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ANALYTICAL ESSAY

Putin, the State, and War: The Causes of Russia's Near Abroad Assertion Revisited*+

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Moscow's annexation of Crimea and meddling in eastern Ukraine are the latest signs of Russia's increasingly assertive behavior in the post-Soviet space. Not surprisingly, Moscow's actions have become the source of much debate. This article maps the fast-growing literature on the subject and assesses four types of explanations: (1) decision-maker explanations focusing on Putin's personality traits and worldviews; (2) domestic political accounts emphasizing the Kremlin's efforts to deflect attention from internal failures; (3) ideational accounts explaining Russia's near abroad assertion with reference to its national identity and desire for international status; and (4) geopolitical accounts highlighting power and security considerations. The article shows that each approach offers some valuable insights but fails to provide a convincing stand-alone explanation. It is argued that to overcome the identified shortcomings, scholars need to devote more attention to building synthetic accounts. A theoretical model is outlined that specifies how geopolitical pressures, ideas, domestic political conditions, and decision-maker influences interact in shaping Russia's near abroad policy.

Keywords: Russian foreign policy, analytical eclecticism, International Relations theory

Russia's takeover of Crimea and meddling in eastern Ukraine have grabbed headlines. But, Moscow's actions in Ukraine are only one element of a much bigger story. In recent years, Russia has become increasingly assertive and, at times, aggressive in its dealings with other former Soviet republics: Russia went to war against Georgia in 2008; it repeatedly cut off energy supplies to neighboring states like Ukraine, Moldova, and Lithuania; it interfered on a number of occasions in the domestic political affairs of these and other countries in the region; it strengthened its military presence in the post-Soviet space with the construction of new bases in countries like Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan; it put economic pressure on neighboring states to join Moscow-led organizations such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Eurasian Economic Union; and so on (for overviews, see Donaldson et al. 2014, 158–230; Freire and Kanet 2012;

*The title of this article draws on Kenneth Waltz's (1959) seminal study *Man, the State, and War*.

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Gvosdev and Marsh 2014, 157–200; Kramer 2008; Mankoff 2009, 241–92; Nygren 2008).

Not surprisingly, these dynamics have received considerable popular and scholarly attention. A lively debate has ensued among Western diplomats, think-tank analysts, and academics about the causes of Russia's assertive stance in the region. According to the US Library of Congress's catalogue, more than seventy books have been published on Russian foreign policy since 2010 alone, many of them with a special focus on Moscow's activities in the so-called "near abroad." In addition, hundreds of scholarly journal articles and an endless number of think-tank studies and media reports address the issue.

The purpose of this article is to map the fast-growing literature on the subject and assess its contributions. How do scholars and analysts understand Russia's near abroad policy? What are the limitations in the existing studies on the topic? And what should be the future research agenda?

At risk of oversimplification, we can group the existing explanations of Russia's near abroad policy into four categories. The first focuses on President Putin's career path and worldviews. One common argument is that Putin's KGB background and his Cold War mentality predispose him to pursue assertive policies in the post-Soviet space. A second category emphasizes the role of domestic political factors. Some observers suggest, for example, that Moscow's combative behavior in the area is an attempt to draw public attention away from political and economic failures at home. A third set of explanations points to ideas, broadly understood, as the central driver of Russia's near abroad assertion. In this view, it is part of Russia's national self-understanding to be a great power with a sphere of influence in central Eurasia. A fourth approach explains Russia's actions with reference to geopolitical imperatives. The basic argument is that Moscow seeks to establish a forward security zone in the face of growing external pressure, such as NATO's advancement to the Russian borders.

This list of explanations is by no means exhaustive, but it captures the most important positions in the scholarly debate about the sources of Russia's near abroad assertion. The next four sections take a closer look at them in the indicated order, describe their theoretical underpinnings, and assess their major claims.

The merits of the different explanations are evaluated on the basis of several criteria, including their ability to (i) identify the major *causes*, or drivers, of Russia's near abroad assertion; (ii) explain how Russia's neighborhood policy has unfolded *over time*; (iii) account for similarities and differences *across space* (e.g., the differences between Russia's policies toward Ukraine and Kazakhstan); and (iv) provide insights into the *causal mechanisms* and *processes* that link the presumed sources of Russia's near abroad assertion with Moscow's behavior.

No doubt, these criteria put the bar high. However, if scholarly accounts of Russia's near abroad assertion are to be of any value to policymakers, these accounts must provide comprehensive and detailed explanations of Moscow's behavior—not "on average" estimates. Put in social science speak, when studying a concrete puzzle or case, theoretical elegance and parsimony take a backseat to explanatory power. As shown below, the existing accounts offer some valuable insights into Russia's neighborhood policy. However, individually none of them can provide a fully satisfactory explanation. To the contrary: All have empirical and logical gaps.

The fifth section proposes how scholars can overcome the identified deficiencies. I argue that scholars need to investigate the interrelation of different factors. Yet, it is not sufficient to maintain that everything "somehow" matters. Instead, scholars ought to develop synthetic accounts that specify *how* external factors are related to internal determinants, *how* material and ideational forces interact, and

how the interplay between agents and structures influences Russia's near abroad policy.

In extension, I present one analytical framework that emphasizes the influence of geopolitical factors but also accords some non-negligible weight to other factors. While a comprehensive assessment of this framework is beyond the scope of this article, I demonstrate its plausibility. Moreover, I provide a research design that explicates how it can be tested empirically. Given the framework's multi-causal logic, testing it requires the application of different research methods, including congruence analysis, within-case comparisons, and process tracing. One major advantage of this type of multilayered research strategy is that it enables scholars to integrate the fine-grained case knowledge of area specialists with the broader insights of International Relations (IR) theorists. The final section concludes.

Decision-Maker Explanations: The Putin Factor

The first set of explanations holds that Russia's assertive behavior in the post-Soviet space can be directly attributed to the Russian president, Vladimir Putin. Some observers speculate that Putin's mental ailments drive Russia's combative policies (for an overview, see Nechepurenko 2015). Others advance the view that Putin's career background in the KGB and FSB predisposes him to pursue hawkish policies. Still others trace Russia's near abroad assertion to Putin's Soviet past and his ambition to restore a USSR-style empire (see, e.g., Brzezinski 2014; Coughlin 2008; Harding 2008).

Building on these popular views, a number of scholars have ventured to develop more nuanced understandings of Putin's personality. Consider, for instance, Angus Roxburgh's *The Strongman: Vladimir Putin and the Struggle for Russia* (2012) and Allen Lynch's *Vladimir Putin and Russian Statecraft* (2011). Both studies recognize that external conditions set the frame for Moscow's international behavior, but their basic argument is that Russian foreign policy cannot be properly understood without understanding Putin's personal idiosyncrasies and worldviews. The studies portray Putin as having a can-do attitude and believing in the necessity of preserving Russia's leadership in central Eurasia. More generally, they describe Putin's view of the outside world as marked by deep-seated fear and suspicion. As Roxburgh (2012, 121) writes, "Vladimir Putin, the strongman, was haunted by almost paranoid illusions of weakness and external danger."

Other scholars have put forth similar views. For instance, Mark Galeotti and Andrew Bowen (2014) argue that Putin "does not see himself as aggressively expanding an empire so much as defending a civilization against the 'chaotic darkness' that will ensue if he allows Russia to be politically encircled abroad and culturally colonized by Western values at home." Seen in this light, it is little wonder that Putin is opposed to NATO's and EU's increased presence near Russia's borders and seeks to prevent the westward drift of former Soviet republics like Ukraine.

Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy's study, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin* (2013), presents the perhaps most sophisticated analysis to date, mapping Putin's personality traits and tracing them to formative experiences in his past. In brief, their argument is that Putin is a composite of many different identities—Statist, History Man, Survivalist, Outsider, Free Marketeer, and Case Officer—that shape his worldviews and, in extension, Russian policy. According to Hill and Gaddy, Putin does not seek to revive the Soviet empire but wants to build a Russian zone of influence in central Eurasia, based on his belief in Russian exceptionalism (History Man). Moreover, Putin believes in the need for a strong state (Statist), and he understands the importance of economics in world politics today (Free Marketeer). At the same time, Putin's mind is geared toward zero-sum thinking and, if need be, he does not hesitate to resort to violence to achieve his goals (Survivalist).

In a follow-up piece, Fiona Hill (2014) explains how Putin's complex personality structure has informed Russia's actions in Ukraine. Her argument is that Putin's zero-sum attitude has led him to perceive the EU's courting of Ukraine as a potential threat to Russia's economic and political position in the region. In response, he has employed all means necessary and used "the same methods of manipulation, intimidation and force that he has deployed at home, as well as abroad in the war with Georgia in 2008" (Hill 2014).

Although they differ in their details, all the above-mentioned accounts share the basic tenet that Putin's *personal* geopolitical vision drives Russia's near abroad assertion. Carried to its logical conclusion, it implies that if another individual had been in power, Moscow's neighborhood policy might have been very different. This argument implicitly rests on the "great men make history" approach, which has long been a favorite among many historians. Moreover, it fits well with research on the effects of leadership traits on foreign policymaking, which has received increased attention in recent years (see, e.g., Byman and Pollack 2001; Dyson 2006; Duelfer and Dyson 2011; Foster and Keller 2014; Shannon and Keller 2007). This body of work suggests that leaders' worldviews, belief systems, and cognitions have a significant effect on the formation and conduct of foreign policy. This is especially the case when there is a foreign-policy crisis; when decision-making authority is concentrated in the hands of a predominant leader; and when the individual in power has a strong belief in his/her ability to control events (for background, see Hermann 1976).

Thus, on the face of it, individual-level accounts centered on Putin are well suited to explain Russia's near abroad assertion. For one thing, the recent developments in Ukraine, or the 2008 war in Georgia, can certainly be described as foreign-policy crises. For another, it is widely known that Putin is an exceptionally ambitious statesman with a strong preference for controlling political developments. Furthermore, given the centralized power structures and personalized nature of Russian politics, it is not far-fetched to imagine that Putin's worldviews assume great importance in the formation of Russian policy. On reflection, however, the argument appears less persuasive. Four issues in particular cast doubt on the thesis that Putin is the wellspring, or root cause, of Russia's near abroad assertion.

First, the widespread view of Putin as an almighty dictator who can make policies solely based on his personal preferences is misleading. Although there is a concentration of power in today's Russia, a number of scholars have pointed out that Putin is not insulated from domestic political pressures and internecine elite struggles. As one knowledgeable observer put it, "intense elite competition, elections, and public opinion are managed [in today's Russia], but they matter more than the conventional wisdom holds" (Barkanov 2014). It is thus questionable to what extent Putin's personality can be uncritically used to explain Russian state behavior.

Second, Putin's ambition to reassert Russia's dominance in the post-Soviet space enjoys widespread support from the general public and elite groups. As one scholar writes, "Across all of Russia's political elites—including the marginal liberal parties—there is a strong consensus that Russia must work to consolidate its position as the geopolitical fulcrum of central Eurasia" (Lynch 2007, 62). What is especially noteworthy here is that even staunch critics of Putin, such as the neocommunist Sergei Udaltsov and nationalist Aleksei Navalny, agree with many of the Kremlin's policies in the former Soviet region. Given that people across the entire political spectrum support Russia's near abroad assertion, the Putin argument loses some of its appeal.

Third, and relatedly, the historical record suggests that all plausible alternatives to Putin as president would have staked out a similar course. If we turn back the clock to 1999, there were four likely contenders for the Russian

presidency: Yevgeny Primakov, the former prime minister; Yuri Luzhkov, the powerful Moscow major; General Aleksander Lebed, the former secretary of the Russian Security Council; and Gennady Zyuganov, the leader of the Communist Party. All four supported a more combative approach in the region. Primakov had in fact worked hard (although with mixed success) for the enhancement of Russia's influence in central Eurasia during his term as prime minister (Mankoff 2007; Tsygankov 2010, 112–21). Luzhkov, for his part, repeatedly made it clear that he was in favor of a more assertive policy in the post-Soviet space (Alexandrov 2001, 26–30). Similarly, General Lebed had taken a strong stance on foreign policy, calling for Russia to strengthen its ties with neighboring states to counter the growing influence of outside powers like NATO (Dunlop 1997; Lebed 1997, 369–72). Finally, Zyuganov had also made NATO's eastward expansion a top priority in his foreign-policy agenda and focused on possible countermeasures, most notably the creation of a forward security zone on the territory of the former Soviet Union (Truscott 1997, 171–72). The fact that very different policymakers advocated roughly similar policies undercuts the argument that Putin's personal peculiarities are the root cause of Russia's assertive behavior in the region.

Fourth, several area specialists have shown that Russia also pursued assertive policies toward other post-Soviet countries in the early 1990s (see, e.g., De Nevers 1994, 44–61; Hill and Jewett 1994; Porter and Saivetz 1994). At that time, Russian troops intervened to pacify civil wars that were raging in Georgia, Moldova, and Tajikistan, but also and above all to advance Russia's political-military interests there. Moreover, Moscow used diplomatic pressure and economic sanctions to maintain basing rights in neighboring countries. The current debate tends to overlook or ignore this. For instance, it is often forgotten why Russia had naval bases in Crimea in the first place. The reason is simple: President Yeltsin had blackmailed the Ukrainian leadership to grant these basing rights by employing thinly veiled threats of energy cutoffs. In a similar vein, the Russian leadership had used the energy weapon and other forms of pressure in the early 1990s to extract military and economic concessions from countries like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan. In many ways, Putin's approach to the post-Soviet space looks like a carbon copy of these policies. This does not necessarily mean that his personal beliefs are irrelevant, but the similarities between Putin's policies and those adopted under President Yeltsin after the USSR's dissolution are too striking to be ignored or shrugged off as happenstance.

Combined, these observations undermine the claim that Putin is the primary driving force behind Russia's near abroad assertion. This is not to say that we should neglect Putin's worldviews. They surely matter, but the extent to which they matter appears to be much more subtle and limited than popular impression would have us believe. The key question is whether Putin's worldviews play a *decisive* role in the formation of Russia's near abroad policy. In other words, will Russia's near abroad policy change if and when Putin leaves office? Based on the observations made above, there are good reasons to doubt that this will be the case.

This leads to a larger social scientific issue. For long, IR scholars have discussed the importance of human agency. If pressed, most analysts would concede that it is dangerous to ignore the role of individuals when trying to understand a country's international activities. At the same time, most analysts would agree that it is equally dangerous to ignore the broader context within which individuals develop their worldviews and pursue their ambitions. Even a scholar like Stephen Dyson (2001, 331), a well-respected foreign-policy analyst and strong proponent of individual-level explanations, concludes, "At any specific time, the pressures of the political environment, the institutional constraints of the position which the individual occupies, and/or the normative expectations of behavior which accompany

this position, can 'predetermine' an individual's actions regardless of their individual beliefs" (see also Jervis 2013). That is to say, the choices of statespeople are enabled and constrained by a large number of factors, including the country's history, culture, economic conditions, domestic political circumstances, geography, and the strategic international environment.

This should not be misconstrued as a blanket dismissal of individual-level explanations of foreign policy. Instead, it means that scholars working within this tradition need to specify how, and to what extent, domestic and international factors enable and constrain the decisions of state leaders. How permissive or restrictive is the international environment? And, how permissive or restrictive is the domestic political environment?[1] Many of the existing accounts, which aim to show the impact of Putin's personal characteristics on Russia's near abroad assertion, have failed to address these questions. This is unfortunate, especially since the above observations suggest that other Russian policymakers, faced with similar circumstances, might have acted similarly. Thus, at the current state of research, one should be wary of ascribing too much importance to the Putin factor in explaining Russia's near abroad assertion.

Domestic Political Explanations: The Imperative of Regime Survival

A second set of explanations holds that domestic political factors play a crucial role in shaping Moscow's actions in the former Soviet space. There are two main variants of this approach. One is that the Kremlin tries to divert public attention from internal failures by creating external crises. Lilia Shevtsova (2008, 2009, 2010) of the Carnegie Moscow Center has forcefully asserted this line of reasoning. "Within Russia," she writes, "the war [against Georgia] marked the revival of the old tactic of rallying the population around a common foreign enemy, thus distracting them from their real problems" (Shevtsova 2010, 83). Likewise, Ariel Cohen (2007, 1) of the Heritage Foundation has suggested that the Putin regime is using foreign policy "as a tool to buttress domestic support and to foster a perception that Russia is surrounded by enemies at a time when its democratic legitimacy is deteriorating" (see also Filippov 2009; McFaul 2014, 169).

The general argument that underpins this strand of analysis is well known. It stems from diversionary war theory, according to which a regime that lacks popular legitimacy has a tendency to engage in conflicts abroad. The reasoning is straightforward: Foreign-policy crises enable governments to burnish their nationalist credentials, deflect attention from failed domestic policies, delegitimize the opposition, and create a "rally around the flag" effect (for an overview, see Levy and Thompson 2010, 99–104).

Another common argument links Russia's near abroad assertion to fear of democratic contagion. This perspective takes its cue from regime-security theory (see, e.g., Jackson 2013) and the work on political diffusion processes, which holds that "impulses for [democratic] change spread across countries" (Weyland 2010, 1151; see also Gleditsch and Ward 2006; Brinks and Coppedge 2006). Accordingly, the leadership in Moscow is deeply concerned that political turmoil in neighboring countries will spill over into Russia, thereby threatening the regime's political survival. Thus, in response to the wave of colored revolutions that swept through the post-Soviet space in 2003–2005, the Kremlin launched a counterrevolutionary offensive to reverse, or at least contain, the spread of democracy in the region.

Political scientist Thomas Ambrosio (2006, 2007, 2009) is a notable promoter of this view. He claims that "the Kremlin ... actively seeks to halt or contain the spread of democracy in order to preserve its own autocratic political system" (Ambrosio 2007, 233). In a similar fashion, US academic and White House adviser

[1] On permissive and restrictive environments, see Taliaferro (2012, 197–200).

Celeste A. Wallander (2007, 112) concludes that "the Russian leadership has sought to strengthen relations with other authoritarian regimes … with the explicit objective of helping them to fend off democratization" (see also Silitski 2010, 344–46; Wilson 2010).

Following this reading, it is not difficult to understand why Moscow was disturbed when mass protests in Ukraine culminated in Yanukovych's ouster from the presidency. Seen from Moscow's perspective, it raised the specter of democratic spillover and threatened the Russian leadership's own political survival. The pro-Western orientation of the new government in Kiev and EU's plans to promote economic and political reforms in Ukraine reinforced these fears. As a RAND Corporation study notes, "From Putin's point of view, the real danger is *contagion*—that Russian citizens might begin to agitate for a similar more open system in Russia. Hence, Putin has sought to weaken and discredit the government in Kiev" (Larrabee et al. 2015, 3; emphasis in original). In addition to that, the conflict in Ukraine provided a welcome opportunity for the Russian leadership to draw public attention away from growing internal problems. "[F]or the Kremlin," Shevtsova (2015) concludes, "the turn to expansionism [in Ukraine] is … a pressure release valve and a way to compensate for its weaknesses in other areas (including the economy)."

Both explanations share the assumption that the imperative of regime survival is the motivating force behind Russia's actions. This view finds broad appeal among many Western officials and commentators. After all, it resonates with their liberal outlook, according to which Russian authoritarianism is the main source of Moscow's assertive behavior. The logical upshot is that if Russia becomes more liberal and democratic, it will act differently toward neighboring states. Moreover, the approach links to a well-established tradition in IR, which emphasizes the importance of domestic political arrangements in the formation of foreign policy (see, e.g., Moravcsik 1997; Rosecrance and Stein 1993; Russett 1993). Finally, it finds a lot of prima facie support in empirical terms. It is easy to point to numerous instances in which Russia backed autocratic governments in the region. Think, for example, of Russia's long-standing support of the Lukashenka regime in Belarus (Ambrosio 2006; Vanderhill 2013, 64–87). Thus, the approach seems to have much to offer in analyzing Russia's near abroad assertion. Upon closer inspection, however, it does not provide a fully persuasive account.

To begin with, the argument that Russia's near abroad assertion is an attempt to divert attention from internal challenges fails to convince, for four reasons. First, the political survival of the present regime in Moscow was never acutely or seriously threatened. True, there were anti-government protests after fraud-tainted parliamentary elections in December 2011 and prior to Putin's return to the presidency in May 2012. Putin's popularity at that time was no doubt lower than during his first terms. Still, all independent surveys show that Putin and his regime continue to enjoy broad support from large swathes of the population (Smyth 2014). This is not to deny that there is real discontent with the government in Moscow, but it is unlikely to pose a significant challenge to the Kremlin in the short to medium term. There are three reasons why. For one thing, there is no united opposition in Russia; for another, the regime can use the state's coercive apparatus to suppress domestic unrest; and finally, and perhaps most important of all, the Kremlin can fall back on non-democratic sources of legitimacy. Alongside economic growth, which has slowed down in recent years, regime legitimacy is created through the provision of internal order and the promotion of patriotic nationalism within Russia, which is purposefully exploited by the Kremlin (Cannady and Kubicek 2014; Liñán 2010; Rose et al. 2011). In short, the absence of any immediate threat to the Russian leadership casts doubt on the argument that its assertive approach in the region is a case of diversionary foreign policy.

Second, almost all scholars agree that in the longer term, regime stability hinges on economic performance (Treisman 2011). Thus, it seems shortsighted and self-defeating for the Russian leadership to pursue overly assertive foreign policies that lead to trade sanctions from the West and economic isolation. Some observers may counter that the Kremlin artificially creates conflicts precisely because it wants to sustain its popular legitimacy at a time of economic crisis. Indeed, it is well documented that approval ratings of the Russian regime have increased in response to high-level conflicts such as the Georgian war in 2008 and the Ukraine crisis in 2014. However, as Daniel Treisman (2014, 386) has shown, "such rallies tend to be short-lived, dissipating within a few months." He concludes that "Putin's surge during the Georgia war, which evaporated as the financial crisis struck, can hardly have been worth the war's economic costs" (Treisman 2014, 386). Indeed, a large number of quantitative and qualitative studies have shown that diversionary war rallies tend to be fleeting. As scholar Amy Oakes (2006, 439) points out, "the hoped for rally-around-the-flag effect, when it arises, is generally short-lived. If the war drags on and requires greater than anticipated sacrifices, the mobilization process will aggravate the social fragmentation it was waged to ease" (see also Fravel 2010, 338; Hetherington and Nelson 2003). Seen from a regime-security perspective, the creation of foreign-policy crises by the Putin government thus appears unhelpful and indeed counterproductive.

Third, and relatedly, it is noteworthy that several decades of research on diversionary war theory has produced mixed results at best (see, e.g., Fravel 2010; Hendrickson 2002; Levy 1989; Meernik and Waterman 1996). In particular, recent studies have shown that countries with a basic level of state capacity—such as Russia today—tend to forego diversionary uses of force and instead use a mixture of coercion and cooptation to deal with domestic opposition (Oakes 2006). This finding casts doubt on the hypothesized relationship between regime-security concerns, on the one hand, and Russia's near abroad assertion, on the other. Rather than pursuing belligerent foreign policies (or initiating an external war), which entails great risks, the Kremlin could try to buy off political opposition or simply resort to internal repression.

Fourth, and finally, the focus on diversionary motives cannot explain the trajectory of Russia's near abroad policy. As every close observer of Russian foreign policy knows, Moscow began to adopt a more proactive and combative approach in the region in around 2004. At that time, the Kremlin's popularity greatly increased on the back of a booming economy, mainly brought about by a rise in world energy and commodity prices. In other words, just as the economy recovered, which in turn boosted the Russian leadership's popularity, Moscow assumed a more assertive stance abroad. This pattern does not fit well with the argument that Russia's combative approach in the post-Soviet space is an attempt to deflect attention from internal failures.

Likewise, it is problematic to argue that the chief objective of Russia's near abroad policy is to prevent democratic diffusion processes and shield fellow autocratic regimes. After all, there are also instances in which Russia actively undermined authoritarian governments in the region. The toppling of Kyrgyzstan's strongman, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, is a case in point. In 2009, Bakiyev had fooled the Russians by extending the lease of a US air base in the country, after having pocketed a US$300 million bribe from Moscow to expel the Americans. A few months later, a popular revolt unseated Bakiyev, which Moscow facilitated and supported (Blank 2010; Cooley 2010; Shapovalova and Zarembo 2010).

Similarly, Russia can have good relations with neighboring states transitioning toward democracy. Take the case of Georgia. By almost all accounts, the new government of President Giorgi Margvelashvili is as democratic as the government of Mikhail Saakashvili—if not more so. Still, whereas Russia's relationship with the Saakashvili government bordered on open hostility, Moscow's approach to the

Margvelashvili government is more measured and, for the moment, less aggressive. In other words, Moscow's relationship with Tbilisi has significantly improved in recent years, as Georgia became more, not less, democratic (Cecire 2015; Way 2015, 701). Again, this case does not square with the argument that Russia's near abroad assertion is dictated by regime-type considerations.

Thus, even though Moscow's actions may have negative effects on democratization processes in other former Soviet republics, it seems quite a stretch to assume that the promotion of a particular form of government is the primary driver of Russia's regional policy. For the Kremlin, it appears important to have pro-Russian governments in nearby countries, irrespective of their regime type. Indeed, a number of area specialists have made arguments along these lines. For example, David Cameron and Mitchell Orenstein (2012, 36), who examine the negative influence of Russia on democratic developments in the post-Soviet space, note in passing that "post-Soviet states ... may be subjected to Russian influence that undermines rights, liberties, and democracy—not necessarily because Russia wishes to undermine the rights and liberties that exist in these countries but, rather, because it wishes to limit their drift away from the emerging Russian-dominated security and economic zone." In a similar vein, Tom Casier (2012, 42) notes, "The determining factor for supporting or weakening a regime is likely to be loyalty to Moscow, rather than the degree of democracy." And foreign-policy analyst Janusz Bugajski (2004, 79), who is usually among the more fervent Russia critics, has conceded that "internal characteristics of the Ukrainian regime ... were of lesser interest to Moscow as long as Kyiv followed Russia's foreign and security policies and did not succeed in gaining NATO or EU membership."

In sum, it is difficult to find clear-cut evidence of a direct link between domestic political factors and Russia's near abroad assertion. Quite the contrary, a closer examination raises doubts about the relative importance of domestic factors. All of this is not to say that internal conditions do not matter. Internal conditions—such as regime-security concerns, interest-group pressure, or state capacity (more on which below)—may indeed weigh heavily in the formation of Russia's near abroad policy. For the moment, however, their impact remains speculative.[2]

Ideational Explanations: National Identity and the Hunt for Status

A third set of explanations focuses on the role of ideational factors. One popular approach links Russia's domineering attitude in the region to its Soviet and pre-Soviet historical legacy. Some commentators have suggested that Russia is predisposed, by its cultural DNA, to seek expansion and empire. According to *New York Times* columnist William Safire (1999), for instance, an "old imperialist urge" drives Moscow's regional policies.

Many IR scholars have moved toward a less essentialist and more nuanced view, emphasizing that ideas are highly contingent and malleable. The perhaps most significant writer here is Ted Hopf, who has provided a series of sophisticated interpretations of Moscow's international behavior. Hopf goes beyond the claim that Russia is hardwired by its cultural DNA to pursue expansionist and aggressive policies. Instead, his argument is that Russia's identity is created and recreated through everyday habits and discursive practices in society. History and culture matter, not because they determine state behavior in any mechanical way, but because they provide a reservoir of social and verbal practices out of which states' goals, purposes, and self-understandings are constructed. Different discourses, in turn, lead to different foreign policies (Hopf 2002, 2005, 2006).

[2]For a more general critique of regime-based explanations of Russian foreign policy, see Tsygankov (2012a).

As Hopf and other scholars have shown, there are at least three major identity discourses that vie for primacy in Russia's marketplace of ideas: a liberal discourse treating the other post-Soviet countries with benign neglect; a conservative discourse calling for the recreation of the Tsarist or Soviet empire; and a centrist discourse emphasizing the importance of maintaining an informal sphere of influence in the region (Chafetz 1996; Kuchins and Zevelev 2012; Light 1996). After a brief period in the early 1990s, when the liberal discourse was thriving, centrist ideas gained the upper hand and began to shape Russia's near abroad policy. Anne Clunan (2014, 285) sums it up nicely. "By 1994," she writes, "[a] common-denominator consensus had emerged among the elite: Russia was a global great power and the rightful hegemon in the 'post-Soviet space.'" This fits well with the above observation that many Russians, including members of the opposition, support Moscow's combative policies in the region.

In a related manner, a recent wave of research has argued that considerations of prestige and status play a crucial role in the formation of Russian foreign policy (Clunan 2009; Freire 2011; Larson and Shevchenko 2010, 90–93; Neumann 2008; Tsygankov 2012b). According to this reading, the search for greater international status is the root cause of Russia's near abroad assertion. The argument goes as follows: In Moscow's view, it is a status symbol and marker of great powerhood to have geopolitical control over one's immediate neighborhood. Hence, Moscow works hard to establish primacy over the post-Soviet space.

Seen through this lens, the toppling of Yanukovych and the pro-Western orientation of the new government in Kiev challenged Russia's status as a great power. What is more, Ukraine plays a pivotal role in Russia's national-identity narrative. The Kievan Rus (a medieval East Slavic state established on the territory of what is now Ukraine) is widely regarded as the birthplace of modern Russian statehood. "Ukraine," as one scholar put it, "is at the very heart of the origin myth of the Russian nation and civilization" (Barkanov 2014). Accordingly, Russia is defending not just concrete security interests in Ukraine but its very self-identity and status as a great power (Clunan 2014, 289; Larson and Shevchenko 2014, 276–77).

As this brief overview shows, a considerable part of the existing literature takes an ideational stance of some sort to account for Russia's near abroad assertion. Many of these studies are informed, implicitly or explicitly, by the constructivist approach to International Relations (see, e.g., Adler 1997; Katzenstein 1996; Wendt 1999). By pointing to the role of contending identity discourses and status concerns, constructivist-inspired studies have made a substantial contribution to our understanding of Russia's near abroad policy. However, these accounts are not without their problems either.

The first and most fundamental problem with the identity argument is that it begs the question: Why does one discourse have more influence than another does? In other words, even if one accepts the conclusion that the centrist discourse won out in Russia's marketplace of ideas in the mid-1990s and has remained dominant ever since, this just elevates the question to the next level. What are the underlying reasons for centrism's ascendancy and continued primacy? Granted, Hopf and other scholars refer to a variety of factors to account for this, ranging from the failure of "shock therapy" in the 1990s to growing instabilities along Russia's borders. Yet, they provide no systematic account for how and why these factors explain the rise and prevalence of centrist ideas among Russia's political class and the broader population. As a result, the reader is left with a highly insightful and detailed description of different identity discourses vying for primacy, but is left in the dark about the factors that brought about the shift from liberal ideas to centrism. This is problematic, at least from a positivist social science perspective.

It relates to a larger theoretical issue. As a number of scholars have pointed out, the question of idea and identity change has been insufficiently addressed in

constructivist-inspired IR scholarship. In the words of David Lake (2012, 571), "The greatest challenge for such an approach ... is explaining which ideas bundled into which identity are selected from the set of possible ideas and identities." In a similar vein, Rodger Payne (2001, 38) notes, "Scholars working in International Relations unfortunately lack a good theory to explain the persuasiveness of any normative claim over others." And Thomas Risse-Kappen (1994, 187) has pointed out that "decision makers are always exposed to several and often contradictory policy concepts," but scholars have "failed so far to specify the conditions under which specific ideas are selected and influence policies while others fall by the wayside."[3]

Beyond this theoretical Achilles' heel, there are empirical sore points. For one thing, explanations emphasizing domestic ideational drivers cannot account for why Russia's near abroad assertion picked up speed in around 2004—but not earlier. As noted above, centrist ideas were dominant in Russia at least since the mid-1990s. Accordingly, policymakers in Moscow devoted much rhetorical attention to maintaining some form of control over the former Soviet territory and objected staunchly to NATO expansion. On the ground, however, relatively little happened. In fact, compared to the early 1990s, Russia's near abroad policy became increasingly diffuse, inchoate, and overall less assertive. Among other things, Russia agreed to a division of the Caspian Sea's energy resources (a position it had vehemently opposed in previous years) and promised to close two of its four military bases in Georgia. Thus, at the end of the decade, scholars like Svante Cornell (2000, 118) from the Stockholm-based Institute for Security and Development Policy could aptly describe Russia as a "retreating hegemon." Ron Suny (1999, 150) of the University of Chicago likewise concluded that "Russian foreign policy, notably toward the Southern Tier [of the former Soviet Union], tended to moderate over time." All of this is to say that Russia's neighborhood policy in the late 1990s was much less assertive than its confrontational rhetoric would suggest. This gap between words and deeds does not square with ideational accounts, which hold that Russian state behavior is strongly influenced by the prevailing discursive practices at the domestic level.

Ideational accounts emphasizing the quest for status and prestige also face challenges. After all, Russia's attempts to establish a regional sphere of influence to gain greater international status have often proven unsuccessful and indeed counterproductive. For example, Russia's military incursion into Georgia in 2008 and its takeover of Crimea in 2014 seem to have reduced, not increased, Russia's status among Western policymakers. Ideational scholars could counter that the target audience of Moscow's actions is non-Western countries or domestic constituencies. However, many ideational scholars have been clear that the West, and the United States in particular, remain the main reference point in Russia's hunt for status (Neumann 2008, 128; Tsygankov 2010, 1). Against this background, it is baffling that Russia repeatedly pursues policies that constitute obstacles to greater status attribution from the West. Tsygankov (2012b, 236–58) has suggested that "wounded honor" can explain actions such as Russia's war against Georgia. Other constructivist-minded scholars have tried to explain Russia's aggressive policies with reference to its "diplomatic habitus" (Neumann and Pouliot 2011, 108). Regardless of whether one finds these interpretations convincing, what becomes clear is that the link between Russia's near abroad assertion and hunt for status is less straightforward than it first appears. Auxiliary arguments are needed.

Finally, an important external criticism has been leveled at ideational interpretations of Russia's near abroad assertion—namely, that they downplay or ignore any potentially independent effect of material factors. Scholar Andrej Krickovic

[3]For a similar criticism of constructivism, see Mearsheimer (1994, 42). An exception to the rule is Jeffrey Legro's (2005) study *Rethinking the World*, which puts forth a constructivist-inspired theory of idea change.

(2014, 511) has put the point well and is worth citing in extenso: "Focusing on the uniqueness of Russia's identity," he writes,

> may obscure other, more objective, reasons why Russia pursues the political and national objectives that it does. Historical identity has undoubtedly shaped the Russian elite's geopolitical ambitions. However, choosing to pursue "great power status" is not just a reflection of the Russian elites' bruised ego. It also reflects the potential, as well as the actual power resources that Russia has at its disposal as well as the external constraints and opportunities it faces.

If this is so, constructivist-inspired studies offer only a partial account of the reasons underlying Russia's near abroad assertion. In conclusion, then, while there can be no doubt that ideational approaches add to our understanding of Moscow's policies in the post-Soviet space, they do not provide a fully satisfactory explanation.

Geopolitical Explanations: External Opportunities and Threats

A fourth set of explanations sees geopolitical imperatives as the central driving force behind Russia's actions. The argument has two components. The first is that Russia's economic revival in around 2004 provided it with the opportunity to expand its influence in the post-Soviet space. In the words of Jeffrey Mankoff (2007, 127) of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, "High oil and gas prices ... have given Moscow economic leverage over its neighbors that it did not possess 10 years ago." Likewise, Jeronim Perovic (2009, 1) of the University of Zurich concluded, "This new wealth marks a very significant development, since it means Russia ... can pursue a more 'independent' foreign policy line." In short, the argument is that growing material capabilities have enabled, and to some extent incentivized, Russia to pursue assertive policies in the former Soviet region.

The second component, which sometimes is presented as a separate argument, holds that Moscow has adopted a combative stance in response to external threats, such as NATO's eastward expansion and US-promoted regime changes along Russia's borders. As scholars Andrei Shleifer and Daniel Treisman (2011, 128) point out, Moscow's opposition to "further enlargement of NATO ... is hardly surprising: no state would welcome the extension of a historically hostile military alliance up to its borders." Likewise, even some constructivist-inspired scholars acknowledge that "the Kremlin had reasons to suspect geopolitical motivations behind the [US] regime-change strategy, which included a long-term geostrategic presence and greater control over natural resources in the region" (Tsygankov 2010, 156). Accordingly, Russia's near abroad assertion can be understood as a reaction to external pressures. Russia wants to exercise greater control over neighboring states to counterbalance and, if possible, roll back the growing influence of foreign powers on its doorstep (see also Karagiannis 2013, 83–89).

Viewed in this perspective, Russia's actions in Ukraine appear in a different light. The critical issue for Moscow was not Yanukovych's ouster from the presidency, but rather that the new government in Kiev made clear its intent to build closer ties with Western institutions like EU and NATO. To prevent that from happening, Russia shifted from softer means to hard power. Along these lines, Dmitri Trenin (2014), the director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, has argued that Russia's moves in Ukraine are driven by "geopolitical considerations," aiming at keeping "Ukraine out of NATO." IR scholar John Mearsheimer (2014, 82) concurs. "No Russian leader," he writes, "would tolerate a military alliance that was Moscow's mortal enemy until recently moving into Ukraine." He further contends, "This is Geopolitics 101: great powers are always sensitive to potential threats near their home territory" (Mearsheimer 2014, 82).

In essence, geopolitical-inspired explanations hold that the combination of rising material capabilities and strategic threats pushed Russia to assert its regional dominance. It is worth noting that, in this view, Moscow's behavior has little to do with the peculiarities of Russian culture or leadership characteristics. Rather, it is reflective of broader patterns and trends in international politics. Confronted with similar pressures and opportunities, any major power would act in a roughly similar manner. This line of reasoning takes its cue from the neorealist perspective, merging insights from its offensive and defensive strands. The latter holds that states tend to balance against dangerous concentrations of power near their borders (Walt 1987; Waltz 1979). The former suggests that the anarchical international structure provides strong incentives for states to go on the offensive and pursue regional dominance. However, only states with sufficient power resources can act on these incentives (Mearsheimer 2001).

Russia's near abroad policy indeed appears to be a case where insights of these two strands can be neatly combined with each other. There is ample evidence, for instance, that Russia's political elites and the broader population see NATO expansion as a potential threat to the country's security. It is also clear that Russia has used its growing economic and military strength to exert control and influence over smaller neighboring states. Thus, in many regards, Russia has acted in tune with geopolitical imperatives. However, this approach has its shortcomings too. Three in particular stand out.

First, it cannot fully account for Russia's threat perceptions. Currently, Western powers constitute the greatest national security threat in Russian military thinking. China, by contrast, plays only a minor role. From a geopolitical perspective, this is baffling. After all, China has overtaken Russia in both economic and military terms. Moreover, the two countries share a long border. Thus, going by power and proximity, China is at least as threatening to Russia as US-led NATO expansion, or EU enlargement, for that matter. As one scholar pointed out, "China will likely pose a greater threat to Russian security and sovereignty than will Europe and the United States over the long term" (Ziegler 2012, 410). Likewise, another scholar noted that Russia "still seems too preoccupied with NATO and largely oblivious to the lengthening shadow of China" (Laquer 2010, 159). This becomes even more puzzling if one considers that China has increased its economic and political involvement in Central Asia in recent years. As one Swedish analyst observed with some astonishment, "Although China is an emerging competitor for influence in the Caspian and Central Asia . . . it is perceived by Russia as far less threatening than the United States" (Norling 2007, 40).

Second, geopolitical explanations have difficulties accounting for the specific policies and actions undertaken by Russia. Why, for example, has Russia formally annexed Crimea and recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, while it continues to support but does not legally recognize the separatist region of Transnistria in Moldova? Country-specific and contextual factors beyond the purview of a purely geopolitical account seem to be at play. More generally, as indicated above, Russia has employed a wide range of tools and tactics to enhance its influence in the post-Soviet space, including military, economic, and political means. The prevailing geopolitical explanations fail to explain why and when Russia uses some foreign-policy instruments and not others.

Third, the thesis that external pressures and opportunities are the sole drivers of Russia's quest for regional dominance is hard to square with Moscow's near abroad policy in the second half of the 1990s. At that time, external pressure on Russia increased as the Americans stepped up their activities in the Caspian area, and NATO invited the Baltic countries to become full members. As noted, policymakers in Moscow vociferously protested against these moves. On the ground, however, Russia's near abroad policy became increasingly weak and incoherent. Some scholars have suggested that Russia's lack of military and economic

capabilities was the reason for its restrained response to geopolitical pressures (Allison 2001, 253). At first glance, this reading has something to it. After all, Russia found itself in a deep economic crisis in the second half of the 1990s. Power, however, is relative, and Russia's power resources were still much greater than those of the other former Soviet republics (Menon 1998, 104–7). Thus, the geopolitical argument pointing to the distribution of power in the region is not fully convincing.

Instead, as some observers have noted, mostly in passing, it appears that Russia's disjointed policies in the late 1990s can be ascribed not to the lack of material capabilities but to the country's internal weakness (see, e.g., Blank 1998; Blum 1998; Makarychev 1999). As the Russian newspaper *Kommersant Daily* noted at that time: "It is impossible to pursue an integrated foreign and economic policy today because Russia's political and economic elite, including its ruling elite, not only is not consolidated, but has split into competing, hostile factions, groups and groupings that are openly battling each other" (quoted in Freedman 1997, 98). In other words, Russia appeared like a composite rather than a unitary actor. This is not easily captured by the prevailing geopolitical explanations, which pay little attention to internal political arrangements and dynamics.

It leads to a larger theoretical challenge. To be clear, the problem is not that domestic-level factors are downplayed in neorealist-inspired explanations and approaches. After all, this is a conscious analytical choice. The problem is that they fail to explicate the causal process through which systemic imperatives affect the decisions of state leaders. In fact, many neorealist approaches leave this question unaddressed, or they work with a rationality assumption. That is to say, it is simply assumed that state leaders make "rational" calculations about external threats and opportunities (see, e.g., Mearsheimer 2009; Keohane 1986, 167). On reflection, it seems quite a stretch to assume that humans who make foreign policy act like information-processing supercomputers. Thus, it is difficult for purely geopolitical approaches to establish a plausible link between external threats and opportunities, on the one hand, and the actual decisions of Russian policymakers, on the other. There is, in other words, an explanatory gap inherent in many geopolitical approaches—namely, to specify the linkages through which strategic incentives that arise from the international system affect state behavior.

To sum up, the geopolitical view appears to go a long way in explaining the broad outlines of Russia's near abroad assertion. There remain, however, some important areas that cannot be explained in terms of external pressures and opportunities—specifically, Russia's threat perceptions, the choice of foreign-policy tools, and Moscow's inchoate actions in the latter half of the 1990s. In addition, geopolitical approaches remain unclear about the causal mechanism through which external constraints and opportunities influence the decisions of Russian policymakers.

The Road Ahead: Toward Analytical Eclecticism and Synthetic Explanations

Thus far, we have seen that each of the four approaches contributes to our understanding of Moscow's neighborhood policy. At the same time, the previous sections also reveal that limitations and shortcomings characterize these approaches. All of them fail (to varying degrees) to account for the possible interaction between different causes. In addition, and partly as a result of this, they have difficulties to explain the development of Russia's near abroad policy over time; difficulties to clarify the reasons for the differences and similarities in Russia's policies vis-à-vis individual post-Soviet states; and difficulties to identify the causal process linking the sources of Russia's near abroad assertion with Moscow's behavior. Table 1 on the next page provides a summary. The question that remains is: How should scholars proceed?

This article argues that to overcome the identified shortcomings, future research needs to devote more attention to studying the interplay between potential causes. It may very well be that factors and dynamics separately emphasized by the different approaches could be used successfully in combination to provide a fuller understanding of Russia's near abroad assertion. Indeed, many scholars agree with that, at least in principle. In practice, little effort has been made to specify theoretical propositions or assemble empirical evidence on the interaction between different factors.[4] More research needs to be done in this regard. It would fit well with the growing focus on analytical eclecticism in IR (see, e.g., Eun 2012; Sil and Katzenstein 2010; Moravcsik 2003).

While a thorough discussion of analytical eclecticism is beyond the purview of this article, it is important to note that eclectic research holds huge potential but also carries great risks. On the one hand, the combination of theoretical and analytical elements from different perspectives presents a promising way to deal with a subject as complex and contested as Russia's near abroad assertion. On the other hand, there is the danger that eclectic research ends up producing laundry-list explanations where potential causes are simply added without elaborating on their relative importance or the internal coherence of the resulting account. The scholarship on Russian foreign policy should not fall into this trap. Instead, to reap the rewards of eclecticism while avoiding the most common pitfalls, scholars working on Russian foreign policy should go beyond the claim that everything "somehow" matters and develop explanations that specify the relative weight, role, and relationship of the different factors at play.

This, of course, is easier said than done. In what follows, I present the contours of *one* synthetic framework, partly for illustrative purposes and partly because of its potential to account for many of the shortcomings in the existing explanations.

A Multilayered Framework for Analysis

Taking its lead from the geopolitical perspective, the framework starts at the international level. It is argued that, in a condition of international anarchy, powerful countries like Russia have strong incentives to surround themselves with a regional sphere of influence. The primary goal is to prevent smaller neighboring countries from teaming up with great power rivals from other parts of the world. After all, no one wants to have client states of potential adversaries within close proximity of its border. Furthermore, powerful countries have a strong incentive to gain some form of control over communication and transport routes in their geographical vicinity. This is good for economic reasons but also for strategic objectives, as it minimizes the risk of being cut off from vital supply routes or export markets in times of crisis. Seen in this light, there is nothing special or peculiar about Russia's ambition to dominate its neighborhood.

Importantly, even in a view of Putin and his associates as a group of narrowly self-interested power-seekers, whose primary aim is to stay in office, one may expect that they will defend the country's national security and geopolitical interests. The reason is simple. Without the shell of the state, political leaders are vulnerable when it comes to conflicts with "outsiders." In other words, if political

[4]Partial exceptions include Mankoff (2009, 40–42), Tsygankov (2012b, 267–69), Vanderhill (2013, 41–96), and especially Bunce and Hozic (2015). The latter argue that the interplay of national, regime, and personal security interests drive Russia's assertive behavior toward Ukraine. This line of reasoning combines insights from individual-level explanations, liberal domestic politics theory, and realist thinking. It is consistent with the argument developed in this article. In contrast to this article, however, Bunce and Hozic (2015) focus primarily on Russia's actions toward Ukraine and do not address Russia's near abroad assertion in its entirety.

Table 1. Challenges in explaining Russia's near abroad assertion

	Main Explanatory Factors	Main Challenges
Decision-Maker Explanations	Putin's Cold War mindset and security service background Putin's personal inclinations and worldviews deriving from formative experiences in his past	Causal drivers: to integrate the constraining and enabling influences of factors at the domestic and international levels Development over time: to explain the similarities between Putin's neighborhood policies and those conducted under Yeltsin in the early 1990s Causal process: to account for the broad consensus within Russia regarding the country's near abroad policy
Domestic Political Explanations	The Kremlin's ambition to deflect attention away from political and economic failures at home The Kremlin's ambition to prevent democratic contagion in Russia's immediate neighborhood	Causal drivers: to integrate the role of international and ideational factors in the formation of Russia s near abroad policy Development over time: to explain why Russia's near abroad assertion picked up speed in around 2004, at a time when the Kremlin's popularity among ordinary Russians increased Similarities/differences across space: to explain the Kremlin's combative policies toward autocratic regimes and cooperative policies toward democratizing regimes Causal process: to explain why the Kremlin engages in diversionary foreign policies instead of cooptation or repression
Ideational Explanations	Russia's centrist national identity that emerged in the early to mid-1990s Russia's desire for international prestige, status, and recognition as a great power	Causal drivers: to integrate the potentially independent impact of material factors on Russia's near abroad policy Development over time: to explain the gap between Russia's assertive rhetoric and less assertive policies in the late 1990s Causal process: to explain the rise and continued dominance of the centrist identity discourse within Russia Causal process: to explain Russia's self-defeating hunt for status and recognition from the West
Geopolitical Explanations	External opportunities provided by Russia's growing material capabilities and regional power disparities in the post-Soviet space External threats in the form of NATO expansion and the promotion of pro-Western regimes along Russia's borders	Causal drivers: to integrate the role of internal and ideational factors in the formation of Russia's near abroad policy Development over time: to explain Russia's restrained response to growing external pressures in the latter half of the 1990s Similarities/differences across space: to account for the selection of policy tools and tactics toward other post-Soviet states Causal process: to explain Russia's threat perceptions, especially concerning Western powers Causal process: to explain the mechanisms through which geopolitical incentives that arise from the international/regional system affect Russian decision-makers

leaders or leadership groups fail to protect the functional and territorial integrity of the state, they risk losing their policymaking autonomy vis-à-vis external actors; at worst, they are in danger of being removed from office by force. After all, foreign-imposed regime change is hardly uncommon in world politics. Thus, even the most venal office-seekers, like Putin and his entourage, have a powerful incentive to advance the geopolitical interests of the state (on the interplay of national and regime security, see Ayoob 2002, 46; Bunce and Hozic 2015; Gilpin 1996, 7–8; Sørensen 2001, 107–8).

This, however, is not the whole story. As shown above, the geopolitical line of reasoning has a number of shortcomings. To account for them, one has to move down to the domestic level and peek inside the Russian black box. At the domestic level, two factors appear particularly important: the dominant set of ideas within Russia and the level of state capacity.

Ideas matter because they influence countries' threat assessments. The basic argument is simple. If states that project military power next to one's own border are also regarded as competitors in the prevailing identity narrative, this will make a bad situation worse. For example, it does not seem far-fetched to assume that Russian fears of NATO expansion are heightened by historical animosities toward the US-led military bloc. More generally, a central theme in Russia's national-identity narrative is that the greatest threats to the country's national security have come from the West. The collective historical memories of attacks from the Swedish Empire, Napoleonic France, and Nazi Germany are very much alive. It accentuates a sense of vulnerability to encroachments from Western powers, which is why many Russians are particularly sensitive to NATO's eastward expansion and EU's increased activism in the post-Soviet space.[5]

State capacity matters because it captures the ability of governments to respond to geopolitical imperatives in a timely and effective manner (Zakaria 1998; Schweller 2004). In particular, the factor "state capacity" appears useful in explaining why Russia became less, and not more, assertive in the second half of the 1990s. During this time, the Russian state had become thoroughly penetrated by oligarchs; the country's tax-collection system was in ruins, which made it very difficult for the Russian state to mobilize power resources from society; and several regional governors had begun to pursue their own, semi-independent foreign policies. Combined, these developments can account for Moscow's inability to reassert its regional position in the late 1990s—despite strong geopolitical pressures to do so. The result was an odd combination of rhetorical toughness by Russian policymakers and weak action on the ground. Simply put, the Russian state was too fragmented internally to act in a coherent and combative fashion externally. In the early 2000s, however, Russia experienced a growth in state capacity. The Putin government strengthened the tax-collection system, brought wayward governors to heel, and cracked down on oligarchs not loyal to the Kremlin. The Russian state, in other words, regained authority over internal and external affairs. This, in turn, enabled Moscow to adopt a more proactive and assertive stance in the post-Soviet region.

It takes us to the individual level. According to my framework, Putin's personal inclinations and worldviews play no substantial role in causing Russia's near abroad assertion. Instead, Putin is best understood as a "transmitter" responsible for translating geopolitical imperatives into foreign-policy behavior. This does not

[5]Of course, throughout history, Russia has also been repeatedly attacked from the south and east. Think, for example, of the invasion by the Mongols in the thirteenth century. However, these attacks do not figure as prominently in Russia's historical memory as do attacks and incursions from the west. Anyone who has attended Victory Day in Moscow knows, for instance, that Russian soldiers parade in replica uniforms of World War II and the Napoleonic Wars. Combat gear and uniforms of the Mongol wars are typically not displayed. The point here is that Russia's threat assessments are not influenced by "objective history" (if such a thing exists) but by the prevailing interpretation of history, which is entrenched in Russia's national-identity narrative.

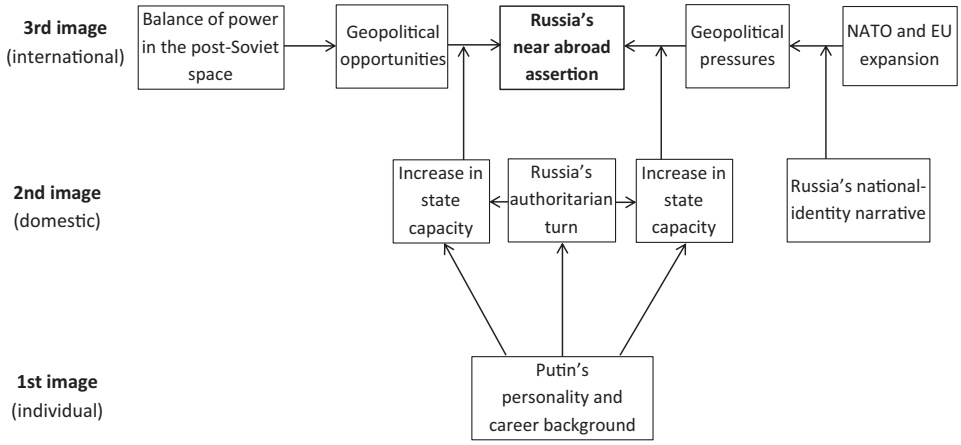

Figure 1. A causal map of Russia's near abroad assertion

imply that Putin has been irrelevant, however. Given his statist mindset and background in the security services, Putin was well suited to strengthen the state vis-à-vis alternative power centers. In other words, Putin not only consolidated his grip on power through authoritarian means, which he certainly did, but also strengthened the capacity of the Russian state. In effect, the Russian state was able to respond to the pulls and pushes of the international system in a more coordinated manner.

This is, in a truncated form, the argument. Admittedly, it is a rough synthesis, but it suggests a promising avenue for future research. Contrary to many of the existing accounts, the proposed model goes beyond single-variable explanations and provides a more comprehensive framework for analyzing Russia's near abroad assertion. At the same time, the model does not fall into the opposite error of adding variables like items on a grocery list without specifying their relative weight and interrelationship. Instead, the different factors play distinct but complementary roles. This form of theoretically informed synthesis is consistent with the emerging school of neoclassical realism, which seeks to integrate international and unit-level factors in the study of foreign policy (see, e.g., Foulon 2015; Kitchen 2010; Rose 1998). The proposed model expands on the extant work of neoclassical realist scholars, who typically focus on the interplay of broader international influences with *one* specific unit-level dimension (be it state capacity, national ideas, or decision-makers). In contrast, the proposed model takes all three factors into account and develops an argument of how they, in conjunction with geopolitical imperatives, shape Russia's near abroad policy. Figure 1 displays graphically the relationship between the different factors in a "causal map," which is briefly described in the following.

Starting at the map's upper-left corner, the gross imbalance of material capabilities in the post-Soviet space provides Russia with the *opportunity* to make a run for regional dominance. By contrast, and at risk of stating the obvious, countries like Georgia or Latvia cannot pursue regional dominance, simply because they lack the material wherewithal to do so. Jumping to the upper-right corner, the increased presence of foreign powers in the post-Soviet space, notably the expansions of the US-led NATO alliance and the European Union, has put geopolitical pressure on Russia. This, in turn, provides Russia with an *incentive* to employ assertive means in order to create and uphold a sphere of influence near its borders.

Moving downward to the state level, Russia's national-identity narrative serves as a *moderating factor* that affects the threat assessments of policymakers in Moscow.

The arrow going from identity narrative to the causal link between NATO and EU expansion, on the one hand, and geopolitical pressure, on the other, implies this simple idea. Importantly, the reader should keep in mind that the argument here is not that Russia's national-identity narrative is the fundamental source, or cause, of these threat assessments. As the discussion above suggests, there are very real pressures from the international system, and Moscow correctly perceives them as potentially dangerous and threatening. What a purely geopolitical analysis cannot explain is why Moscow is especially concerned about NATO and EU expansion. In other words, the basic point here is that Russia's national-identity narrative magnifies threat perceptions of existing geopolitical pressures—it does not create these threat perceptions out of thin air.

Moving to the center of the causal map, the rebuilding of Russian state capacity in the early 2000s enabled Moscow to deal effectively with geopolitical pressures and opportunities. In other words, state capacity functions as a *mediating factor* that captures the ability (or inability, as the case may be) of Russian government authorities to act strategically on the international stage. As indicated above, the speedy rebuilding of Russian state capacity in the early 2000s was facilitated by the turn toward authoritarianism. Through heavy-handed means and disregard for civil liberties, the Kremlin reasserted control over wayward governors and strengthened the taxation capacity of the Russian state. This allowed the Kremlin to mobilize resources from Russia's burgeoning economy for foreign-policy purposes.

Dropping to the individual level, Putin's personality and career background contributed to the rebuilding of state capacity as well as to Russia's turn toward authoritarianism. Putin, it appears, was bent on creating a strong state and showed little concern for democratic norms and procedures. This is an important part of the explanation of how the Kremlin managed to create a stronger state in the early 2000s within a relatively brief period of time. Thus, the authoritarian turn under Putin can be seen as a *facilitating factor* of Russia's near abroad assertion.

These arguments have considerable prima facie plausibility, but they are not conclusive or definitive. Future research should explore in greater detail whether and how geopolitical imperatives interact with national-identity narratives, state capacity, and the coming to power of Putin in shaping Russia's policies in the post-Soviet space. Given the multi-causal character of the model, the chosen research strategy has to be multilayered and combine different research techniques, including congruence analysis, within-case comparisons, and process tracing. A few words about these methods, and how they can be combined, are in order.

A Multilayered Research Design

In a first step, scholars should employ *congruence analysis* to check whether there is a general association between geopolitical opportunities and pressures, on the one hand, and Russia's near abroad assertion, on the other. The geopolitical opportunity structure is easy to ascertain by measuring the relative distribution of material capabilities in the post-Soviet space. Likewise, measuring geopolitical pressure is relatively straightforward. One has to examine the activities of extra-regional powers in the former Soviet area. The higher the level of geopolitical pressure, the stronger the incentive for Russia to pursue regional dominance via combative means.

In a second step, one can make use of *within-case comparisons* over space and time. If the above argument is correct, we should be able to observe that Russia targets especially those countries in the post-Soviet space that have indicated their willingness to team up with foreign powers. Consider, for instance, Russia's

assertive approach toward Ukraine in recent years, which stands in marked contrast to Russia's policies toward a country like Kazakhstan. Similarly, we should be able to observe changes over time in Russia's behavioral pattern vis-à-vis individual states in the region. Whenever a neighboring country makes overtures to extra-regional powers—say, Georgia under Saakashvili—Russia will step up its assertiveness. Conversely, when the country in question changes its foreign-policy orientation and shelves plans to join forces with outsiders, Moscow will pursue less assertive policies toward it. Thus, comparisons over space and time are useful to ascertain the basic theoretical argument in a large number of within-cases.

The third step is to engage in a form of *process tracing* to check whether Russian policymakers "speak and behave as the theory predicts" (Van Evera 1997, 64; for more on process tracing, see Beach and Pedersen 2013; Bennett and Checkel 2015). One obvious difficulty here is data scarcity and the limited access to Russian decision-making processes. Still, we can expect to find traces of geopolitical reasoning in policy documents and pronouncements of Russian government officials. For example, we should find that they express ambitions to build a regional sphere of influence. Moreover, policymaking circles in Moscow should express concern about efforts by smaller neighboring states to team up with extra-regional powers. Russian government officials need not express such concerns in each and every statement, but they should cite efforts of other post-Soviet states to cooperate with outside powers in military and defense affairs as potentially threatening and dangerous. By extension, we should not see substantial differences in the geopolitical ambitions and threat assessments among different government officials within Russia. To the contrary, because politicians in the same state face identical geopolitical dangers and opportunities, we should see Russian politicians of various persuasions and ideological colorations drawing fairly similar conclusions.

Relatedly, one should examine Russia's prevailing national-identity narrative. For this purpose, scholars can either conduct their own discourse analyses or fall back on the work of constructivist-inspired IR scholars and Russia specialists. If the argument outlined above is correct, then we should find discursive structures and practices that emphasize the "historical threat" from the West. Moreover, we would expect that these discursive elements imbue the rhetoric of Russian policymakers when they describe the actions and activities of Western powers in the post-Soviet region.

In a fourth and final step, researchers should assess the level of Russian state capacity and how it has developed over time. Toward that end, one can employ quantitative indicators, such as state revenue to GDP (a standard measure of state capacity in the field of comparative politics), and rely on qualitative assessments of Russia specialists. Moreover, one can carry out some form of before-after comparison to test the argument that Russia's near abroad assertion was facilitated by the increase in state capacity after the coming to power of Putin. In addition, it appears useful to apply at-a-distance personality measures to evaluate the hypothesis that Putin had a statist mindset and was preoccupied with creating a stronger Russian state at home (for an application of this research technique on Putin, see Dyson 2001).

In essence: The multi-causal framework outlined above calls for a multilayered research strategy. The combination of congruence methods, within-case comparisons, and process tracing will help maximize the number of observations, test empirically the proposed causal mechanisms, and thus provide a basis for assessing the overall argument. Moreover, such a research design makes it possible to combine—in a systematic fashion—the broader insights of IR theorists with the case-specific knowledge of area-study scholars.

Before concluding, it must be underscored that the purpose of the preceding pages was not to impose a single theoretical framework. The point was, rather, to

illustrate the potential benefits of building synthetic accounts that are anchored in one specific perspective. It was demonstrated how the geopolitical perspective can be enriched and made more specific by layering in elements from other approaches. Along similar lines, the literature examining the domestic political sources of Russia's near abroad policy should devote more attention to fleshing out the interplay with geopolitical and ideational factors. Ideational explanations, in turn, should focus more on how material factors and decision-making influences interact with ideas in shaping Russia's near abroad policy. Decision-maker approaches, for their part, should devote more attention to specifying how domestic and international factors constrain and enable Putin's approach to the post-Soviet space. The result would be explanatory competition, but it would be between synthetic accounts, which hold the potential to provide more detailed and fine-grained explanations of Russia's near abroad assertion. This is to say that decision-maker influences, domestic political conditions, ideas, and geopolitical imperatives all matter, to some extent, but they play different roles and carry different weight in the various approaches.

Conclusion

Recent years have seen a proliferation of books and articles on Russia's near abroad policy. There is widespread agreement that Russia has become increasingly assertive toward other post-Soviet states since around 2004. At the same time, there is widespread disagreement on the sources or causes of Russia's near abroad assertion. This article has identified four sets of explanations: decision-maker accounts focusing on Putin's mindset and worldviews; domestic political accounts emphasizing the Kremlin's interest in preventing internal unrest and democratization spillover; ideational accounts highlighting the role of Russia's national self-understanding and desire for international status; and geopolitical accounts suggesting that power disparities and external pressure play a central role in explaining Russia's policies in the region.

The article has shown that all four approaches can bolster their preferred interpretations with anecdotal but ultimately inconclusive evidence. In fact, a closer look reveals that each approach has some empirical and logical gaps. Thus, in isolation, the existing accounts fail to provide a fully satisfactory explanation. It has been suggested that to overcome the identified shortcomings and extend our understanding of Russia's near abroad policy, scholars need to investigate the interrelation of assumed causes. Future research should develop different synthetic explanations and compare them with each other and the record of Russia's near abroad policy. This is worth the effort, because mono-causal approaches focusing on one set of factors while neglecting others are unlikely to lead to any progress. Thus, scholars should devote more attention to developing multi-causal models that interweave elements of the different approaches—without degenerating into laundry-list explanations—and test these models through multilayered research strategies. The result would be more nuanced and fine-grained, and therefore most likely stronger, accounts of Russia's near abroad assertion.

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