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Near Abroad: Russia's Role in Post-Soviet Eurasia

ELIAS GÖTZ

THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE IN FEBRUARY 2022 has caused a massive humanitarian crisis. As of this writing, thousands of people have lost their lives, and many more seem destined to die. Moreover, nearly 2.5 million Ukrainians have fled their country, a number that will grow considerably if the war continues. Beyond the human suffering and misery it entails, the conflict has shaken the foundations of Europe's security order. Western governments have scrambled to ramp up their defensive expenditures, imposed severe economic and political sanctions on Russia, and upped their supply of weapons to Ukraine. The Kremlin, in turn, has shown no signs of backing down. On the contrary, the Putin government has issued thinly veiled nuclear threats and warned Western leaders not to impose a no-fly zone over Ukraine. Though it is still too early to know how the conflict will end, it is already clear that Europe will not be the same after the war. How could this happen?

This special issue puts the ongoing conflict into a broader perspective, focusing on the causes and consequences of Russia's, at times assertive, regional policy in the years running up to the war. It is guided by two sets of questions.

(1) What are the principal determinants of Russia's actions in post-Soviet Eurasia? Do domestic dynamics, ideational influences or geopolitical considerations shape Moscow's policy in the region?
(2) How does Russia's involvement in the various parts of post-Soviet Eurasia affect the situation there? And how do Russia's actions in the region impact its relations with other power centres, including the United States, the European Union, China and Turkey?

This special issue is the outcome of a collaborative effort of numerous people. I would like to thank the contributing authors for their excellent work, the legion of anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions, and the journal editors of *Europe-Asia Studies* for shepherding the special issue to completion. Moreover, I am grateful to Liviu Horovitz for insightful comments at various stages of this project. Finally, a big thank you goes to Michael Loader for his superb job in language editing this introductory essay.
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To address these broad questions, the special issue brings together area study experts and international relations scholars. Too often, these two groups of researchers speak past, rather than to, each other, if they have any conversation at all. International relations scholars tend to give short shrift to the granular knowledge of area specialists, while area specialists often ignore the broader insights of international relations scholars. This separation is unfortunate, in my view, as it prevents the cross-fertilisation of ideas and knowledge. The issue contributes to what I think is (or should be) a joint enterprise, fusing insights from both fields to gain a deeper understanding of Russia's regional policy and the international politics of post-Soviet Eurasia more generally.

At the outset, several clarifications are in order. The first concerns the term 'post-Soviet Eurasia'. Geographical definitions are always, to some extent at least, subjective and can become a matter of intense political debate. By post-Soviet Eurasia, this special issue refers to the successor states of the Soviet Union—minus the three Baltic states. The three Baltic states have joined Western institutions, notably the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and become part of the political, economic and security structures of the Euro-Atlantic order. Arguably, therefore, a different set of factors and dynamics shapes Russia's relations with the Baltics, although we are open to debate this proposition.[1] It should also be noted that phrases like Russia's 'policy in post-Soviet Eurasia', 'neighbourhood policy', and 'near abroad policy' are used interchangeably in this special issue, unless otherwise indicated, and without any political connotations or preferences implied.[2]

Second, and related, by focusing on Russia's activities, we do not mean to suggest that the other post-Soviet states are merely pawns, or passive objects, in the strategic manoeuvrings of Moscow. On the contrary, the other post-Soviet states are autonomous actors with their own aspirations and interests, as several of the following essays demonstrate. The primary focus of this special issue is on Russia, though, because its actions (and inactions, for that matter) undoubtedly have a major impact on the political, economic and security dynamics in post-Soviet Eurasia.

Third, the aim of this special issue is *not* to put forward one particular perspective, or master theory, that explains everything. Rather, the objective is to advance our understanding of Russia's regional policy by applying a variety of analytical angles. Naturally, the contributors do not see eye to eye on all matters. Yet, in our view, this is not a shortcoming but a strength. Explanatory competition is healthy, as it drives the scholarly debate forward and impels researchers to clarify and refine their positions. If there is one thing that all contributors agree on, it is that single-factor analyses are usually inadequate to shed light on Russia's actions in post-Soviet Eurasia. All contributors put forth synthetic accounts that, in various ways, combine international and domestic factors, capture the interplay of material forces and ideas, and reveal the connections between structure and agency in the formation of Moscow's neighbourhood policy. Thus, the essays in this issue contribute to the emerging wave of eclectic analytical research in the

[1]For a theoretically informed analysis highlighting the distinctiveness of Russia's Baltic policy compared to its relations with other former Soviet republics, see Götz (2019).

[2]The term 'near abroad' (*blizhnee zarubezh'e*) first emerged in Russian accounts during the early 1990s to describe Moscow's relations with the other former Soviet republics.

fields of Russian and Eurasian studies and international relations (see, for example, Sil & Katzenstein 2010; Lake 2013; Charap & Welt 2015; Götz 2017).

Finally, it is important to note that this project was initiated in the autumn of 2020, that is, before the surreal winter of 2021–2022. Several authors have continuously updated their contributions, while others have made only minor changes. Some of the special issue's assessments are likely to be overtaken by events, reflecting the challenges of exploring a dynamic topic. Many observations and predictions, however, sound almost prophetic in retrospect. Ultimately, of course, it is up to the readers to decide for themselves how well the individual contributions stand up to the test of time.

This introductory essay serves as an extended scene-setter. It homes in on perhaps the most fundamental and contentious question regarding Russia's neighbourhood policy: what are the key drivers, or causes, of Russia's actions in the region? Not surprisingly, in recent years, this question has garnered a lot of attention among researchers and policy analysts. At risk of oversimplifying a rapidly expanding body of literature, one can distinguish between three perspectives. The first holds that Russia's activities in the region are driven primarily by domestic political determinants, in particular the Kremlin's attempt to rally popular support at home. The second perspective explains Russia's behaviour on the basis of ideational factors, most importantly the rise of a civilisational identity narrative and status ambitions. The third perspective focuses on geopolitical factors and argues that Russia seeks to build a regional sphere of influence to enhance its national security.

To be sure, there are other explanations for Russia's policy in post-Soviet Eurasia, but most accounts fall into one of these three clusters. In the next sections, I describe the argument of each perspective in detail. I also show that accessible evidence offers at least some empirical support for each perspective; at the same time, it becomes clear that none of them provides a fully convincing stand-alone explanation of Russia's near abroad policy. In the fourth and final section, I outline how the individual essays in this special issue contribute to filling the identified gaps and shortcomings, and more generally, advance our understanding of the international politics of post-Soviet Eurasia.

The domestic drivers of Russia's policy in post-Soviet Eurasia

One set of explanations suggests that domestic political considerations are the principal driver of Russia's policy in the region. This line of reasoning comes essentially in two forms. The first is that Moscow deliberately seeks to create conflicts in post-Soviet Eurasia to draw attention away from economic and political shortcomings at home. As Diamond, Plattner, and Walker put it, 'belligerence and adventures in the countries on Russia's periphery … are intended to distract the Russian public from the country's acute social and economic problems and to allow Putin to pose as a restorer of national greatness' (Diamond *et al*. 2016, p. 7).

The argument rests on the observation that, for most of the 2000s, the Putin government enjoyed a high level of popular support based on fast-paced economic growth. In other words, there was an implicit social contract between the Russian populace and the regime. The Kremlin provided for the economic wellbeing of large swathes of the population in exchange for their political compliance (McAllister & White 2008). In the

late 2000s, however, the country's economy started to stagnate. Real wages decreased, living standards declined, and unemployment soared. In effect, the popularity of the Putin regime took a hit. This became evident in the context of Russia's parliamentary and presidential elections of 2011–2012, as a series of protests rocked Moscow. In short, the political stability that had characterised the first ten years of Putin's reign was coming into question (Guriev 2015).[3]

In response to eroding popular support, the Putin government began—the argument goes—to initiate external conflicts. The aim has been to divert attention from internal problems and drum up Russian great power nationalism. The other ex-Soviet countries were, and still are, ideal targets for such 'diversionary' conflicts, as they are geographically proximate and relatively weak in military terms. What is more, the ambition to establish a 'Greater Russia' that controls, either directly or indirectly, the states of the former Soviet Union, appears to resonate with large parts of the more conservative and nationalist segments of Russian society (more on this below). In other words, Moscow's confrontational neighbourhood policy is seen as a way of creating a 'rally-round-the-flag' effect to unite the population behind the regime. This view is neatly summarised by Mandelbaum, who writes 'for the sake of its survival the Putin regime needed to distract the Russian public from its economic difficulties and rebuild public support for its leader. Attacking Ukraine, annexing Crimea, and occupying the Donbass offered a way to do both' (Mandelbaum 2019, p. 31).[4]

A second common variant of the domestic politics perspective suggests that Moscow seeks to contain the spread of democracy in the post-Soviet space. The Kremlin, in this reading, is sensitive about the emergence of apparently successful democracies on its doorstep out of fear that they may serve as a role model for Russia, thus undermining the Putin regime's hold on power. As Kagan puts it:

> ever since he [Putin] consolidated power, he has worried that external forces of liberalism would work to undermine his authoritarian rule at home. … His objection to the expansion of NATO has less to do with the eastward advance of the alliance's military power than the presence of democracies closer to Russia's borders. (Kagan 2018, pp. 112–13)[5]

Along this line, numerous observers have attributed Russia's 2022 military attack on Ukraine to fears of a democracy spill over. For example, Person and McFaul write, 'Putin is threatened by a successful democracy in Ukraine. He cannot tolerate a successful, flourishing, and democratic Ukraine on his borders. … That undermines the Kremlin's own regime stability and proposed rationale for autocratic state leadership' (Person & McFaul 2022). Similarly, Rachman notes, 'the only type of government Putin can tolerate on Russia's borders is a corrupt autocracy that mirrors the Kremlin's own regime. A true democracy would offer an alternative that could encourage opposition in Russia'

[3]For background, see Feldmann and Mazepus (2018).

[4]See also Kliment (2014), Cadier and Light (2015, p. 205), Mendras (2015), Stoner and McFaul (2015, pp. 175–81), Wesslau and Wilson (2016), Taylor (2018, pp. 137–38), Theiler (2018, pp. 332–42).

[5]See also Ambrosio (2009), Vanderhill (2013, pp. 41–96), Wilson (2014), Zubov (2014), Blank (2015), Dickinson (2018).

(Rachman 2022). Cohen likewise concludes that 'Ukraine is a problem for Putin's Russia not because it may join NATO, but because it is democratizing' (Cohen 2022).[6]

In short, the claim is that Moscow opposes democratic transitions in the post-Soviet region, as they may prove contagious and spread to Russia itself—a democratic 'domino theory' of sorts. This line of reasoning nicely complements the aforementioned argument, according to which the Kremlin uses imperial ideology and foreign policy adventures to rally popular support at home.

On first blush, there is much that speaks for the domestic politics perspective. Russia has turned increasingly authoritarian in recent years, and President Putin and his associates have spoken out repeatedly about the danger of 'colour revolutions' in post-Soviet states. Concomitantly, the Kremlin has provided other authoritarian countries in the region—Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan, for example—with diplomatic and material assistance that help their regimes to survive. Seen in this light, a good case can be made that domestic determinants and especially regime-security concerns are the primary driver of Russia's near abroad policy.

A closer look, however, reveals some explanatory shortcomings. To begin with, there is a timing problem. Almost all observers agree that Moscow adopted an increasingly assertive posture in the region by the mid-2000s (see, for example, Kramer 2008; Nygren 2008; Mankoff 2009, pp. 241–92). At that time, as already mentioned, the Russian economy was performing well, and the Putin government enjoyed sky-high approval ratings. Hence, there was no need for the Kremlin to manufacture external crises to rally domestic support. Indeed, as we shall see below, some scholars make the exact opposite claim—that the rise of energy prices and Russia's economic recovery in the mid-2000s emboldened Moscow to pursue a more confrontational policy in post-Soviet Eurasia.

In the last few years, the domestic situation obviously has changed. The Russian economy has been stagnating, mainly due to low energy prices and the lack of much-needed structural reforms. In parallel, signs of social unrest, including strikes and mass protests, have become more common. In mid-2017, for example, several anti-corruption rallies roiled Moscow (MacFarquhar & Nechepurenko 2017). In September 2018, a wave of nationwide protests broke out in response to the government's plans to raise the retirement age. The fact that the protests occurred not only in Moscow but also in multiple other cities across the country demonstrated how widespread the discontent was—not only among young urbanites but also in the countryside among traditional supporters of the Putin regime (Pigman 2018). Moreover, in August 2020, tens of thousands of people took to the streets in the Far East city of Khabarovsk, following the arrest of a popular regional governor (Pinkham 2020). Parallel to these developments, Putin's approval ratings have been declining, falling to a historic low of 59% by mid-2020. To be sure, many other state leaders would be envious of this number; yet, given Russia's highly personalised political system, popularity ratings below 60% constitute a potential threat to the regime's stability. As Trenin explains, 'popularity ratings are important: to rule effectively, one needs at least 60% support; to rule comfortably, 70%. Approaching 50%, however, which is totally fine in the west, is fraught with the dangers of civil strife in Russia' (Trenin 2017).

[6]See also Applebaum (2022), Daalder (2022), Stoner (2022).

The Putin government, in short, has faced a surge of public discontent and severe economic pressure in the last few years. Thus, from a domestic politics perspective, this should have been the moment for the Kremlin to instigate another major international crisis, or start 'a little, victorious war' along its periphery, in order to galvanise public support.[7] Indeed, several observers have argued that diversion from internal problems has been one of the main propellants behind Russia's war against Ukraine. For instance, Kazharski argues, 'Russia's recent behavior is driven by … constructed enemy images, which are meant to stabilize a decaying authoritarian regime through a rally-around-the-flag effect' (Kazharski 2022).[8]

This argument, however, is problematic. Public opinion polls conducted before the war show that an armed intervention in Ukraine was unpopular among large parts of the Russian population (Kolesnikov 2021; Hale *et al*. 2022). After all, there are close family ties between hundreds of thousands of Russians and Ukrainians. To be sure, following the initiation of the 'special military operation', domestic support for the Putin regime increased. And yet, as one study pointed out, 'unlike the public reaction when Russia took Crimea, there are no signs of celebration within Russian society' (Smeltz *et al*. 2022). On the contrary, in the first weeks of the war, there were anti-war rallies in several Russian cities. In response, the Kremlin quickly passed laws making any protests against the war—or even calling it a 'war'—a punishable offence. In parallel, it took steps to shut down almost all remaining independent media outlets in Russia and blocked access to foreign media. All of this suggests that the Putin regime did not take public support for the war for granted. Indeed, as the war drags on, the number of Russian losses is likely to increase. This, coupled with severe economic pressures resulting from Western sanctions, entails the risk of producing large-scale discontent in Russia. In the words of one seasoned observer, 'instead of boosting Putin's popularity as the 2014 annexation of Crimea did, it [the war against Ukraine] is a huge stress test for the entire political system and the domestic stability Putin values so highly' (Liik 2022). This does not tally with the 'rally-round-the-flag' argument.

Likewise, the argument that the Kremlin's fear of a democratic contagion drives its assertive neighbourhood policy is not fully convincing either. After all, in the past few years, the Kremlin has effectively eliminated voices of liberal dissent. As a result, nationalist groups of various stripes—not liberals pushing for Western-style democracy—dominate domestic opposition in today's Russia (Kolstø & Blakkisrud 2016). Thus, the risk of a democratic spill over in general is relatively low.

More specifically, as regards Ukraine, its democratisation process never impressed many Russians. That is hardly surprising. Before the war, Ukraine's GDP per capita (in constant PPP dollars as measured by the World Bank) was more than 2.5 times lower than that of Russia. In addition, rightly or wrongly, many Russians saw Ukraine as an oligarchic democracy; it reminded them of the political chaos of the Yel'tsin years. Of course, this

[7]The phrase 'a little, victorious war' comes from a memoir of the first prime minister of Tsarist Russia, Count Sergei Witte, quoting V. K. Plehve, the then-minister of the interior, as saying, 'we need a little, victorious war to stem the revolution' (Witte 1990, p. 369).

[8]See also Guriev (2022).

narrative has been peddled by the Kremlin. Still, the fact is that few Russians considered Ukraine as a political model to be emulated (Jarábik 2015; Marples 2016; Reynolds & Watling 2022). Thus, the claim that fear of a democratic spill over impelled the Kremlin to attack Ukraine stands on shaky ground.

Furthermore, the pattern of Russia's relations with other former Soviet republics suggests that regime type is not the central driver of its near abroad assertion. The case of Armenia is instructive. In May 2018, a wave of street protests erupted demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Serzh Sargasian, who had been in power for more than ten years. Opposition leader Nikol Pashinian made it clear that his ambition was to reform the closed political system, pursue judicial and constitutional reforms, and move the country in a more democratic direction. Thus, according to the democratic spill-over thesis, the Kremlin should have provided assistance to the Sargasian government to crack down on the protesters. This, however, did not happen. Instead, the Kremlin adopted a wait-and-see policy and, after Sargasian's resignation, established cordial relations with the new government in Yerevan (Weir 2018). For a regime supposedly deeply terrified by protest-driven change and pro-democracy uprisings, the Putin government showed curious restraint in responding to Armenia's so-called Velvet Revolution. By the same token, Moscow's relations with authoritarian governments in the region are not always amicable—far from it. In 2010, for instance, the Russian leadership aided the overthrow of the authoritarian Bakiyev government in Kyrgyzstan (Blank 2010). Moreover, for many years, Moscow has had mixed and periodically tense relations with the leaders of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, arguably the most dictatorial regimes in the region.

All of this is hard to square with the argument that regime type is the primary determinant of Moscow's neighbourhood policy. Instead, what appears important for the Kremlin is to have pro-Russian governments in nearby countries, regardless of their domestic political systems. This view is shared by an increasing number of area specialists. For example, Cameron and Orenstein who examine the negative influence of Russia on democratic transitions in the post-Soviet space, note that 'post-Soviet states … may be subjected to Russian influence that undermines rights, liberties, and democracy—not necessarily because Russia wishes to undermine the rights and liberties that exist in these countries but, rather, because it wishes to limit their drift away from the emerging Russian-dominated security and economic zone' (Cameron & Orenstein 2012, p. 36). In a similar vein, Charap and Colton write, 'their [the Russians'] objective … is to have *druzhestvennye* (friendly) neighbours, that is, states whose leaders are not hostile to Russia. How these leaders get to power and how their political institutions function is of little concern' (Charap & Colton 2017, p. 77). And Casier concludes, 'the determining factor for supporting or weakening a regime is likely to be loyalty to Moscow, rather than the degree of democracy' (Casier 2012, p. 42).

In essence, then, there can be little doubt that domestic political dynamics and especially regime-security concerns influence Russia's near abroad policy. At the same time, the claim that internal factors are the primary or even sole driver of Moscow's actions in post-Soviet Eurasia does not hold water. Neither the diversionary conflict argument nor the democratic spill-over thesis captures the main thrust and pattern of Russian behaviour in the region.

The ideational drivers of Russia's policy in post-Soviet Eurasia

A second set of explanations holds that Russia's international behaviour is heavily influenced by ideational factors. Various scholars, for example, contend that Russia's imperial legacy informs its attitudes and, ultimately, policy towards the other former Soviet republics. As van Herpen puts it, 'for the Russian state, colonizing neighbouring territories and subduing neighbouring people has been a continuous process. It is, one could almost say, part of Russia's genetic makeup' (van Herpen 2014, p. 2). In a similar vein, Grigas suggests, 'while neo-imperialism has been a prominent trend in Putin's era, it is in fact rooted in the history of the Russian Empire. There is an undeniable historical continuity between present Russian imperial projects and past projects of the Romanovs and Soviets' (Grigas 2016, p. 4). In other words, Moscow's assertive neighbourhood policy is attributed to centuries-old Russian traditions and an inherent predisposition towards imperialism.

This culturally and historically deterministic view is problematic, however, for at least three reasons. First, the argument struggles to provide an adequate explanation for the timing of Russia's reassertion in the post-Soviet space. As Krickovic astutely points out, 'if Russia's imperial identity is such a powerful force, why are we only seeing serious effort at integration now, over 20 years after the fall of the Soviet Union, and not in earlier periods when the strength of this imperial identity was much stronger?' (Krickovic 2014, p. 511).

Second, the assertion that Russia strives for some form of imperial restoration is not as obvious as it may seem at first. In the aftermath of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, an array of Western observers and politicians have matter-of-factly stated that Putin wants to reconstitute a Soviet-style empire. Yet a closer look at the empirical record reveals a more complex picture. In the past few years, the Kremlin has passed up several opportunities that came its way to reincorporate parts of the former Soviet Union. For instance, Russia has shied away from formally annexing Moldova's Transnistria region or South Ossetia in Georgia—despite requests by the local leaderships to do so. This is hardly the policy of a revisionist power blindly committed to the goal of rebuilding its former empire.

Third, an avalanche of research in the social sciences and humanities has driven home the point that cultural and historical experiences are not immutable or objectively given—but highly contingent and malleable. As the sociologist Swidler famously argued, 'all real cultures contain diverse, often conflicting symbols, rituals, stories, and guides to action' (Swidler 1986, p. 277). Building on this, Beissinger notes, 'we should be cautious in talking about Russian culture as if it were a homogenized whole or instinctively imperialist' (Beissinger 2008, p. 7). In a similar vein, Taylor points out, 'cultures are not completely static, nor are they completely uniform. They change over time and are internally complex and contradictory. There is not one Russian political culture, but many' (Taylor 2018, p. 37). Thus, to attribute Moscow's near abroad assertion to the inevitable pull of Russian culture and history is too simplistic.

But there is also a less essentialist and more nuanced version of the ideational argument, which suggests that Russia's socially constructed identity drives its regional policy. In this view, various discursive identity structures, embedded in cultural and historical experiences, compete for dominance in Russia's domestic marketplace of ideas. The

identity narrative that 'wins out' provides a reservoir of meanings that enables leaders to pursue some policy avenues while closing down others. Hopf is perhaps the best-known exponent of this view. In a string of works, he has advanced the argument that contending identity narratives are the primary shaper of Moscow's international behaviour (Hopf 2002, 2005, 2006, 2016). Specifically, he suggests that the rise of a civilisational identity narrative—which emphasises the distinctiveness of Russia's cultural and historical heritage as a Eurasian power—has generated tropes and discursive structures that enable the assertive pursuit of regional leadership. This, for example, made the takeover of Crimea possible. In Hopf's words, 'the predominant discourses of Russian national identity have evolved to the point that the annexation of Crimea and militarily intervening in eastern Ukraine became thinkable and natural by 2014' (Hopf 2016, p. 227).[9]

A related set of arguments holds that in Russian identity discourses the notion of 'great power status' is inextricably bound up with regional spheres of influence and the right to exert control over neighbouring small states. For example, Cooley argues, 'Russian officials believe that by maintaining regional primacy, Moscow will be afforded its coveted "Great Power" status and a seat in future international decision making in other issues and areas' (Cooley 2012, p. 72). Likewise, Larson and Shevchenko hold, 'he [Putin] is determined to ultimately restore Russia to great power status with a sphere of influence over the near abroad' (Larson & Shevchenko 2019, p. 244). And Mankoff suggests that 'its [Russia's] leaders see a central role in the post-Soviet space as a *sine qua non* for Russia's restoration as a major power' (Mankoff 2010, p. 39). In this view, the search for greater international status is the root cause of Russia's efforts to establish itself as the dominant power in the region.[10]

At first glance, the thesis that socially constructed identity narratives and status concerns are a major driver of Russia's regional policy is quite convincing. A great range of literature documents that some form of 'civilizational nationalism' has come to enjoy wide currency in Russia, especially after Putin's return to the presidency in 2012.[11] As Lewis points out, 'having been a marginal idea in the early 2000s for most Russian foreign policy specialists, the Eurasian idea was reinvigorated as a spatial imaginary to frame a new orientation in foreign policy articulated by Vladimir Putin in 2011–2012' (Lewis 2018, p. 1614). For example, President Putin used the language of civilisationism when announcing the creation of the Eurasian Economic Union in October 2011. Discursive elements of civilisational nationalism were also employed by high-level Russian politicians to justify the annexation of Crimea and the February 2022 attack on Ukraine (Engström 2014; Linde 2016; Smith 2016; Tsygankov 2016a, 2016b, pp. 233–60; Katzenstein & Weygandt 2017; Oskanian 2022). Additionally, it is well documented that Russian policymakers and diplomats tend to be highly status sensitive, making it clear that Russia ought to be treated as a great power by other international actors (Forsberg

[9]Hopf (2016) is careful to stress that discursive changes made the annexation of Crimea possible, but contingent circumstances (such as US unilateralism, the failure to adhere to the 21 February agreement to hold new elections in Ukraine, and the presence of significant numbers of ethnic Russians in Crimea) also played an important role. For similar arguments, see Köstem (2018, pp. 734–40) and Strycharz (2022).

[10]See also Tsygankov (2012, pp. 236–58), Clunan (2014), Larson and Shevchenko (2014).

[11]The term 'civilizational nationalism' was coined by Verkhovskii and Pain (2012).

et al. 2014; Schmitt 2020). All of this suggests that ideational factors play an important role in shaping Russia's neighbourhood policy.

On closer inspection, however, there are also some shortcomings and deficiencies in this explanation. To begin with, the argument that civilisational nationalism has made Russia's regional assertiveness possible raises the question of what explains the rise of this narrative in the first place. Hopf and other scholars advancing this argument point to a number of contingent factors at both the international and domestic levels, but they never fully explain why and how these factors shape the balance of power between varying identity strands. In effect, the reader is left with a highly detailed and insightful description of the changing discursive landscape within Russia—but with no 'explanation' in the positivist sense.

Relatedly, the question becomes to what extent narratives and discourses are essentially freewheeling, and to what extent they are instrumentally deployed by political elites. As outlined above, one strand of research suggests that the Kremlin has engaged in a campaign of patriotic mobilisation to rally public support. Extending this argument, several scholars hold that the Kremlin has deliberately fostered a civilisational identity narrative as a central element of its strategy for staying in power. As Laruelle writes, 'Putin has been advancing a conservative value agenda in order to reinforce some of the regime's constituencies and to marginalize the liberals—and the [ethnic] nationalists' (Laruelle 2016a, p. 275). In a similar but more general vein, Pomerantsev argues that 'the Kremlin still guides all the narratives, allowing it to frame any argument in the way that best suits its needs at any given time' (Pomerantsev 2015, p. 176). If this is so, the identity argument can be subsumed under the above-described domestic politics perspective, with all its strengths and weaknesses.

Some scholars who advance the identity argument acknowledge that the Kremlin has employed civilisational nationalism in an instrumental way to win support from the conservative-minded segments of the Russian populace. They contend, however, that once these ideas had been formulated publicly, policymakers in the Kremlin became entrapped by their own rhetoric. Insofar as the Putin government's power is based on the support of conservative groups in society, its rule would be jeopardised if it were to ignore the foreign policy guidelines flowing from the civilisational identity narrative. What is more, parts of the Russian elite may have come to believe the rhetoric they initially used to mobilise popular support. In this way, narratives and ideas take on a life of their own and have an independent effect on the formation and conduct of Russian foreign policy (Linde 2016).

Even this more refined version of the identity argument is not fully convincing, however, as it fails to adequately capture the chasm between rhetoric and practice in Russian neighbourhood policy. For instance, government officials in Moscow have long argued that protecting the rights of Russians and Russian-speakers stranded in other former Soviet republics is a top foreign policy priority. Yet, in practice, Moscow has pursued this principle selectively—depending on the country's overall relationship with Russia. For instance, Moscow has repeatedly scolded Ukraine and the Baltic states for their allegedly discriminatory policies against members of Russian minority groups. At the same time, the Kremlin has shied away from expressing any serious concerns about assimilation policies in Kazakhstan—a country that is closely allied with Russia. Indeed, an array of

area specialists have shown that Moscow tends to employ the protection-of-compatriots argument as a political card to advance strategic or economic objectives (see, for example, Zevelev 2008; March 2012; Laruelle 2015; Pigman 2019).

The rise and fall of the term *Novorossiya* (New Russia)—the imperial Tsarist designation for the area stretching from Kharkov to Odessa—is instructive for examining the connection between Russia's political discourse and its foreign policy behaviour. In the wake of Crimea's annexation, rebel leaders in eastern Ukraine and Russian nationalists started to agitate for the creation of a broad *Novorossiya* entity. Initially, the Kremlin seemed to embrace this project. President Putin, for instance, invoked the notion of *Novorossiya* in a televised press conference. Soon, however, it became clear that separatism enjoyed little popular support in Kharkiv, Odesa, and other regions in south-eastern Ukraine. In response, the Kremlin quickly dropped the use of the term from its discursive repertoire and backed away from the project (Sakwa 2015, pp. 152–53; Laruelle 2016b; O'Loughlin *et al*. 2017). What this episode demonstrates is that Russian government officials are not prisoners of their own rhetoric—but can and do actively shape discursive structures in light of external constraints and opportunities.

Similarly, the claim that status considerations are the primary driver of Moscow's actions faces several challenges. In particular, it is still unclear whether Russia's assertive neighbourhood policy actually enhances its international status and prestige. Many in the Russian elite seem to believe that the establishment and maintenance of a regional sphere of influence is a marker of being a great power. Yet, the application of military force *vis-à-vis* neighbouring states often involves reputational consequences for Russia. Take the annexation of Crimea or Russia's 2022 attack on Ukraine. By most accounts, these moves have severely damaged, rather than advanced, Russia's global image—at least in the eyes of Western policymakers, who are the primary target of Moscow's hunt for status recognition. In Charap and Colton's words, 'Russia has gained some territory, true, but it has paid dearly in … international standing' (Charap & Colton 2017, pp. 21–2). Thus, from a status perspective, the pursuit of regional primacy through a pugnacious neighbourhood policy is self-defeating. This begs the question: do policymakers in Moscow fail to realise the reputational costs involved in using force against neighbouring small states, or are other factors at work? Either way, it becomes clear that status-seeking as an explanation for Russia's neighbourhood policy is not as simple and straightforward as it appears at first glance.

To be clear, all of this is not to say that ideas do not matter, or that they are merely endogenous or epiphenomenal to material forces. To the contrary, ideas likely play an important role in shaping Russia's activities in post-Soviet Eurasia. But exactly how much independent explanatory power they have remains a question to be answered through further research.

The geopolitical drivers of Russia's policy in post-Soviet Eurasia

A third set of explanations focuses on material and geostrategic factors. This approach has two distinct but mutually reinforcing components. The first is the regional distribution of power, as measured by traditional indices such as population size, military budget, number of troops, and GDP. According to many scholars, Russia's economic upturn in

the mid-2000s—largely due to the precipitous rise in world energy prices—is a central factor for explaining its international behaviour. The upsurge in power, the argument goes, enabled and emboldened Moscow to pursue a more self-assertive policy in the former Soviet region (see, for example, Tsygankov 2006, pp. 679–81; Mankoff 2007, pp. 126–27; Kagan 2008, pp. 13–4; Snegovaya 2020). Of course, energy prices have fallen in recent years, and Russia faces severe economic and financial problems. From a cross-temporal perspective, however, Russia is significantly stronger than it was during the 1990s (Saradzhyan 2016; Mankoff 2021; Saradzhyan & Abdullaev 2021). What is more, there is little doubt that Russia continues to dwarf its post-Soviet neighbours in economic and military terms. This provides Moscow with the opportunity to make a bid for regional primacy.

The second component of the geopolitical approach focuses on external pressures. Moscow, it is claimed, seeks to limit the influence of Western powers in post-Soviet Eurasia due to genuine security concerns. As Shleifer and Treisman put it 'Moscow strongly opposes further enlargement of NATO to the east. This is hardly surprising: no state would welcome the extension of a historically hostile military alliance up to its borders, no matter how often that alliance said its intentions were peaceable' (Shleifer & Treisman 2011, p. 128). Many scholars have built on this line of reasoning to explain the Russian takeover of Crimea and its attack on Ukraine in February 2022. For example, Mearsheimer has famously argued, 'no Russian leader would stand idly by while the West helped install a government there [in Kyiv] that was determined to integrate Ukraine into the West. … This is Geopolitics 101: great powers are always sensitive to potential threats near their home territory' (Mearsheimer 2014, p. 82).[12]

In essence, then, geopolitical factors provide Russia with both the means and the motive to establish hegemony in post-Soviet Eurasia. Accordingly, there is little peculiar or case-specific about Moscow's bid for regional mastery. To quote, once again, Charap and Colton, 'it should astonish no one that a country of Russia's capabilities and ambitions will seek influence over its periphery: the US or China are no different in that respect' (Charap & Colton 2017, p. 24). Russia, in this interpretation, behaves like a 'normal' great power. Any country, given the same circumstances and availability of resources, would act in a similar manner.

On reflection, there is much to be said for this view. To begin with, history is indeed peppered with examples of major powers pursuing regional hegemony. In the late nineteenth century, for instance, the United States carved out a sphere of influence in the Central American–Caribbean area. In the first half of the twentieth century, Imperial Japan went to great lengths to build a so-called co-prosperity sphere in East Asia. In the second half of the twentieth century, the Soviet Union imposed its control over large swathes of central and eastern Europe. The United States, meanwhile, vigorously defended its predominance in the Western Hemisphere. Given that countries with different political systems and historical-cultural backgrounds have pursued regional dominance, this is an indication that geopolitical forces—rather than internal political or ideational factors—are at work.

[12]See also Trenin (2014), Bock *et al.* (2014), Götz (2015), Korolev (2017), Carpenter (2021), Walt (2022). For a similar argument about Russia's 2008 military campaign against Georgia, see Karagiannis (2013).

Furthermore, Moscow has more or less openly stressed its commitment to secure a sphere of influence over its neighbours and prevent these states from aligning with outside powers. After the August 2008 war in Georgia, for instance, then-President Medvedev famously described the former Soviet area as a 'region of privileged interests' (Kramer 2008). This position has also figured prominently in successive strategic documents, including Russian Military Doctrines (1993, 2000, 2010, 2014, 2021) and Foreign Policy Concepts (1993, 2000, 2008, 2016). Finally, it is clear that Russia has used its economic and military might in an attempt to dominate its immediate neighbours, especially in foreign and defence policy matters. Thus, in many ways, Russian policymakers have spoken, and acted, in tune with geopolitical imperatives.

This explanation, however, has its shortcomings, too. First, an exclusive focus on geopolitics cannot fully explain Russia's threat assessments. As noted, the Kremlin appears to be deeply terrified about the advance of Western powers, and NATO in particular, towards Russian borders. At the same time, the Kremlin seems much less concerned about China's increased activism in central Eurasia. Indeed, in May 2015, Russia decided to link its own regional economic organisation, the EAEU, to China's Belt and Road Initiative. To be sure, strategic thinkers in Moscow remain wary about Beijing's long-term intentions. Overall, however, Russia has responded much less assertively to China's politico-economic inroads into the post-Soviet area than to Western forays. A purely geopolitical perspective struggles to account for Moscow's varying threat assessments (Tsygankov 2012, p. 18; Götz & MacFarlane 2019, p. 718).

Second, the Russian takeover of Crimea and its February 2022 attack on Ukraine may not be as straightforward a case for a geopolitical approach as some observers want to make us believe. After all, there was little risk (or chance, depending on one's perspective) that Ukraine would join NATO anytime soon. This became patently clear during German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's visit to Moscow on 15 February 2022, when he stated at the post-meeting press conference 'that [Ukraine's bid for NATO membership] is not an issue we will likely encounter while we are in office'.[13] In fact, at several major NATO summits since 2008, the Alliance decided against giving Ukraine a Membership Action Plan (MAP). Seen in this light, it is difficult to interpret Moscow's confrontational approach towards Ukraine as a purely defensive reaction to external pressures (Motyl 2014; Götz & Merlen 2019, p. 144).

Third, Russia's assertive neighbourhood policy has often proved counterproductive in geopolitical terms. After the outbreak of hostilities in 2014, for example, much of the Ukrainian public and elites became increasingly supportive of integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions, including NATO. The Kremlin's attempt to restore some form of strategic control over Kyiv through highly assertive means thus had the opposite effect, as it fuelled great animosity amongst Ukrainians towards Russia (Gaiduk 2020; Thomson-DeVeaux 2022). In addition, the heavy-handed way in which Russia deals with Ukraine has aroused fear among other states in the post-Soviet space that they might be the next

[13] 'Scholz Holds his Ground in Putin's Den', *Financial Times*, 16 February 2022, available at: https://www.ft.com/content/dda0a997-19b9-4cdb-a37c-e17c11dd9b4b, accessed 3 March 2022.

targets in Moscow's geopolitical gunsights. Unsurprisingly, this has pushed them further away rather than closer to Russia (Stronski 2020).

Finally, Russia's assertive actions have fostered a sense of unity among many European countries and the United States that was withering away before the Ukraine crisis. Following the annexation of Crimea, NATO took a number of steps to strengthen its security posture in Europe. This included the stationing of US troops and prepositioning of equipment in Central and Eastern European states; the creation of a Very High Readiness Joint Action Task Force (VJTF); and the deployment of Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) battlegroups to the Baltic states (Brauß & Rácz 2021, pp. 19–25). If anything, the Russian attack on Ukraine in February 2022 has reinforced this trend. Germany and other European states have announced a significant increase in their defence expenditures; NATO has taken steps to further reinforce its eastern flank; and Finland and Sweden have reversed their long-held policy of non-alignment and signed the accession protocol to join the Alliance. Thus, if Russia's aim was to roll back NATO, it has effectively shot itself in the foot.

On balance, then, the geopolitical perspective has much to recommend it. External pressures and opportunities go a long way to explaining Russia's near abroad assertion—but only up to a point. A closer look reveals several important shortcomings and limitations, especially regarding Moscow's threat assessments and the counterproductive effects of its highly coercive approach towards Ukraine and other post-Soviet states. Geopolitically-minded scholars of Russia's neighbourhood policy have their work cut out if they are to fill these explanatory gaps.

Overview of the special issue

As the previous sections have shown, all three perspectives offer valuable insights but also suffer from shortcomings. By itself, neither a domestic politics approach, nor the irresistible pull of ideational factors or a purely geopolitical perspective is entirely satisfactory. Stated differently, the existing accounts provide us with partial explanations of Moscow's actions; they illuminate some aspects but neglect others. Given this, it appears meaningful to combine elements from the domestic political, ideational, and geopolitical approaches. Indeed, if pressed, almost all scholars agree that eclectic accounts are required to gain a fuller and more comprehensive understanding of Russia's neighbourhood policy. In practice, however, many researchers continue to zero in on one set of factors, while offering no more than a few throwaway lines about the role played by the others. Alternatively, some observers tend to add factors from the various perspectives but fail to establish any kind of hierarchy among them or specify the exact relationship between these factors. As a result, the reader is left with some sort of 'grab bag' argument that hides more than it reveals.[14] The following essays seek to strike a middle ground between single-factor analyses and everything-matters approaches, thus shedding new light on

[14]For important exceptions that provide 'first cut' accounts specifying the causal weight and interrelationship of different factors in the formation of Russian foreign policy, see Tsygankov (2012), Krickovic (2016), Götz (2017), McFaul (2020).

Russia's actions in the region and the international politics of post-Soviet Eurasia more generally.

In the opening contribution, Andrei Tsygankov examines Russia's interactions with Eurasia during the Muscovite, Tsarist, Soviet and contemporary eras. Based on this historical analysis, he dismisses the popular notion that atavistic impulses for imperial domination and control are the central driver of Russian actions. Instead, he suggests that a complex set of goals—including commercial openness, security, influence, and civilisational dialogue—have traditionally shaped Moscow's approach towards the region. The takeover of Crimea was a watershed in this regard, as it led Russia to rediscover the importance of non-European partners, revived traditional geopolitics, and reinforced the development of a greater civilisational self-awareness. According to Tsygankov, the underlying causes of this development are the West's unwillingness to build an inclusive European security order after the Cold War's end, and Russia's lack of economic attractiveness. The essay concludes that Russia may once again become a semi-peripheral economy that capitalises on its military power in the pursuit of political objectives.

Building on this, Alexander Libman's essay carefully documents that there is a broad-based agreement among Russian elites of various ideological colorations regarding the importance of Eurasian regionalism. This has found its expression in various speech acts and narratives. The problem is, as Libman explains, that these narratives tend to connect regionalism with the pursuit of power-political advantages. Conservative and nationalist circles, but also government officials in Moscow, link the promotion of Eurasian regionalism to the establishment of a Russian zone of influence. This has made other post-Soviet states reluctant to participate in Moscow-led initiatives. The result is that elite narratives inside of Russia undermine, rather than boost, regionalism in post-Soviet Eurasia.

Tracey German zooms in on Russia's policy towards the South Caucasus. She argues that Russia's policy there is guided by two principal goals. The first is to prevent the spill over of hard or soft security threats that may emerge from the South Caucasus. The second is to secure its position as a regional *Ordnungsmacht* (ordering power), which, in turn, is closely intertwined with Russia's global status ambitions. To achieve these two objectives, Russia has employed a range of military, diplomatic and economic instruments. In particular, Russia has sought to contain and roll back Western influence. Yet, as German demonstrates, the relative success of this policy has paradoxically increased the influence of another 'outside' actor in the region: China. Her conclusion is that Russia is likely to remain the region's dominant power in the military arena, but China's economic and soft-power engagement in the South Caucasus provides the three local states—Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia—with new possibilities to hedge against Russia's overweening influence.

Jeffrey Mankoff picks up on this theme, offering a nuanced examination of Russia's relationship with China. As is well known, Russia strengthened its military and trade ties with China after the imposition of Western sanctions in 2014. Although long regarded as a potential challenger, the Kremlin also acknowledged China's growing economic presence in post-Soviet Eurasia by proposing a 'coupling' (*sopryazhenie*) of Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) with Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Yet, as Mankoff shows, the suggested alignment of the EAEU and BRI has proven difficult in practice. The underlying reason is that the two projects are based on divergent principles.

The EAEU is an attempt to create a single market and consolidate Russia's sphere of economic and political influence in the post-Soviet space. The BRI, for its part, is a Chinese-led infrastructure project seeking to boost trans-regional connectivity. Thus, regardless of the extent to which Moscow and Beijing seek to coordinate their activities, there is a latent tension between their objectives.

Morena Skalamera tackles in her essay Russia's role in the energy politics of post-Soviet Eurasia. Her analytical point of departure is that China's oil and gas investments in the region have undermined Russia's virtual monopoly on Central Asian energy exports. Furthermore, the global energy transition which aims at replacing fossil fuels with renewables stands to weaken Russia's export prospects, and in extension, its leverage over energy customers. Nonetheless, Skalamera convincingly argues that Russia will retain substantial influence in regional energy politics. For one thing, some Central Asian elites have become alarmed by China's rising influence; they seek to check Beijing by rebuilding their partnership with Moscow. For another, the ongoing energy transition challenges not only Russia but also the other petro-states in post-Soviet Eurasia, pulling them together to develop common strategies to cope with the 'green menace'. Finally, Skalamera shows that Moscow continues to exert substantial influence in the region through Russian-led transnational elite networks.

Seçkin Köstem discusses the rivalry between Russia and Turkey in post-Soviet Eurasia. In particular, he scrutinises three theatres of conflict: Georgia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Donbas. In all three theatres, Russia and Turkey have supported opposing sides. At the same time, both countries have continued to cooperate on a range of issues, including on energy and defence matters. To capture this complex relationship, Köstem develops the concept of 'managed regional rivalry'. The concept suggests that aspiring regional powers—such as Turkey—and regional hegemons—such as Russia—tend to have competing geopolitical and material interests. However, over time, they can develop institutionalised mechanisms of cooperation and mutual respect. Moreover, ideological affinity and economic interdependence prevent regional rivals from engaging in direct military confrontations. This conceptual framework, Köstem argues, goes a long way to explain the evolving Russo–Turkish relationship in post-Soviet Eurasia.

Tom Casier's contribution to this special issue asks why Armenia's decision to withdraw from the EU's Association Agreement in 2013 passed largely unnoticed, while Ukraine's failure to sign the agreement triggered a major crisis between Russia and the West. Casier acknowledges the many structural and contextual differences between the two cases. Still, he argues that existing explanations cannot fully account for the different outcomes. To fill that gap, Casier examines discursive dynamics between Russia and the EU through the lens of script formulation theory. Analysing more than 100 public statements by Russian and EU decision-makers, he finds that attribution of accountability varied greatly in scope and content in the two cases. Both Russian and EU decision-makers ascribed Armenia's withdrawal from the Association Agreement to considerations of political elites in Yerevan. Conversely, Russian and EU decision-makers attributed the Yanukovych government's decision not to sign the Association Agreement—along with the subsequent Euromaidan protests—to nefarious activities of the other side. According to Casier, this led to a self-reinforcing discursive dynamic of negative accountability attribution, which has played an important role in the escalating conflict in and around Ukraine.

Thomas Ambrosio explores the development of Kazakhstan's and Belarus's national security doctrines and policies. Towards that end, he builds on and extends the theory of intra-alliance security dilemmas. The theory captures the strategic considerations of small state governments which are allied with a great power patron that simultaneously poses a threat to their national security. According to Ambrosio, both Kazakhstan and Belarus face this dilemma. On the one hand, after Crimea, Kazakhstan and Belarus started to pay more attention to the potential threat posed by Russia. On the other hand, neither Kazakhstan nor Belarus was willing to break with Russia. The reason, explains Ambrosio, is that Moscow continued to serve as a bodyguard for the ruling regimes in Nur-Sultan (now Astana again) and Minsk. In fact, with a rise in the level of internal threats to their leaderships in recent years, both the Tokayev and the Lukashenka governments have now turned again to Russia for greater assistance.

Elias Götz's essay concludes the special issue by examining the evolution of Russia's neighbourhood policy since the early 1990s. Towards that end, Götz outlines a neoclassical realist framework that focuses on three sets of factors: geopolitical imperatives and status ambitions; changes in state capacity; and varying levels of external pressure. The interplay of these factors, Götz contends, goes a long way to explain why, when, and how Russia has sought to dominate the post-Soviet space. In particular, the essay suggests that geopolitical imperatives and status ambitions conjointly account for the broad-based consensus among Russian politicians to establish a regional sphere of influence. Weak state capacity, in turn, can account for the fact that Russia's near abroad policy in the latter half of the 1990s was less assertive than in previous and subsequent years. Finally, Götz shows that varying levels of external pressure are congruent with the types of policy tools and tactics—coercion, support, or subversion—that Russia employs towards other post-Soviet states in its pursuit of regional primacy.

Combined, the essays that follow make several major contributions. First, they shed new light on the contemporary politics of post-Soviet Eurasia, including the ongoing war in Ukraine, Russo–Chinese relations in the former Soviet area, and the region's evolving energy landscape. These developments are much commented upon, but far from fully understood. Second, the contributors put forth eclectic accounts that capture the interplay of domestic political, ideational, and geopolitical influences. That is to say, they steer clear of single-factor explanations. At the same time, as the previous overview shows, they assign different weight to various causes and combine them in different ways. In so doing, the contributions to this special issue lay the groundwork for scholarly debate—as well as dialogue—between different eclectic accounts of Russia's near abroad policy. Finally, the essays that follow go beyond the oft-repeated mantra that international relations and area studies need to be 'somehow' merged; instead, they demonstrate in practical terms how insights drawn from both disciplines can be combined to gain a deeper understanding of the international politics of post-Soviet Eurasia.

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