CHAPTER 10

Contested Regional Leadership: Russia and Eurasia

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Regionalization is a central issue in contemporary international relations (Acharya 2014). Power is diffusing through the international system. The post-Cold War liberal international order seems to be fraying (Kagan 2017). This reflects the deepening internal problems of major liberal states, among them the difficulties of adapting traditional economies to globalization, growing inequality, the re-emergence of populism, economic stagnation, and the loss of political self-confidence. A second element is the growing dissensus concerning liberal principles of global and local governance. Ideological and political alternatives have emerged and regional structures with differing understandings of international order seem to be coalescing (Acharya 2004; Hurrell 2007). One major example is Eurasia.

This chapter addresses contested Russian leadership in Eurasia. I take Eurasia to refer to the former Soviet Union minus the Baltic republics, which have been integrated into the principal Euro-Atlantic (North

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Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO]) and European (EU) institutions. I acknowledge the multifarious conceptions of regional identity within this area and also the regional initiatives that cross the boundary line between this space and neighbouring ones. But the delineation chosen here conforms most closely to how Russia addresses its immediate neighbourhood. The focus of the chapter is Russia's claim to regional leadership and the practices associated with that claim. Responding to Acharya's (2014) point that there is a need to recognize non-Western discourses on international relations, the chapter considers Russian understandings of international order and the place of its neighbourhood in that order.

As the introductory chapter outlined, the literature around regionalism tends to focus on contemporary and historical scholarship in East Asia, and, to some extent, Africa, Latin America, and South Asia, ignoring Eurasia. However, Acharya's point can be equally well applied in the Russia–Eurasia case, which is compelling, given its proximity to the EU, and its challenge to the theoretical (globalization) and normative (liberal values) apparatus of Euro-Atlantic projection into its eastern neighbourhood.

The analysis is informed by official Russian documents, the statements of major figures in the Russian leadership (the president, the prime minister, and the foreign minister), and Russian analytical and academic discourse. The discursive analysis is complemented by an account of Russian behaviour in relation to the other states of the region and concerning the policies of outside actors there. Does Russian practice match their discourse?

This discussion focuses on the period after 1999, for several reasons. One is that the Russian Federation has been led through the period by Vladimir Putin, as prime minister and as president. Second, in the 2000s the Russian state consolidated, the economy recovered, and the major outlines of Russia's claim to, and practice of, regional leadership crystallized. This generated a clear difference in Russian practice between the 1990s and subsequent behaviour.

Given the difficulties in the Russian economy and state finance since 2014, it is questionable whether earlier assertion, notably in Georgia and Ukraine, will endure. But those successes are now well rooted. It is debatable whether domestic challenges to the established *vertikal'* of power would generate moderation in foreign policy or whether the opposite might be the case.[1]

Regional Leadership

Regional leadership reflects the effort of one or more states in a region to exercise a predominant influence over the direction of a region's internal and international relations. That effort can include patterns of regional political, military, and/or economic integration. It may also comprise forms of institutionalization. It may involve positive incentives for cooperation or forced compliance. It might or it might not reflect efforts to control the nature and degree of relations between states within the region in question and states and institutions outside it.

Regions vary widely along these vectors, not least as a result of variation in regional distributions of power. There are many historical examples in which, where one state enjoys substantial superiority in power, there is a tendency towards consolidated leadership (hegemony) and efforts to determine outcomes in the domestic politics and foreign policy of neighbours. Where power is more evenly distributed, such consolidation is less likely. Where no state is in a position to impose its hegemony, smaller states take advantage of the consequent ambiguity to maintain and increase their policy flexibility. Regions also vary in the extent to which powerful outside actors seek to affect internal regional dynamics and institutionalization.

Regional hegemons do not necessarily seek to impose their dominance directly and coercively. For example, the United States is a regional hegemon within an asymmetrical distribution of power. One might consider Germany to enjoy a more modest preponderance within the EU, although power is more evenly distributed. The United States has taken a loose, market-based, and weakly institutionalized approach to regional leadership. Germany embeds itself in regional institutions, avoiding explicit claims of leadership. Both seek consensus among partners as a basis for regional cooperation.[2]

In other cases, the leader takes a much more ambitious and assertive approach to controlling the space around it. Russia in Eurasia is a good example. Eurasia falls into the sub-group of regions having one clearly dominant power, the Russian Federation. At 143.5 million (in 2014), Russia's population exceeds that of the other 11 states within Eurasia. Russia's gross domestic product (GDP; US $1.3 trillion in 2015) is more than twice the size of the other 11 (World Bank 2016). Its military expenditure measured in 2014 (US $91,081 million) is more than four times the accumulated spending of its regional counterparts.[3] Russian forces

have been significantly modernized and restructured over the past several years to enhance their military effectiveness in the region. In institutional terms, Russia was instrumental in the creation, and is central to the funding and operations, of regional institutions: the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).

Russian policymakers clearly aspire to lead and believe they have the right to do so. Their approach to leadership falls on the assertive and exclusive end of the spectrum of forms of regional leadership particularly towards the Western edge (Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova) and in the Caucasus, although the approach in Central Asia is more modulated, given the role of China.

Russia Understanding of and Role in Eurasia

How it understands and acts in its region is in part a product of its perception of the larger system. Official Russian views on the international system have been reasonably consistent in describing it as a dangerous, dynamic, and competitive environment. As power shifts, there is increasing diversity and an increasing role for regionally based centres of power, in the context of a growing struggle between civilizations (Russia 2008, 5; Russia 2015, para 9, 12; Russia 2016a, 3). This is accompanied by a strongly geopolitical perspective; great power politics is, in fundamental respects, about interstate competition over control of space and resources. In that competition, force is increasingly important (Russia 2016a, 5).

System and Region

The principal international challenge for Russia is taken to be American unipolarity (Putin 2007, 2; Trenin 2016a, 1–2). Since the United States is the principal member of NATO, NATO is part of the problem. It is a threat, not only because Cold War military alliances are obsolete and provocative per se but also because NATO's eastward enlargement poses a direct threat to the Russian Federation. As President Putin put it:

> *I think it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernization of the Alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, it represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of trust. And we have the right to ask: against whom is this expansion intended?* (2007, 5)

An article commemorating the 10th anniversary of that speech noted one of Putin's principal problems of the time was "the fact that the Atlantic alliance to expand eastwards ignoring the interests and the protests of Russia" (Akopov 2017, 2). To the extent that the EU's regional engagement is taken to be a proxy for the spread of Western norms and practices, it is also perceived as part of the problem.[4]

Unipolarity has a hard power component, but it is also a matter of soft power (the power of ideas) (Russia 2016a, 3). From the official Russian perspective, the United States and its allies seek to transform other states in America's preferred liberal direction. Western efforts comprised advocacy, "naming and shaming," conditionality, monitoring and evaluation of state performance (rule of law, corruption, elections), and the provision of technical assistance to states. The United States and European institutions have also promoted the development of independent civil society organizations through grants and core funding, "best practices" advice, and networking activities.

These activities run counter to dominant Russian conceptions not only of their regional role but also of their statehood. Events such as Georgia's 2003 Rose Revolution and Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution raised several concerns in Russia: the possible erosion of Russian influence in the region and contagion affecting Russian domestic politics.[5] Efforts to reform institutions and to strengthen civil society's capacity to constrain authoritarian governments challenged Putin's approach to rebuilding the Russian state and building his own power structure within the state. These events built towards a perception that the threat from the West was not only interstate but had to do with an external attempt to change target states, including Russia, from within (Surkov 2007, 51; Putin 2007, 7). Soft power was the ideological superstructure of American hegemony applied to Eurasia.

Several general lines of doctrine and policy followed in global international relations. One was the effort to undermine the structural dominance of the United States and its allies through the advocacy of multipolarity (polycentrism) and to create or strengthen alternative multilateral (G20 and the BRICS [Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa]) (Russia 2008, 5; Trenin 2016a, 2) and bilateral (e.g., Sino-Russian and Sino-Indian military, political and economic cooperation) initiatives.

Another has been the normative effort to contest the universalization of liberal values. At the global level, Russia has mounted a sustained defence of states' rights to choose their own political systems and domestic

norms. That position is linked to a defence of sovereignty and non-intervention (Karaganov 2016, 1). The third is a stress on UN Charter principles that embody those norms in international law. These directions of thought date back well into the earlier post-Cold War discourse. A good example is Yevgeny Primakov's advocacy of multipolarity and trilateral Russo-Sino-Indian cooperation in Asia in the mid-1990s during the period in which he was foreign minister and then prime minister (Mankoff 2012, 38).[6]

The fourth relevant aspect of Russia's view of international order is status hierarchy. America's unipolarity undermined the pre-existing status hierarchy in which the system was dominated by the superpowers, who claimed special rights and obligations concerning the management of the international system. That claim persists in the Russian defence of the role of the UN in world governance (Russia 2000), notably the Security Council, which operates not only as a weak constraint on the United States but as an affirmation of Russian status in the system as a whole. Unsurprisingly, in the context of debates about the reform of the Council, the Russian government is clear that the status of the five permanent members, and their veto, should be preserved (Russia 2016a, 9).

Russia in Its Region

Russia's role definition in the region is strongly related to its perspective on the system as a whole. Russian concern over the threat of NATO enlargement (e.g., Russia 2000, sect. 3) emanates more or less directly from its understanding of the competitive nature of the system as a whole and from their understanding of the United States and its Western allies (Russia 2015, para 12). The NATO enlargement narrative suggests that NATO is a force for "stability, security and prosperity" (Rumer and Stent 2009, 93). Expansion of the alliance expands the provision of these public goods. NATO policymakers also emphasize the right of sovereign states to choose their alliances.

The Russian leadership does not accept that logic. Opposition to the alliance's eastern enlargement and to direct military ties between Western states and Russia's neighbours has been a major component of Russia's regional policy since the mid-1990s. Russian policymakers and academic commentators have steadily suggested that the alliance is an artefact of Cold War competition, an arm of American power directed against the Russian Federation. It follows that further enlargement of NATO into the

border regions of Russia needs to be repulsed (Russia 2008, 9; Russia 2016a; Russia 2016b, paragraphs 106 and 107).

This is a qualification of the sovereignty of Russia's neighbours; it challenges their freedom to choose their security arrangements. This qualification is related to the Russian claim to a sphere of influence in its neighbourhood. The assertion of a sphere of influence contains a claim to special rights, responsibilities, and interests in areas outside the dominant regional power's sovereign jurisdiction.[7] The states along Russia's Western and Black Sea borders act as a buffer against Western penetration and influence-building in Russia's "hinterland." The same is true of the states of Central Asia with respect to threats from the south, notably from radical Islam.

The claim has at least two implications. Other polities within the region should accept subordination to the dominant power. Those outside the region should not interfere with the dominant power's efforts to manage "its" space. That is to say, a set of rules applies within the sphere. The Russian political elite believes that Russia's primacy in "its" region is a reality. That implies the subordination of its neighbours. Russia's perceived legitimate rights and duties permit intervention in the affairs of other former Soviet states, as well as adjustments to the post-Soviet territorial settlement. The Russian leadership appears to believe that this agenda can be pursued unilaterally. International norms, notably those contained in the UN Charter and in Europe (CSCE 1975, 1990), suggest sovereignty is equal and indivisible, the aggressive use of force and intervention in other states internal affairs are prohibited, and matters of international security fall under the authoritative remit of the UN Security Council.[8] Although, in the international system as a whole, Russia defends these principles, its discourse and behaviour suggest that it does not believe they apply in the same way to its former Soviet neighbours and that other states outside the region should accept this inequality.

That is also reflected in Russian diplomatic efforts to redesign the security architecture of Europe as a whole and to reduce the impact of Cold War institutional legacies such as NATO. The initial proposal for a treaty along these lines emerged in June 2008 and returned as a formal proposal in 2009 (Medvedev 2009). The essence of this proposal was the "indivisibility" of security in Europe, where no state could strengthen its own security at the expense of the security of any other state. That is a recipe for denying small states the right to choose security arrangements. In the context of the reset of Russian-American relations in 2009, influential

Russian academics called for a settlement of US-Russian relations, one significant component of which was American recognition of Russian primacy in the former Soviet states and acceptance that they should refrain from efforts to draw states such as Ukraine away from Russia (Karaganov et al. 2009).

The narrative concerning the military threat from the West is accompanied, as noted earlier, by concern over destabilization owing to the spread of liberal values. This applies not only to Russia itself but also to liberal challenges to existing authorities elsewhere in the region. The effort to ensure regime security in the Russian Federation requires a degree of control over the design of political structures of neighbours; what matters in this context is not only what they do but what they are. This has been justified in terms of a Russian alternative to the liberal universalist challenge: states and peoples, taking account of historical and cultural experiences, have the right to define their own approach to governance, rather than subjecting themselves to the "boring uniformity implied by the Western coordinate system."[9] Attempts to impose universalist frames from outside are considered illegitimate. Given the intrusiveness of EU association arrangements, and also their implications for the orientation of international economic relations, the EU's "transformative power" unsurprisingly has joined NATO's hard power as a perceived threat to Russia's interests (Lavrov 2016; Russia 2016a, 25).

The Russian Federation has fairly steadily argued for international recognition of its special rights and obligations in the neighbourhood (Tsygankov 2016, 89). This pattern substantially predates the Putin era (Russia 1993). The effort to minimize the penetration of Western states, institutions, and values into the region has been accompanied by a sustained effort to build multilateral institutions within the former Soviet space across a broad range of issue areas, notably security and economic relations (explored in greater detail later in this chapter).

Finally, at the transnational level, Russian elites recognize the importance of transnational economic ties in binding together the regional space under Russian leadership. As Anatolii Chubais (2003), a former deputy prime minister who then moved on to run the state electricity monopoly, argued, Russia should pursue a "liberal empire" in the former Soviet space, generating mutually beneficial and deepening cooperation with Russia at the core.[10] Over time, the "liberal" basis of transnational economic ties has come into question; Russian investment increasingly reflects political interest, or corruption, rather than economic rationality. But the

fundamental point about strengthening Russia's hold through economic penetration of the other states in the region remains.[11]

In short, Russia is attempting to construct a sphere of influence in the former Soviet region based on a geopolitical imagining of the international system.

How Russia Manages the Region

The Yel'tsin Era Background

After the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR's) collapse, one of the major practical challenges faced by the newly sovereign Russia was how to design its relationship with its newly independent neighbours. The initial effort to answer this question was embodied in the CIS declaration (1991) and in the subsequent charter of the CIS (1993), which envisaged the maintenance of the previously existing economic space, along with close cooperation on foreign and military affairs (CIS 1991, 1993). Neither posited the notion of a regional leader; the charter noted the equality of all members, mutual respect for their sovereignty and territorial inviolability, and a general prohibition on the use of force against any member. These commitments were paralleled in the 1992 Tashkent Collective Security Treaty (Tashkent 1992).

These institutional initiatives fell afoul of the general post-Soviet disintegration of neighbouring states (and of Russia itself) and a lack of resources to render them effective. The first stirrings of practical manifestation of the Russian view of regional leadership are found here. Russia quickly found itself vulnerable to instability in neighbouring states. The wars in Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Tajikistan implicated Russian military units spread across all four republics, as well as generating spillovers, since Russia lacked secure borders with its neighbours.

The conflicts carried contagion effects for Russia itself, as minorities sought to separate from successor states to which they had been arbitrarily assigned. Chechnya's abortive secession from Russia in 1991 is illustrative. Russia also faced the prospect of mass migration of ethnic Russians from the other republics into Russia and lacked the means to absorb them.

In the early 1990s, Western states and the UN encouraged Russia to stabilize its neighbouring space or at least acquiesced in Russian efforts to do so.[12] The major Russian engagement with its neighbours had three

aspects under Yel'tsin: military involvement with regional conflict, regional cooperation, and responses to wider international engagement.

The military element comprised the participation of Russian forces on the ground, arms transfers, and peacekeeping and diplomatic mediation. Concerning the role of Russian forces, the examples are the war in Moldova (1990–1992); the civil conflicts in South Ossetia (Georgia) in 1990–1992 and in Abkhazia (Georgia) in 1992–1993; the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict from 1988 to 1994 in Azerbaijan; and the civil war in Tajikistan from 1992 to 1997. In all these cases, varying numbers of Russian-commanded troops were stationed in the conflict regions, a legacy of Soviet-era deployments and bases.

Arms transfers to conflict parties sometimes occurred directly as a matter of policy decision, for example, through the regional agreement on sharing of Soviet military resources with other post-Soviet governments. In other instances, transfers occurred indirectly; military equipment was abandoned (e.g., during the withdrawal of the Russian unit in Nagorno-Karabakh). Elsewhere, arms were looted from depots nominally under the control of Russia, for example, in Georgia. Some Russian military contingents allegedly engaged in illicit trade of weapons, as in Moldova.

Beyond arms transfers, Russian units participated in logistics or combat operations of belligerents as allegedly occurred in Karabakh and Transnistria, as well as the loan of Russian aircraft in the Abkhaz war. A third was direct military intervention, for example, when Russian border forces and ground troops supported the government side in Tajikistan's civil war.

Russian officials were actively involved in mediation directed at cessation of hostilities, much of which was successful. In Moldova, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Karabakh, Russia took the leading role. In Tajikistan, Russia cooperated with Iran in achieving a peace agreement. In addition, Russia provided security guarantees (Tajikistan, given the presence of Russian bases and operational forces) or peacekeepers (Moldova and Georgia) to observe and police agreements. In Karabakh, the Russian leadership favoured an Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) peacekeeping force with its own significant participation, but the Azerbaijani government opposed Russian participation. The peacekeeping force was never deployed.

Given the economic and institutional collapse in Russia itself during the early 1990s, the capacity of the Russians to suppress these conflicts by force was extremely limited. It has been suggested that Russia adapted its

objectives to its limited means in this period, seeking not to exercise significant control over policy outcomes in these states but to complicate those states' consolidation by "freezing" their conflicts.[13]

The second vector of engagement in the 1990s was institutional cooperation. The establishment of the CIS has already been mentioned. Here there was a radical disconnect between original Russian policy and regional outcomes. The close union envisaged in the original CIS documents did not emerge in practice. Most of Russia's partners did not want so close a union. They were uncertain about their own foreign policy preferences. They had good reason to believe that Russia could not deliver on the supposed benefits. They also understood that, although Russia's capacity to meddle was considerable, its capacity to impose alternatives was limited. The CIS and the Tashkent Collective Security Treaty failed to provide incentives to Russia's neighbours sufficient for them to become effective.

Moreover, effective multilateral cooperation requires a member capacity to deliver on collective commitments. Weak states tend to produce weak cooperation. Russia's neighbours neither wanted nor had the capacity to deliver robust regional multilateralism; Russia did not either. Despite elaborate formal institutionalization, the CIS and its subordinate institutions failed in the 1990s (Olcott et al. 1999). In addition, the record displays significant ambivalence in Russia's own view of regional multilateralism. In the early 1990s, Russia itself prioritized relations with the West and sought to insulate itself from the economic and security difficulties of its neighbours (Tsygankov 2016, 82–87). To the extent it did engage regionally, in practice Russia preferred smaller subregional and bilateral arrangements in which it was the dominant player.

The third aspect of Russia's behaviour in the region concerns international engagement. In the 1990s, little attention was paid to keeping the West, and to some extent China, out of the Eurasian neighbourhood. The focus of Western (NATO and EU) enlargement was outside the regional space. Moreover, Russia was in no position to aid in post-collapse recovery and was vulnerable to the consequences of the collapse of its neighbours. It had little capacity to resist foreign engagement in external humanitarian, development, and state-building activities. As such, the Russian government did not resist foreign intrusion to the extent that its perceived interests might have suggested. Russia did not impede the extension of NATO's Partnership for Peace Programme into the region and became a partner itself. Nor did it obstruct the EU's Technical Assistance to the Commonweath of Independent States (TACIS) and Partnership and

Cooperation (PCA) processes. Instead, it flirted with both EU programmes and with more formal bilateral arrangements with both organizations.

In other words, although the basic directions of contemporary Russian regional policy emerged over the period, the record of regional leadership in the 1990s was limited and ambiguous. That reflected the confusion of the early post-Soviet period and a lack of consensus on the main directions of regional policy and on the priority accorded to the region in overall Russian foreign and security policy. At a deeper level, the shortfall was a product of the weakness and disorganization of the Russian state and also the absence of material capacity to sustain an ambitious regional strategy.

Regional Policy Under Putin

When Vladimir Putin entered central government, he moved to consolidate the state and to restore its control over national territory. He also worked to establish his own control over the state apparatus. He marginalized or destroyed competing centres of political and economic power and created his own client system. The Russian state began to rebuild its capacity to project power within the region through military reform and investment in force modernization. These efforts were facilitated by substantial increases in the global energy and mineral prices.

In other words, the preconditions were put in place for a more serious Russian effort at regional leadership. The years 2004–2006 appear to mark the beginning of that effort, for several reasons. In 2004, despite Russian objections (Mankoff 2012, 23), NATO proceeded with its second round of eastward enlargement, which included three former Soviet republics—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. NATO had not declared an end to the process, so the question was: who was next? Second, as discussed, the Putin government was disturbed by regime change in Georgia at the end of 2003 and, more significantly, Ukraine in 2004. The discussion focuses on security, institution building, and economic instruments.

Security Regionalization

Here, I focus on two seminal events: Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008 and Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2014. Both are illustrative of major developments in Russia's use of force in pursuit of its regional agenda. As already discussed, the Russian aspiration to exercise control over the region's security affairs germinated early after the collapse of the

USSR. The rise in oil prices at the end of the 1990s generated resources sufficient for a more ambitious military strategy.

The shift appeared first in the Southern Caucasus. The 2003 Rose Revolution was followed by a brief improvement in Russian-Georgian relations, evident in Russian good offices in negotiating the removal of the Shevardnadze government, and assistance in re-establishing Georgian government control over Ajara. The honeymoon was cut short by the new government's attempt to take control of South Ossetia in the summer of 2004. Georgian-Russian relations deteriorated through the mid-2000s as Mikheil Saakashvili's commitment to integration into Western institutions gathered pace. Russian military pressure on Georgia increased with repeated military exercises along their shared border and with incursions into Georgian airspace in Central and Western Georgia. These measures were accompanied by the distribution of Russian passports to residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Matters came to a head in April 2008, when Georgia's and Ukraine's NATO membership aspirations were discussed at the alliance's summit. Their bid for a Membership Action Plan (MAP) was strongly supported by the Bush administration but ran into resistance from some European allies (e.g., Germany, Italy, Belgium, and the Netherlands) (Asmus 2010, 131). The Alliance refused to grant membership action plans to Georgia and Ukraine, but committed to their eventual NATO membership.

Putin responded mildly at the NATO Summit. He noted that the principal concern of Russia, granting MAPs, had been removed from consideration. However, he warned Georgia and Ukraine about Russia's interests in the region and the danger of depending on NATO to resolve their problems with Russia (Putin 2008). Meanwhile, Russia reinforced its military presence in Abkhazia, mounting a major military exercise (Kavkaz 2008) on Georgia's northern border at the end of July.

In early August, military incidents on the administrative boundary line dividing South Ossetia from Georgian-controlled areas intensified. The Georgian government responded with an assault on South Ossetia. Russia intervened in the Ossetia dispute and then advanced into Georgian government-controlled territory, cutting the country's main east-west corridor and taking Georgia's principal port, Poti. At the end of August, Russia recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as sovereign states. Since then, it has integrated both into Russian economic, security, and governmental space.

The invasion is consistent with the model of a regional power seeking to control outcomes in what it perceives to be its space and to limit intrusion by competitor states and organizations.

Russia's intervention in Ukraine in 2014 also matches this interpretation. In this instance, the "intruder" was not NATO but the EU. The EU Eastern Partnership process, beginning in 2009, was intended to negotiate association agreements with six former Soviet states. The agreements were to be concluded at Vilnius in November 2013.[14] As the summit approached, Russia made serious efforts to convince the partners to defect from the EU process and to join Russia's effort at regional integration, the Eurasian Customs Union (EaCU). In September 2013, after a private meeting with Vladimir Putin, Armenia's President Sargsyan abruptly withdrew his country from the finalization of EU association and opted instead to seek membership in the EaCU. Given the close defence ties between Armenia and Russia, and the former's deep security dependence on the latter, it is reasonable to assume that Armenia succumbed to Russian pressure.[15]

In the weeks prior to the Vilnius Summit, and prefiguring the discussion of economic instruments later in the chapter, the Russians made similar demands on Ukraine, coupling them with offers of significant financial support and subsidization of gas prices. The Ukrainian government walked away from the EU process, also seeking membership in the EaCU. That decision resulted in the overthrow of the incumbent government. The successors reversed the country's position and resumed negotiation with the EU on association and deep and comprehensive free trade. Russia responded by engineering a referendum on secession in Crimea, followed by annexation. Russian regular and irregular forces also provided assistance to separatists in eastern Ukraine, contributing substantially to the outbreak and continuation of civil war there. Repeated ceasefires failed to endure. There has been little progress in negotiation of a settlement. The lack of progress results in part from Ukrainian unwillingness to abandon its Western orientation and Russia's unwillingness to accept that orientation.

Economic Regionalization

Russia's economic power in the region arises from at least three factors: the comparative size of the Russian economy, as discussed earlier; the dependence of many of its neighbours on import of Russian energy and access to the Russian market; and the hub and spokes pattern of legacy

infrastructure, which gave Russia considerable capacity to influence the flow of exports from the other republics into world markets. The policy is a mix of carrots and sticks. During the period in question, Russian state and private companies' direct investment in the region increased substantially, focusing on energy production and transit and other natural resources, banking and financial services, and telecommunications (Walker 2007).

Dependence on Russia generated vulnerabilities that could be exploited in the quest for regional compliance with Russian preferences. In the mid and late 2000s Russia repeatedly interrupted energy supplies to neighbouring states, resisting Russian preferences. Major examples include interruption in gas supplies to Georgia, Ukraine, and Belarus in 2004, 2006, 2009 and 2014 and interruption in electricity supply to Georgia in 2006.[16] The carrots (subsidies and credits) created Russia's sticks—the capacity to manipulate dependence for political purpose.

The Ukrainian example is illustrative of this chapter's general point about regional leadership. While to some extent, interruptions in Russian gas supply may have reflected efforts to adjust prices towards world levels, and pressure concerning accumulated energy debt, they tended to occur in the winter, when interruption had maximal social and political effect. In 2009–2010, settlement of gas supply and price was linked to agreement between Russia and Ukraine on long-term Russian use of the Sevastopol naval base—the headquarters of Russia's Black Sea Fleet. Economic power was translated into strategic purpose. The same might be said of Russia's effort to use economic (gas supply and pricing) and monetary (loans and debt relief) instruments in order to entice Ukraine away from its intended Association Agreement at the Vilnius Eastern Partnership Summit in November 2013.

The third element was the use of neighbours' dependence on Russia's internal market for much of their trade. Here the Russian government has made frequent use of trade embargos, ostensibly on food safety grounds, to secure political gain. Two examples suffice. Georgia is a major regional producer of vegetables and fruit, as well as wine. One element of the growing Russian pressure on Georgia discussed in the previous section was the embargo on Georgian sale of wine and other agricultural products into the Russian market. Russia also withdrew from the CIS economic embargo on Abkhazia, freeing up trade to and from that region of Georgia. Second, in 2009, Russia banned dairy imports from Belarus. Belarus claimed that the trade reduction (and a contemporaneous suspension of

loan disbursement) resulted from Belarusian refusal to recognize Georgia's breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Barry 2009).

Institutional Regionalization

The final dimension is institutional, with a particular focus on security and economic cooperation. Concerning security, in 2002 the Tashkent Treaty on Collective Security was due for a ten-year renewal. The membership built on the treaty by establishing the CSTO. This institutionalization was accompanied by agreements on the establishment of coalitional rapid reaction forces and the creation of an elaborate structure of governance for the organization. The organization also created a process for combatting non-traditional security threats (narcotics trafficking, counter-terrorism).[17] The core membership (Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan) has been stable since 1992. Russian leadership is clear. The organization has its headquarters in Moscow, and the secretary general has always been a Russian diplomat. Unusually for a multilateral organization, the CSTO website is hosted on the Russian government server.

Concerning economic cooperation, the key element is Putin's 2011 proposal for regional economic integration. Putin called for "making integration a comprehensive, sustainable, and long-term project" to create a common economic space with "unified legislation and the free flow of capital, services and labour force." The common economic space was to be the first step in the creation of a Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and then a Eurasian Union (Putin 2011). It also envisaged a common external tariff.

The common economic space project was launched in January 2012 by Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. An economic union treaty followed in May 2014, coming into effect in January 2015. Putin stressed that the union would welcome other states and particularly other CIS states. Armenia and Kyrgyzstan entered the union in 2014 and 2015.

Economic power in the customs union is highly concentrated. Russia accounted for 86% of the group's GDP and 84% of its population in 2014 (Dreyer and Popescu 2014, 2). The establishment of a working common economic space would strengthen Russian economic hegemony. The common external tariff makes completion of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements between the EU and member states of the Eurasian Union extremely difficult. The union not only impedes Western economic penetration but also is intended to create an equal inter-institutional relationship in Europe as a whole. As Putin said: "A partnership between the

Eurasian Union and EU that is economically consistent and balanced will prompt changes in the geo-political and geo-economic setup of the continent with a guaranteed global effect" (Putin 2011). The word "balanced" is important, given Russian resentment of what it deemed to be the unequal treatment of Russia by European institutions and its desire to achieve recognized equality of status.

The extent to which this initiative will be realized in practical terms remains to be seen. The record of previous attempts at integration would encourage scepticism. On the other hand, the past is sometimes not a terribly good indicator of the future. Given the recovery of the Russian economy from 2000 to 2014, Russia's capacity to assert hegemony is considerably greater now than it was during the 1990s. However, Russian growth is dominated by energy export revenues, which fell sharply in 2014 and have failed to recover to earlier levels. In the meantime, the effort to diversify the Russian economy has largely failed, strengthening the macroeconomic impact of the energy-price volatility.

The consequences for the state budget have been stark. State revenue has decreased, spending has been reduced, and reserves are being depleted. Russia is, therefore, not currently in a position to assume the costs of meaningful economic integration with its poorer partners. Moreover, the partner states vary in their capacity to deliver on their commitments and display resistance to subordination. Russia, in turn, appears to subordinate its EEU multilateral commitment to its own foreign policy preferences. This suggests that, despite Russia's greater strength, the fate of this initiative will likely be similar to that of previous efforts at economic integration.[18]

Discussion of institutional regionalization would be incomplete without a comment on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), with particular reference to Central Asia.[19] The SCO is a helpful reminder that Russian policy towards institutional regionalization is complemented by subregional initiatives, notably in Central Asia. The SCO was established in 2001–2002 and now includes four Central Asian states, along with Russia, China, and now India and Pakistan, which became members in 2017. It has a remit of political, economic, and security cooperation, a remit that significantly overlaps with those of the EEU and the CSTO.[20]

Given Russia's record of hostility to the involvement of external great powers and organizations in the former Soviet space, the SCO is anomalous. China dwarfs Russia in most measures of power and has become the major economic partner of a number of Central Asian states. The main

axis of economic cooperation in Central Asia is shifting from north-south to east-west, the major player being China rather than Russia. That trend may accelerate as China moves ahead with its Belt and Road initiative. The shift cuts across Russia's effort to consolidate the former Soviet republics around Russia, as well as giving local players more flexibility in policy development.

However, there are ample reasons why Russia might view China differently from the West. China was developing a significant economic relationship with the Central Asian states anyway. There is little that Russia can do to constrain that process. The SCO created a framework to institutionalize Chinese engagement and, possibly, to constrain it. From a status perspective, Russia is treated as an equal with China in the arrangement. Moreover, the Chinese government shares Russian concerns about the projection of Western influence (SCO 2005, 4). Both states also have deep concerns about the spread of radical Islamist ideology, and terrorism, through Central Asia. In other words, they have had a shared geopolitical interest.

The Russians and Chinese have a reasonably developed, mutually beneficial bilateral structure of cooperation. That includes joint action in international fora, the February 2017 joint veto concerning Syria, "the latest in a string of vetoes by Moscow and Beijing" (RFE/RL 2017) being a case in point. And both states participate in wider institutions (the BRICS, the G20) contesting Western hegemony. However, like the EEU and prior efforts at institutionalization, the SCO is long on ambition and short on practical impact.

To summarize the institutional dimension, there has been a sustained Russian effort to strengthen institutions of regional cooperation in the security and economic spheres under its leadership (Safranchuk 2008). The membership of these organizations does not include all of the region's states, and organizations often have overlapping competencies. This produces a confusing geometry of regional integration. With the exception of the SCO, Russian dominance of the institutions is clear. The effect of this effort at consolidation remains unclear. But the evidence suggests that institution building is a significant component, largely unsuccessful, of Russia's effort to establish leadership in the region. The issue of regional reaction to Russian leadership belongs to the companion chapter in this volume, authored by Stefan Meister. Here it suffices to note that there is little evidence that institutional regionalization generates any compliance pull or followership with respect to Russian foreign policy preference.

Conclusion

The analysis suggests that Russian perspectives on the region and its leadership involve exclusivity, preponderance, and qualification of the sovereignty of "subaltern" states. Enforcement of leadership includes both negative (coercion, sanctions) and positive (investment, subsidy, security guarantees) incentives. The official position is broadly accepted by Russian politicians and policymakers and relevant non-governmental elites. Public opinion polls suggest broad support for Russian policy in its region. That consensus is deeply rooted in Russian interpretations of history, culture, and international relations and is not an epiphenomenon of Putin's leadership. It poses a fundamental challenge to liberal universalism.

Early in this chapter, it was noted that regions vary in the degree to which power is distributed and the nature of regional leadership, ranging from loose and cooperative to tight and coercive. Eurasia is distinctive in the degree of concentration of demographic, economic, and military power in Russia. Russia has increasingly tended towards tight and often coercive leadership. Since 1999, the discourse of the state and the Russian political elite has developed increasingly towards advocacy of a hegemonic and exclusive approach to Russia's role in the region. That draws into question norms of sovereignty (the right of other states in the region to choose their economic and security arrangements), non-intervention, and territorial integrity.

Generally speaking, Russian behaviour corresponds to the coercive model of leadership. It has used military, economic, and political/institutional instruments in order to build a sphere of influence in Eurasia. It has deployed both positive (subsidization of energy prices, lending on favourable terms, investment in regional infrastructure, defence cooperation, and military assistance) and negative (sanctions, disruption of energy supply, migration, and visa policy) incentives to pursue its hegemonic programme. It has used force against its neighbours in order to enforce compliance.

The research design of this chapter pushes towards generalization about Russia's approach to the region. Although their conceptualization of the region and their own role covers the region as a whole, behaviour varies. Russian actions in the West and in the Caucasus have had a much harder edge than in Central Asia. That reflects the common ground with Central Asian leaders on resistance to the imposition of liberal principles in domestic political arrangements. Russia has also taken a more positive view of

Chinese engagement with Central Asia, and has accepted Chinese inclusion in the SCO, in the hope of constraining and institutionalizing a Chinese role that Russia is not in a position to resist.

The question why Russia takes this approach to regional leadership is not, strictly speaking, relevant to this analysis. However, several factors are plausible given the preceding analysis. One was the cognitive framework of the leadership regarding the competitive and geopolitical nature of international relations (Tsygankov 2016). Russia's policy in the region is strongly affected by the elite's reading of the nature of the international system as a whole. The perception of the Western threat may have been reinforced by the actions of the West towards the region after the USSR's collapse at the beginning of the 1990s, notably NATO enlargement (Mearsheimer 2015), and the Western welcome of regime change in Georgia and Ukraine. These enhanced Russian leadership concerns about the Western agenda of democratization. The post-imperial legacy, the lingering economic and security interdependence of the former Soviet states, and a desire for equal treatment (respect) in the systemic hierarchy (MacFarlane 2016) are also relevant. In other words, the outcome is overdetermined. Here it suffices to note that the multiplicity of security, status, historical, political, economic, cultural, and psychological factors contributing to this approach to regional leadership suggests that the approach is deeply rooted and enduring.

Notes

1. This point is a specific aspect of a broader logic covered in Robert Gilpin's discussion of declining powers (1981, 189–195).
2. This analysis ends in December 2016 and does not discuss the evidence of a different US perspective on the region under the Trump administration. However, President Trump has abandoned his earlier promise to "cancel North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)" and has agreed to commence negotiations on reform of the regional trading system.
3. The data are incomplete, as no information is available on Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Such data would not significantly affect the general picture.
4. The latest foreign policy concept (2016a, 25) refers to both NATO and the EU as reflecting geopolitical expansion. At times, Russian officials have also complained of Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) complicity in this Western projection of norms.

5. The Rose Revolution removed the Shevardnadze government and initiated a rapid reform of governance and legal institutions. The Orange Revolution was a widespread protest against a fabricated election and produced a similarly reformist government.
6. For a detailed account of independent Russia's transition from Westernizing to statist foreign and security policy, see Tsygankov (2016, 59–96).
7. Keal (1983) offers a very helpful theorization of the concept of spheres of influence and applies the concept effectively to the Cold War division of Europe.
8. It is worth noting that the USSR and the Russian Federation have subscribed to most of these international normative documents. This difference is not covert but public. As one Russian commentator noted recently, "Russian authorities have portrayed their country as one that doesn't hesitate to violate every international norm, including by murdering their own citizens abroad" (Pertsev 2017).
9. Lavrov (2016) notes in this context that the enlargement of NATO and the EU is not so much about smaller states "going from subjugation to freedom … but rather a change of leadership" since the new members "can't take any significant decision without the green light from Washington or Brussels."
10. The liberal empire theme was later identified as one of two dominant concepts in Russia's approach to its region by Ivan Safranchuk (2008).
11. I am grateful to Stefan Meister for comment on this point.
12. For example, S/RES/937 (1994), in which the Security Council expressed its appreciation for Russian (CIS) "peacekeeping" initiatives in the Abkhazian region of Georgia or S/RES/1089 (1996) where they did the same for Russia's intervention in Tajikistan's civil war.
13. Tajikistan differs from the other four conflicts, since a formal peace agreement was achieved.
14. For a detailed discussion of the partnership programme and of the EU's approach to the states on its eastern littoral, see MacFarlane and Menon (forthcoming). See also an exhaustive and extremely useful account of the Vilnius and post-Vilnius process in Wiegand and Schulz (2015).
15. This dependence stems from the lack of a settlement to the Karabakh conflict, the rapid increase in Azerbaijani military modernization, and Armenia's poor relations with Turkey.
16. For an analysis up to 2007, see Walker (2007).
17. For a good summary of the aims and activities of the organization, as well as access to key documents, see Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) (2002 and ongoing).
18. For a recent negative prognosis, see Dragneva and Wolczuk (2017).

19. For a useful analysis of Russian policy in Central Asia, with reference to China, see Mankoff (2012, 244–258).
20. Gabuev (2017) provides detailed background on the development of the SCO in the context of the China-Russia dyad.

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CHAPTER 11

Hedging and Wedging: Strategies to Contest Russia's Leadership in Post-Soviet Eurasia

Stefan Meister

Russian elites define their country's position as that of a global player in a multipolar world, largely due to its role as regional hegemon in the post-Soviet area. This is connected to Russia's self-image as a great power and a former empire. From the perspective of Russian leadership, the country's post-Soviet neighborhood—in Russian terms its "near abroad"—consists of countries with limited sovereignty. This includes all the countries of the European Union (EU)'s Eastern Partnership (EaP; Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) and the Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan, Tadzhikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan), but not the three Baltic states, as these are members of the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Moscow uses different integration instruments, including the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), to preserve dependencies and prevent other (external) integration options.[1]

However, while post-Soviet Russia is still the dominant security, energy, and cultural power in the region, it is declining in the areas of trade and economic development, where it faces increasing competition from the EU and China. Moreover, Russia lacks soft power to attract its neighbors.

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The "Putin system" might be a role model for some authoritarian leaders, but Russia has no sustainable model for attracting the admiration of other societies.[2] Therefore, Russian leadership uses soft coercion and increasingly—as in the case of Ukraine—military power to compel post-Soviet countries' allegiance.[3]

Smaller (secondary) post-Soviet states are unable to directly contest Russia's position as the dominant hegemon. However, in light of Russia's declining economic power, the ruling elites of other Eurasian countries have begun to shore up their own sovereignty with contestation strategies, including balancing, wedging, and hedging, often with the support of outside players engaging in multi-vector foreign policy. The success of these strategies depends on the countries' resources, their geographic proximity to external players like China and the EU, and the bargaining abilities of their elites.

At the same time, post-Soviet leaders want to benefit from Russia. Their economic and political systems are mostly similar to Russia's, and their embedded strategic thinking is strongly driven by rent-seeking options, short-term gains, and geopolitics and balance of power calculations. Therefore, relations between post-Soviet states and Russia can be described as an ongoing bargaining process, in which Russia is compelled to pay a price to secure loyalty.

The Russian annexation of Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine led to a new dynamic in relations between Russia and its post-Soviet neighbors. In part, as a reaction to its lack of soft power, the Kremlin has set a new paradigm for the entire post-Soviet region: if these states are not loyal and attempt to integrate with competing (especially transatlantic) organizations, military intervention or annexation of part of the country may be used to prevent these steps. In setting this precedent, the Kremlin alienated other post-Soviet states and increased the degree to which they feel threatened—even its so-called closest ally Belarus—contributing to a complete lack of trust on both sides.

This chapter addresses the questions of how and why secondary and tertiary Eurasian powers have refused to follow the dominant regional power's ambitions. What are the key motivations behind the choice of a particular contestation strategy? The first section briefly discusses how International Relations (IR) theory conceptualizes contestation strategies and how this scholarship is relevant to analyze Eurasian responses to Russia's ambitions in the region. The second section focuses on the nature of post-Soviet politics and its inherent conflict between interdependence

and sovereignty, which sets the framework of the relations between Eurasian secondary powers and Russia. The third section illustrates the contestation strategies of secondary Eurasian countries through the perspective of multi-vector foreign policy. The fourth section analyzes three distinct types of contestation strategy utilized by one or more individual Eurasian states. The fifth section portrays the Ukraine crisis since 2013/2014 as an expression of a shift in Russian policy and shows how this shift challenges the established contestation strategies in Eurasia. Finally, the conclusion develops the argument that Eurasian contestation is likely to increase the more Russia seeks to dominate its post-Soviet neighbors.

Contestation Strategies in IR Theory: Relevance for Eurasia

Robert Keohane (1969) divides the international system into four types of states: system determining (great powers), system influencing (secondary or tertiary powers), system affecting (middle powers), and system ineffectual (small powers). Looking into the types of states in the contemporary post-Soviet region, it must first be noted that there is a stark asymmetry between Russia and the other post-Soviet states in terms of national capabilities, including military and economic power, population, geographic size, and international prestige. Compared to Russia, the other states in the region are all highly inferior across these indicators. Under President Vladimir Putin, Russia has pursued active hegemonic engagement in post-Soviet Eurasia.[4] It has military bases and installations in some of the countries,[5] it has created a regional military alliance (CSTO) to provide military support (and also deploy Russian troops within the member states), and it has established a free trade zone and an institution for economic integration (the EEU). Furthermore, Russia dominates regional policing and peacemaking, and is either directly or indirectly involved in all regional conflicts.

However, despite this fundamental asymmetry and Moscow's growing international engagement in the Middle East and North Africa, Russia's presence in the post-Soviet region is waning. In Europe, states like Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova are highly motivated to integrate into the EU. In Central Asia, China is increasingly playing a competing role, despite the two countries' cooperation in the Shanghai Cooperation

Organization (SCO). While Russian leadership has worked since 2010 to force deeper Eurasian integration to halt this process, this integration has its limits, as the conflict with Ukraine demonstrated. Furthermore, the deepening of the integration of the EEU has been slowed down if not stopped, and in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis several countries have called the process into question, particularly Kazakhstan and Belarus (Dragneva and Wolczuk 2017).

Before we continue, a theoretical approach to the post-Soviet space requires that the secondary and small powers be identified. Kazakhstan describes itself as a regional leader in Central Asia but is not accepted as such by the other Central Asian states. Ukraine, despite being the second-largest post-Soviet country by population and economy and one whose strong civil society serves as a model for other post-Soviet countries, has not become a leader in relation with the EU since the 2014 Orange Revolution. That role was instead taken by Georgia, which overcame internal obstacles to implement the most comprehensive reform agenda of all the post-Soviet countries under the presidency of Mikheil Saakashvili (2004–2013). But even if Georgia is the leader in terms of reforms and harmonization with EU standards, it is a small state at the margins of Eurasia and still mired in a difficult transformation process. Other small states like Armenia and Belarus are even more dependent on Russia, in terms of either economy or security. Azerbaijan is a resource-rich country that has diversified its energy exports and pipeline infrastructure to de-emphasize Russia, and sees itself as the most powerful country in the South Caucasus—but it is not accepted as such, nor does it have the ambitions and resources to become a dominant (sub-)regional power.

Within the framework of neorealism, which dominates scholarship on countries' strategic reactions with high systemic concentrations of power, secondary or tertiary states tend to follow either balancing or "bandwagoning" strategies (Waltz 1979, 118, 126). In contrast to regional or global powers, these states lack the resources and hard power to enforce their interests independently. Therefore, they need to either forge alliances with other small states or follow great powers. More recent IR scholarship has broadened the scope of strategic responses, placing these on a spectrum of accommodation, neutrality, and resistance. While secondary (middle) powers can disrupt the system but not change it unilaterally, tertiary (small) states cannot affect the system individually at all and need a large number of allies to do so.[6]

Meanwhile, domestic-level IR theories argue that small states' ability to act matters. This perspective focuses on internal factors as sources of foreign policy, such as national culture, mentality, ideology, institutional interaction, as well as leaders' opinions and views. Proponents argue that, in a multipolar, twenty-first-century world, small states have more room to maneuver than in the bipolar period of the twentieth century. Under the current process of power transition, small states thus become less vulnerable and more resilient (Preiherman 2017, 9). Instead of being mere system takers, they increasingly develop into full-fledged actors with a range of strategic options through which they can resist or reshape the pressures emanating from structural conditions (Cooper and Shaw 2009, 4).

But neither neorealism nor domestic-level theory fully explains why Belarusian or Kazakh leadership sometimes supports and in other cases resists Russian pressure.

Neoclassical realism typically focuses more on great powers than on small states, but there is no reason why its propositions could not be adapted to explore smaller states' foreign policy behavior in the Eurasian region (Ripsman et al. 2016). One useful contribution of neoclassical realism is the concept of strategic hedging, defined as an

> insurance strategy that aims at reducing or minimizing risks arising from uncertainties in the system, increasing freedom of maneuver, diversifying strategic options, and shaping the preferences of the adversaries. It is a portfolio or mixed strategy that consists of both cooperative and competitive strategic instruments ranging from engagement and enmeshment, all the way up to balancing. Any hedging portfolio will be a combination of both cooperative and competitive strategic instruments. (Dong 2015, 64)

Hedging is considered less confrontational than traditional balancing, less cooperative than bandwagoning, and more proactive than neutrality (Preiherman 2017, 12). Strategic hedging holds the most promise as a way to understand the contestation strategies employed by secondary post-Soviet states in their relations with Russia: as they seek to benefit from but not integrate with Russia, they need a constant bargaining and insurance strategy to reign in the dominant player in the region, and they are likely to deploy a strategy less confrontational than balancing and more actively engaged than bandwagoning to enlarge and utilize their room to maneuver effectively. Post-Soviet leaders know their limits with regard to

Russia's interests but constantly test their room for maneuver when relations between Russia and external players provide an opportunity.

Furthermore, the power to act is not limited to powerful states. The outcome of negotiations often depends not exclusively on national resources but also on the skills, capabilities, and positioning of the actors. In a multipolar world, the power of smaller states grows when they are able to develop smart negotiation strategies and exploit the competing interests of extra-regional great powers. When operating in a situation with two or more competing external actors, they can increase their leverage against dominant actors by developing different wedge strategies, including internationalizing conflicts, challenging trade chains or loyalty, or threatening rapprochement with the opposing camp (Gnedina 2015, 1013).

Wedge strategies need at least two competing external players to function. They have been utilized successfully by European post-Soviet countries including Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, and to an extent the three South Caucasian states. For the Central Asian states, relations with China constitute an important mechanism to balance Russia, but Chinese leadership is much smarter in its own negotiation capacities.

To sum up, the line between secondary and small states in post-Soviet Eurasia is hardly clear, and both resources and ability to maneuver around the dominant regional power are equally important in determining outcomes. Classical balancing and bandwagoning strategies seem to be insufficient to analyze the behavior of smaller post-Soviet states and their interaction with Russia; hedging and wedging are promising concepts to better explain the contestation strategies of secondary post-Soviet states. Successful hedging and wedging strategies employed in the region often use relations with other external players to protect bargaining positions vis-à-vis Russia.

Nearly all post-Soviet countries therefore pursue a multi-vector foreign policy. Multi-vector foreign policy means cooperation and co-habitation with all regional players, including Russia (Gnedina 2015, 1008). It helps to hedge sovereignty in the face of Russia's revisionist foreign policy, while driving a wedge between Russia and external players like the EU, the USA, and China.

The Nature of Post-Soviet Politics: Interdependence and Sovereignty

The end of the Soviet Union was driven not only by the economic weakness and moral and credibility crisis of the Communist Party but also by national elites who challenged the universalist legitimacy of the Soviet model. Nationalism was a driving force behind the breakup of the Soviet Union; national movements and leaders in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and to a lesser extent Central Asia were supported by their respective societies against the Soviet leadership in Moscow (Kappeler 2008).

At the same time, with the exception of Georgia following the Rose Revolution in 2003 there has been no significant transition among the elites, neither in Russia nor in most of the other post-Soviet states (Kryshtanovskaja and White 1996, 711–733). After 1991, Soviet elites remained in power in post-Soviet states, with the former heads of the Communist Party often becoming president of their newly independent states—including Leonid Kravchuk in Ukraine (former secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party), Nursultan Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan (former General Secretary of the Communist party of the Kazakh Socialist Union republic and still in power), and Eduard Shevardnadze (former Soviet foreign minister) in Georgia. Only with the so-called color revolutions of the early 2000s have some of these elites been displaced by a younger generation.[7] Even so, these elites come from roughly the same stock, and neither the governance model nor the function of the state has changed significantly. This continuity of Soviet (national) elites makes it easier for Russian leadership until today to influence its post-Soviet neighborhood via informal ties and corruption, and the resilience of bonds to the Kremlin has given non-Russian post-Soviet elites informal and direct access to Russian elites, facilitated by a common system of values and negotiating behaviors.

Labor and production divisions among the former Soviet Union republics created a highly integrated economy, where geographic distances played no role and the Russian Socialist Union republic was the center and hub for pipeline, railway, and highway infrastructure (Williamson 1993). After the fall of the Soviet Union, these integrated economies in many cases persisted, making it more difficult for secondary powers to develop their own industries and markets without integrating with other economic spaces like the EU and substantially reforming their economies as the Baltic states did. As a product of the Soviet political, social, and economic

system, relations between Russia and its near abroad are still characterized by an interwoven set of interests that can verge into interdependence. Only resource-rich states like Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan have been able to successfully diversify their export infrastructures and then only with the support of international investors in the 2000s when prices for oil and gas were high. The comprehensive integration of the post-Soviet states' economies and infrastructures still constitutes an impediment to greater independence from Russia but also an important bargaining tool for Eurasian elites.

The military industrial complex was one of the Soviet Union's key industrial sectors and also one of the most highly integrated. Until recently, countries like Belarus and Ukraine had remained key suppliers to the Russian arms industry (Cooper 2013, 98–107). While this is still the case with Belarus (Bohdan 2017), Ukraine and Russia have been disentangling their economic ties in different sectors since their military conflict began in 2014 (Dunnett 2015). For Ukraine, this might mean losing the most important market for its arms products, but it also means becoming independent from the Russian market. Although the Ukrainian government approved a prohibition against exporting military technology to Russia, there are still ways to circumvent this restriction, including transporting arms via Belarus (McLees and Rumer 2014). While the Russian government is keen to eliminate any dependence on Ukrainian technology supplies, both countries have a lasting interest in maintaining these production chains at least in part, as they also provide tools for influence, bargaining, and hedging.

Mutual dependence and integration are also important with regard to pipeline infrastructure. The Soviet Union built pipelines from its peripheral regions to European Russia, then further to the lucrative export markets of Central and Western Europe. The resource-rich states, including Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan, have made independence from the Soviet/Russian pipeline system a primary goal. This has only been possible with external support: Kazakhstan, for example, developed a close cooperation with Chinese and Western energy companies by introducing the most liberal investment policy in the region. The more isolated Turkmenistan developed a new pipeline with China and Azerbaijan and constructed a gas and oil pipeline to the EU via Turkey in cooperation with British Petrol (with US government support), rendering it more independent from Russia (Idan and Shaffer 2011, 241–268).

Ukraine and Belarus, on the other hand, have relied on cheap Russian oil and gas, which the Russian state company Gazprom has had to export through a pipeline system now owned by newly independent states. In turn, countries like Ukraine and Belarus have used the transit pipelines on their territory—which lead to the EU, the most important market for Russian energy companies—to negotiate discounts on prices for oil and gas, credits, and other concessions from the Russian government (Balmaceda 2013).

No post-Soviet country except the Baltic states has been able (or willing) to fully leave the Russian sphere of influence. This is due primarily to a lack of political will rather than a lack of opportunity (except in the case of Georgia): post-Soviet elites have mostly been interested in staying in power and maintaining access to rent-seeking opportunities. From this perspective, Russia is not only the hegemon that has to be balanced and hedged but also a source of income. While trying to protect their sovereignty and limit Russian influence, there remains an incentive among post-Soviet elites to benefit from corruption and business with Russia.

Yet resources are distributed unequally among the Eurasian states, and the elites of these states have followed different strategies to consolidate their power positions and balance relations between Russia and external players. Besides the export of natural resources, other instruments to balance Russia have been geographic location, military cooperation with NATO and the USA, and regional integration with the EU. A multi-vector foreign policy is the dominant pattern in nearly all post-Soviet countries.

Contestation Strategies of Post-Soviet States

Multi-vector foreign policy as a wedging and hedging strategy is a non-ideological policy that serves first and foremost the interests of post-Soviet elites playing both sides (Russia and that of another external player) and prevents their countries from integrating with either Russia or another regional power, for example, the EU (Kuzio 2006, 89–108; Nice 2013, 73–89). It represents the typical policy of post-Soviet elites, who are more focused on personal short-term benefits than their states' sustainable development through reforms and modernization. Any decision to integrate with one side would have detrimental implications for these elites: stronger integration with Russia would result in a loss of sovereignty and the redistribution of resources in favor of Russian elites; integrating with

the EU would further challenge their power position and undermine rent-seeking options through increasing political competition, transparency, and rule of law. While the EU tries to transform its Eastern neighbors through association and free trade agreements, Russia works to reintegrate these states in its security and economic institutions (Haukkala 2013, 91–104).

Neither the EU nor Russia has achieved its goals with regard to the post-Soviet countries. While the implementation of EU standards by post-Soviet states has been rather limited, the integration of these states into institutions dominated by Russia—as in the cases of Belarus and Kazakhstan—has not compromised the smaller states' sovereignty or increased their loyalty to the hegemon. This is especially telling in the interdependence between EaP countries and both Russia and the EU. Some of these countries need investment, technology, financial support, and recognition from the EU; others, such as Belarus and Moldova, depend on Russian trade, or, like Armenia, on (cheap) resources and military support (Gnedina 2015, 1008). The post-Soviet European countries, however, have generally managed to circumvent the influence of both the EU and Russia, while achieving some of their own short-term goals. Central Asian states like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan simultaneously cooperate with Russia, China, the EU, and the USA.

But the multi-vector foreign policy of post-Soviet states means neither balancing nor bandwagoning, but primarily bargaining with competing external actors (including Russia) over the terms of cooperation (Ibid., 1009). Through tactical maneuvering, post-Soviet elites in Eurasia try to pursue their own objectives, including maximizing their wealth and power and maintaining a certain degree of autonomy from all external actors to prolong the bargaining game. While they have to accommodate the demands of the more powerful external actor in some cases (Belarus, for instance, had to sell its transit pipeline infrastructure to Russian Gazprom to secure low prices for oil and gas), in other cases they can successfully maneuver between the competing external actors until they are able to negotiate favorable deals with one or both.

This means that the main interest of Eurasian, post-Soviet elites is to neither follow nor join Russia, China, or the EU, but instead to maintain a neutral position to preserve freedom to maneuver in relation to all actors. Eurasian states bargain with Russia, the West, and China, remaining sufficiently flexible to change their positions or contradict previous decisions in order to gain personal benefits or secure power and independence.

Their main goal is to extract as many benefits as possible from external players, while making as few concessions or compromises as possible. This is also a reason why they prefer to preserve the current rules of the game: any substantial change could challenge their power positions at home.

Negotiations take place as a result of conflict and cooperation; this is the constant theme of post-Soviet Russian policy toward its "near abroad". Secondary Eurasian states change their behavior in response to specific actions undertaken by Russia and other external players, including the EU. Each side, Russia and the Eurasian states, can influence the behavior of the other by offering benefits or imposing costs which would make non-cooperation more costly (Ibid., 1012). A comprehensive integration of infrastructure and economy is a bargaining chip in both directions.

The Ukrainian leadership, for example, used the pipeline system on its territory several times before 2014 to extract benefits from Russia, and former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych used negotiations with the EU on an association agreement and a deep and comprehensive free trade agreement to negotiate credits and discounts on the price of gas from Russian leadership (Walker 2013). But Yanukovych was not interested in joining the Russia-led EEU or signing the Association Agreement with the EU, because either would change the rules of the game and impact his bargaining options (Moshes 2013, 59–72). He did not expect Ukrainian society to oppose his decision not to sign the Association Agreement with the EU and march against the regime for the second time after the Orange Revolution. The Euromaidan protest of 2013/2014 had less to do with political support for the EU and more to do with political opposition to components of the country's (post-)Soviet heritage, mainly Russian interference, the lack of the rule of law, and the corruption of Ukrainian elites but also the aggression of security forces against demonstrators.

Categorizing Contestation Types in Post-Soviet Eurasia

The following section focuses on three types of contestation strategies. Resource-rich countries like Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, which have been able to diversify their economic dependency on Russia by diversifying their pipeline infrastructure, primarily follow hedging strategies through external balancing, albeit with some differences. The second group comprises countries that try to drive a wedge between Russia and an external player

in the context of a multi-vector foreign policy. Examples include Ukraine before the Euromaidan protest, along with Moldova and Belarus—all three have played Russia against the EU and vice versa. A third category includes the attempts made by Ukraine since 2014 and Georgia since 2003 to pursue integration with the EU and NATO to protect their independence from Russian influence. While confronting Russia and attempting to leave its sphere of interest, they still use hedging and wedging strategies to improve their bargaining positions and protect their power positions. Armenia is also part of this group: while integrating into the Russian-led EEU and remaining dependent on Russia in terms of security and energy policy, it engages in cautious rapprochement with the EU and Iran to improve its room for maneuver toward Russia.

Typical examples of states pursuing multi-vector foreign policies include Ukraine until 2014; Georgia before and after the presidency of Mikheil Saakashvili; and Moldova, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan. While the EU represents the most important bargaining chip for the countries that are part of the EU's EaP policy, China serves as an alternative to Russian influence for Central Asian states.

This is more difficult for countries like Belarus and Armenia, which are much more dependent on Russia. While Belarus is economically dependent on Russia due to the lack of internal reforms, Armenia requires Russia's support in the Karabakh conflict with Azerbaijan. Belarus and Armenia enjoy much less room to maneuver than resource-rich countries like Azerbaijan or Kazakhstan. Both constitute what Keohane's model would call "ineffectual states" that depend on the actions and resources of more powerful states, in this case Russia (Keohane 1969, 295–296). Furthermore, both depend heavily on discounts for Russian oil and gas; Belarus' main source of income is processing cheap Russian oil to create high-end products for export mostly into the EU. Russia is the most important market—Belarus exports 35 percent of its food production and 22 percent of its machinery production to Russia (2015) (Dragneva and Wolczuk 2017, 8).

Nevertheless, in several cases Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has shown independence from Russia, while cautiously preserving the foundations of their bilateral relations.[8] First, he refused to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia after the Russian-Georgian War in 2008. Second, Lukashenko, in line with Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, refused to endorse and support sanctions against Ukraine in the context of the EEU, as well as retaliatory sanctions

Russia leveled against the EU in response to EU sanctions related to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Lukashenko recognized the new Ukrainian leadership after the Euromaidan events, and even increased regular exchange with Kiev despite the escalation between Russia and Ukraine (BTC 2017). This stance signaled a great deal of Belarusian geopolitical maneuverability, flexibility, and independence from Russia. Belarus did not bandwagon with Moscow, even when facing a growing threat of similar Russian action within Belarus itself. Several authors have argued that there was a threat of a Russian invasion of Belarus in the context of the joint ZAPAD (West) 2017 military exercise (Goble 2017); Lukashenko nevertheless resisted Moscow's demand to build a new Russian military base on his country's territory.

At the same time, Lukashenko regularly presented his country as Russia's closest ally. It participated in nearly all integration projects initiated by the Kremlin, joining the Customs Union in 2010, the Single Economic Space in 2012, and finally the EEU in 2015 (Preiherman 2017, 14). Moreover, it refrained from challenging any other fundamental economic or security bilateral arrangements, instead respecting the red lines Russian leadership has drawn, including serious rapprochement with NATO or the EU. One example of a red line would be any challenge of military cooperation with Russia, because of Belarus' importance as a buffer between Russia and NATO; respecting this, Lukashenko has never mentioned any interest in joining alternative security organizations like NATO.

Yet being a member of Russia-led institutions does not mean being loyal to Moscow. From the perspective of Belarusian leadership, membership is one element of strategic hedging: it increases the country's information regarding Moscow's security thinking and grants access to elements of the country's defense planning. Even the ZAPAD 2017 military exercise illustrated how Minsk is trying to enlarge its room to maneuver while simultaneously presenting itself as a more independent player pursuing its own interests. Thus, it was Lukashenko, not President Putin, who invited foreign observers and neighboring countries to monitor the ZAPAD 2017 exercise (Ioffe 2017).

Thus Belarus is pursuing strategic hedging to explore its room for diplomatic maneuver. As is typical for such an insurance strategy, the country actively participates in as many international platforms and organizations as possible.[9] While widening its international presence, Belarus simultaneously strengthens its sovereignty in the eyes of the international community

and diversifies its channels of strategic interaction (Ioffe 2017). At the same time, Belarus would never join an international organization that contributed to military and political tensions between Russia and the West; any escalation of tensions between Russia and the West would force Minsk to take a side, compromising its room for maneuver and risking its regime stability.

The Minsk negotiation platform being used in the conflict over Ukraine is in line with this approach, allowing Lukashenko to demonstrate his independence and play the role of an honest broker.[10] This platform provides neutral ground for the Minsk I/II negotiations and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE's) Trilateral Contact Group on Ukraine. The Belarusian leadership uses the platform itself as a hedging instrument to avoid becoming involved in any military or political escalation between Russia and the West (Preiherman 2017, 16). It gives Lukashenko international recognition and allows him to play a crucial role as an intermediary between Russia and the West, while de-escalating tensions between Russia and the EU. This is useful for Moscow, as it provides a neutral platform for talks with Western powers.

The Astana format provides a similar framework for the Syrian negotiations, offering Russia an "alternative" platform to the more Western-dominated UN-Geneva talks (RFE/RL 2017). The Kazakh leadership uses this format to present itself as an important negotiation link between Russia and the international community.

Kazakhstan is pursuing a similar strategy to Belarus, but it has more resources and therefore more leeway to develop a multi-vector foreign policy. President Nazarbayev is trying to establish his country as an important platform for discussions on international challenges like nuclear disarmament and tolerance among religions. At the same time, he is enhancing the international role of his country by participating in and even leading several international organizations.[11] Aside from membership in the Russia-led Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), CSTO, and EEU, Astana also participates in NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) program and has an Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) with NATO; at the same time, it is a member of the SCO, which is dominated by Russia and China. The Kazakh OSCE Chairmanship in 2010 offered an important platform for the country to raise its prestige and recognition in international relations.

Other crucial elements in the country's economic policy, such as the diversification of oil and gas pipeline infrastructure, large investments in

transport and export infrastructure, and concessions to transit states, constitute an additional component of its multi-vector foreign policy (Idan and Shaffer 2011, 250). Kazakhstan has built a relatively open economy compared to other post-Soviet states and sought to diversify its trade, with the EU being its most important export market (53 percent), followed by China (12 percent) and Russia (10 percent) (Dragneva and Wolczuk 2017, 10). It exports its oil, the most important source of revenue, via the Russian port of Novorossiysk and through the Russian oil distribution network, but Astana has also built a pipeline to China and Iran and transports smaller amounts of oil by tanker across the Caspian Sea via the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline to Europe. It did not invest in Russian or Chinese ports, but instead in Georgia's Black Sea ports, giving the country greater independence from the dominant players in its neighborhood.

In resource-rich Azerbaijan, oil and gas account for nearly 90 percent of exports and 55 percent of revenues (globalEDGE 2015). The country follows a strategy similar to Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy, including the diversification of its transit and pipeline infrastructure (Idan and Shaffer 2011, 255). In contrast to Kazakhstan, however, it is not a member of Russia-led security (CSTO) and economic institutions (EEU), but only in the much less integrated CIS. While Azerbaijan has highly diversified its exports, ensuring that Russia plays no significant role, Russia is its main import partner (globalEDGE 2015). Baku buys Russian weapons, largely because of its conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh. This is even more striking as Russia is Armenia's main security ally: Moscow provides Armenia with weapons at a discount in the context of its CSTO membership and has stationed its 102nd military base in the Armenian city of Gyumri, with more than 3000 Russian soldiers, and built an airbase near Yerevan. Russia is integrating Armenian armed forces in its Southern Military District and forming joint Russian-Armenian ground forces (Abrahamyan 2016).

As part of the Minsk Group it co-chairs with the USA and France, Russia is the main "foreign" negotiator in the Karabakh conflict. It is accepted as the key negotiator by the other two co-chairs, providing Russia additional leverage over both parties to the conflict. This is a significant obstacle in relations between Baku and Moscow; yet in buying weapons from Russia, Baku is hedging its relationship with the Kremlin. The country hopes that being an important export destination for Russia's arms industry will give it some leeway in negotiations with Russia and increase Moscow's interest in maintaining good relations (Kucera 2015).

At the same time, Azerbaijan is also part of NATO's PfP program and has an advanced IPAP. It has never expressed interest in becoming a member of NATO or the EU, as this would provoke Russia to challenge its independence; instead, it tries to cooperate with Russia, for instance, on arms sales, and at the same time protect its independence through cooperation with NATO and the EU. Two of the key projects of the Azeri energy diversification policy were the BTC oil and South Caucasus (SCP) gas pipelines traveling via Georgia and Turkey to the EU, built to circumvent Russian infrastructure in the 1990s. In choosing Georgia as a key partner for its independent resource exports, Baku has gained an opportunity to become more economically independent from Russia. For both Georgia and Azerbaijan, this is a win-win situation in terms of their independence and bargaining position with Russia.

Armenia is more dependent on Russia than Azerbaijan because of its conflict with Azerbaijan, in which Armenia has occupied not only the Karabakh region but also seven Azeri territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh as buffer zones (OSCE 2011). Because of this conflict, Turkey, a close ally of Azerbaijan, has closed its border with Armenia; as a result, the country is dependent on Russia not only for military support but also for its energy supply and trade. Up to 80 percent of the Armenian energy sector is owned by Russian public corporations, and Russian banks have invested heavily in the Armenian financial sector (Zhuchkova 2017). Russia has used this dependency to prevent Armenia's rapprochement with the EU, which was very close to finalizing an association agreement with Yerevan in 2013: by challenging Armenia's security, Russian President Putin ended the association process and forced Armenia to join the EEU instead in 2015. As long as Armenia's trade and energy are supplied entirely by Russia, it has a very weak bargaining position. It needs to bandwagon with Russia. Modest energy cooperation with Iran cannot substitute Russia's role in Armenian security and economic policy (Grigoryan 2015).

Nevertheless, in March 2017 Armenia agreed to an enhanced and comprehensive partnership agreement with the EU, which aims to improve relations in energy, transport, trade, and investment. This step shows that integration with the EEU does not prevent the country from pursuing a multi-vector foreign policy and engaging with the EU despite the limited room for maneuver.

After the Rose Revolution in 2003, Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili abandoned the country's multi-vector foreign policy and

initiated a policy of integration with NATO and the EU, setting up a direct confrontation with Russia. Saakashvili provoked a war with Russia in 2008, hoping in vain for US support; his aggressive reintegration policy in the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia gave Russian leadership a pretext to intervene and occupy both territories. Bidzina Ivanishvili, Prime Minister after Saakashvili's presidency, attempted to return the country to its multi-vector foreign policy after winning the parliamentary elections with his party Georgian Dream in 2012 against Saakashvili's United National Movement party, which recognized the geopolitical reality of the country and wanted to improve relations with Russia. Ivanishvili's party still dominates Georgian politics, winning parliamentary elections in 2016.

But while Georgian leadership in the post-Saakashvili era has tried to engage with Russia by improving trade, cultural, and humanitarian ties, it clearly draws a red line: the freedom to choose its own alliances (Kakachia 2013, 1). There is still strong public support for joining NATO and the EU (NDI 2017), and the Georgian parliament has agreed on a resolution not to join any Russia-dominated organizations like the CIS, CSTO, or EEU (Kakachia 2013, 3). As a result, relations with Russia have only improved marginally. While trade is growing, Russian leadership still threatens Georgia's security. In addition, regarding the occupied territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, there is no compromise in sight: Russia is systematically integrating both territories into its federal structure (Dzutsev 2015).

Ukraine, the second-largest post-Soviet country by population and an essential member of any Russian-led Eurasian integration project, is pursuing an even more confrontational path since the Euromaidan protests in 2013/2014 and the Russian annexation of Crimea. While all Ukrainian post-Soviet leaders have pursued a multi-vector foreign policy, the Ukrainian leadership decided to advance integration with the EU and NATO following the ouster of President Viktor Yanukovych in early 2014.[12] Ukrainian identity building in the post-Euromaidan area takes place against Russian dominance.

This represents quite a shift; before the revolution of dignity, Ukraine was a textbook bargainer between Russia and the EU, playing both sides for its own advantage (Moshes 2013, 59–72). While Ukrainian political and economic elites have used the country's protracted rapprochement with the EU to get better deals from Russia, the oligarchs never had any interest in becoming either more independent from or more integrated

with Russia. Former President Yanukovych threatened to destroy this balancing act with Russia and the EU, and in doing so attracted both popular anger and Oligarch's resistance. Russia's annexation of Crimea and the war against Ukraine have shifted the rules of the country's bilateral relations and will drive further disintegration, with Russia losing tools to influence its neighbor in the process.

The Ukraine Crisis and Its Consequences for Eurasian Contestation

Russian military intervention in Ukraine was a signal of Moscow's strategic weakness. Russian leadership failed to entice Ukraine into its economic and political orbit through a policy of sticks and carrots; its last resort was to use military force and covert military action to destabilize Ukraine and prevent it from moving closer to the West (Krickovic and Bratersky 2017, 181). The Ukraine crisis has forced Russia to recognize the limits of its economic and soft power.

At the same time, Moscow has signaled to other post-Soviet neighbors that it is willing to use force should they attempt to leave the Russian orbit and integrate substantially with transatlantic institutions. But this use of force has so far been counterproductive, hardening public sentiment against any future integration with Russia. It has also sped up the ongoing disintegration of the post-Soviet space, undermining Russian efforts to integrate the countries of the region (Meister 2013, 7–17), and fundamentally changed relations between Russia and its neighbors by challenging traditional contestation strategies.

The post-Soviet states currently exhibit little loyalty to Russia. When Russian leadership can provide benefits, the countries will take its position—until they can secure better deals elsewhere. And the fundamental red line for Eurasian secondary powers is giving up sovereignty. Any action undertaken by Russian leadership to undermine borders will increase the post-Soviet states' desire to counterbalance Russia and hedge their independence.

Nonetheless, challenging the security of these stubborn states has become the main strategy employed by Russian leadership to protect the country's sphere of influence, even when the results are counter to Russia's aims. Russia's desire to pressure Ukraine to cancel the Association Agreement with the EU and instead join the Customs Union and EEU

led to mass protests in Ukraine, for example. This limits Russian integration projects. While Eurasian secondary or small states will accept integration for the sake of economic benefit, they are not willing to relinquish elements of their sovereignty.

In fact, all of the different categorized types of post-Soviet countries have become more cautious in dealing with Russia since the Ukraine conflict; even resource-rich countries like Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan feel stronger pressure from Moscow. Russia is challenging their sovereignty more often and more unpredictably than before, and the low prices of oil and gas since 2008 have restricted their room to maneuver. Their transit diversification strategies cannot belie that they have not modernized or diversified their economies, and that they still have rent-seeking economies like that of Russia.

Following the escalation of the Ukrainian conflict, Russian President Putin argued that Kazakhstan was never a state until President Nazarbayev created it after the fall of the Soviet Union. This led to harsh rebukes from Kazakh leadership, including a threat from Nazarbayev to leave the EEU (Najibullah 2014). The fact that this threat was not carried out illustrates the limits Eurasian secondary powers face when Russian leadership is provoking them; nevertheless, the loss of trust between Moscow and its so-called close allies like Kazakhstan and Belarus represents a significant shift in their relations. Moscow has ignored their interests and introduced sanctions against Ukraine without consulting the other EEU member states. At the same time, both Minsk and Astana used Russia's international isolation following the annexation of Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine to negotiate a better deal in the EEU (Siwizkij 2014, 16).

Both Belarus and Armenia, as countries without natural resources that are, respectively, dependent on Russia for their economy and security, followed a strategy of partially integrating and bandwagoning with Russia, while hedging their positions through rapprochement with the EU. Belarus, with its geographic location close to the EU and on Russia's Western border with NATO, has been more successful in asserting its independence than Armenia. Both states' leaders understand that any integration with NATO or the EU would provoke a Russian reaction, yet both countries have increased their efforts to improve their relations with outside players. Armenia has signed a comprehensive partnership and cooperation agreement with the EU in 2017 despite its membership in the EEU. The Belarusian leadership has made gestures toward the EU, releasing opposition leaders from prison and easing diplomatic relations

(TUT.BY 2016). These steps are part of its hedging strategy toward Russia.

Georgia and Ukraine, meanwhile, are pursuing a different strategy and seeking stronger integration with the EU and NATO. These steps might be the end of their multi-vector foreign policy, but given their geopolitical location and the lack of realistic membership prospects in transatlantic institutions, they have limited room to maneuver. The USA and EU's reactions to Russian regional policies are thus of particular importance to Ukraine and Georgia. Neither country is likely to get an offer of NATO or EU membership, but they can hope for military and economic support and, in the context of the Ukraine conflict, Western sanctions against Russia (Smith-Spark 2017).

But the limited engagement of both NATO and the EU in the conflict zones in the post-Soviet region weakens the Eurasian states' bargaining position with Russia. The absence of Western sanctions following the Russian-Georgian War in 2008 taught the Russian leadership that military action in post-Soviet countries will not provoke the EU or NATO to respond and secondary and small post-Soviet states that they are vulnerable and cannot rely on EU or NATO protection in a military conflict with Russia. The limited reaction of the West to the annexation of Crimea, meanwhile, shows that the West ultimately accepts Russia's sphere of influence. Even if the West has managed to agree on (relatively weak) sanctions against Russia, it will never risk a major conflict with the Kremlin on a post-Soviet state.

The limited offer of foreign powers for integration of the post-Soviet secondary states in the space between Russia and the EU restricts their hedging and wedging opportunities.

Conclusions: Contestation Strategies in Post-Soviet Eurasia

Russia's attempts to dominate the post-Soviet region provoke contestation strategies among secondary and small Eurasian states. Policies of both domination and contestation reflect the nature of Russian policy, as well as that of post-Soviet states and elites. Russia defines itself as a global power through its hegemony in the post-Soviet region; however, despite the economic benefits Moscow has to offer, it lacks soft power and an attractive economic, political, and social model.

Instead, Moscow seeks to preserve its hegemony through informal ties, corruption networks, and, increasingly, military power. While other post-Soviet elites share Moscow's goals and behavioral patterns, such as staying in power beyond democratic limits and hunting rent-seeking opportunities, bonding with Russian elites is simultaneously an opportunity and a threat. Russia is not seen as a benevolent behemoth but as an aggressive hegemon. Integration with Russia is not an option for any post-Soviet elite, because it would mean giving up power, independence, and rent-seeking opportunities. Giving up sovereignty is against authoritarian rule, as it renders leaders vulnerable in an environment that lacks the rule of law, transparency, and competition.

Hedging and wedging are the most typical contestation strategies utilized by post-Soviet states. Their relationship with the dominant hegemon is a constant bargaining process, negotiated in an environment of conflict and cooperation. Their elites improve their bargaining positions through a wedging strategy in which Russia is competing for influence with outside players like the EU, NATO, and China. An ongoing conflict between Russia and at least one additional outside actor gives post-Soviet leaders the opportunity to play both sides and negotiate benefits from one or both. This works unless the conflict between the external players escalates and the secondary power has to decide for either side, as in the case of the Ukrainian conflict.

Combined with a strategy of hedging, post-Soviet countries simultaneously cooperate with Russia, even ostensibly integrating, while promoting their independence from Russian positions. International cooperation and participation in international organizations secure their recognition and sovereignty. This policy of cooperation and contestation is a constant cautious testing of the leeway Eurasian secondary and small states are allowed. While testing out their leverage, they try to increase their room to maneuver to strike the best deal.

Russia's internal weakness leads it to take a more aggressive stance toward its neighborhood, limiting Eurasian states' leverage and increasing their interest in hedging at the same time. The weaker Russia becomes and the more aggressive it acts in its own neighborhood, the more its post-Soviet neighbors will seek to leave Moscow's "near abroad".

Notes

1. For more details on Russia's leadership role in the post-Soviet region, see Neil Macfarlane's chapter in this volume.
2. With the election of Vladimir Putin as Russian President in 2000, an authoritarian state has been established, one that includes a huge number of Putin's former colleagues, friends, and classmates in key positions of the state and the economy. This crony capitalism is described by a symbiotic relationship between the state and the economy, a growing role of the state in the economy, oligarchs who are loyal to the system, and loyalty rooted in rent seeking. Putin is the main guarantor of this system, and at the same time the moderator and decision-maker among competing power groups.
3. On this term, see Sherr (2013).
4. On this term, see Lobell et al. (2015, 154).
5. This includes Armenia, Belarus, the occupied Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan, the separatist Moldovan region of Transnistria, Tajikistan, and occupied Ukrainian Crimea (Hicks 2014).
6. For more details, see Lobell et al. (2015, 148–149); Ebert and Flemes provide a detailed discussion of International Research (IR) theories on contested leadership in the introduction to this volume.
7. Color revolutions started with the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004, Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan in 2005, and the Revolution of Dignity (Euromaidan) in Ukraine in 2013/2014.
8. On the genesis of Belarusian-Russian relations, see Nice (2013).
9. Outside the Russian-dominated world, Belarus is a member of around 60 international organizations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus 2017).
10. Members of this negotiation group include Russia, Ukraine, Germany, and France.
11. Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2017).
12. In his speech at the Ukrainian Independence Day celebrations in August 2017, Poroshenko said his country will do everything to become a member of NATO and the EU (Euronews 2017).

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