Preventive Responses to Russian Instigation of Post-Soviet Flashpoints

Prepared for the Center for a New American Security Transatlantic Security Program

Isabel Dlabach
Master of Public Policy Candidate

University of Virginia | Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy

CNAS

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Disclaimer

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Honor Pledge

On my honor as a student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment.

Isabel Dlabach

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Acronyms

EU: European Union. See Appendix A for member states.
NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization. See Appendix A for member states.
CSTO: Collective Security Treaty Organization. See Appendix A for member states.
NGO: Non-governmental organization

Glossary

The West/Western governments: refers broadly to the governments of the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, and EU and NATO member states, especially leading countries of what is viewed as Western security architecture – the United States in particular, but also including the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. "Governments" includes the executives, legislatures, and foreign policy bureaucracies of these countries, as applicable.

Target countries: Countries included in this analysis as potential flashpoints, both where Russia may interfere and where this report's recommendations should be focused. Target countries are Ukraine, Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan.

Executive Summary

Several post-Soviet countries face instability and are susceptible to Russian interference. Amid declining relations between Russia and Western states, flashpoints in these countries, especially if influenced by Russia, have the potential to draw Western countries or institutions into conflict. This report, prepared for the Transatlantic Security Program at the Center for a New American Security, summarizes the flashpoints in Ukraine, Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, identifies and analyzes potential strategies to combat Russian instigation, and identifies a recommended strategy based on four evaluative criteria.

The strategies are:

1. **Encourage multilateral engagement with Russian-led institutions by target countries**
2. **Assist with domestic political reform and stabilization in target countries**
3. **Focus on countering disinformation in target countries**

These strategies are evaluated base on four criteria:

1. Effectiveness
2. Cost
3. Appropriateness of target countries
4. Feasibility

Based on an outcomes matrix which includes each of these strategies and criteria, the ultimate recommendation of this report is to **focus on countering disinformation in target countries**. This does not exclude or undervalue the importance of the other strategies, but suggests increased investment in anti-disinformation efforts to aid in preventing conflict between the West and Russia.

This analysis can contribute to the Transatlantic Security Program's research and policy recommendations on post-Soviet flashpoints and Russian interference.

Introduction

There is potential for Russian government instigation of several flashpoints in the Eurasian countries of Ukraine, Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. Whether fomented from the beginning by Russian interference or organically formed and subsequently subjected to Russian exploitation, these flashpoints could end up involving Western governments and international institutions.

The purpose of this report is to provide research on these flashpoints and insight into what Western governments can do to combat Russian interference and prevent escalation or conflict, including with Russia itself. The report will first provide background on the issue, focused on how and why Russia may instigate flashpoints in the target countries and how this could lead to conflict involving Western countries and institutions. Then, it will outline three strategies for combating Russian intervention in these countries, including evaluation of evidence for each. The report will then outline four evaluative criteria and use them to analyze each proposed alternative strategy. Based on this analysis, the report will provide a recommendation as well as steps for implementation.

Problem Statement

At the current moment, there are several countries in the post-Soviet sphere of Eastern Europe and Central Asia that are facing instability and are susceptible to interference by the Russian government. Amid declining relations between Russia and Western countries, particularly since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, flashpoints in these countries, if instigated by Russia, have the potential to draw Western countries or institutions into conflict, possibly with the Russian Federation itself.

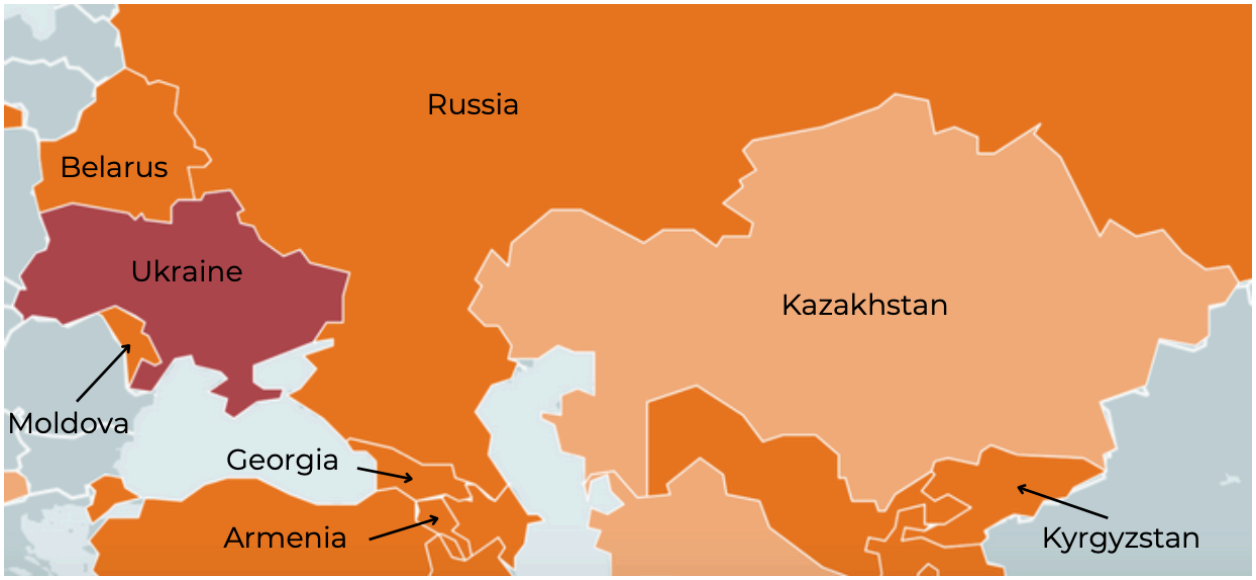
Client Overview

The Center for a New American Security (CNAS) is a bipartisan nonprofit organization that produces research, analysis, and recommendations on advancing the United States' interests to inform policymakers, experts, and the public. CNAS' Transatlantic Security Program aspires to contribute to strong transatlantic partnerships and help policymakers understand and respond to both opportunities and challenges.

This analysis contributes to the program's research on post-Soviet flashpoints and ways to, over the long term, prevent potential conflict with Russia further down the line.

Background

Figure 1: Map of Russia and Target Countries



Underlying map adapted from International Crisis Group's CrisisWatch global conflict tracker (CrisisWatch, 2024). Areas in red are classified as a Deteriorated Situation; areas in dark orange are classified as an Unchanged Situation; and areas in light orange are classified a under Standby Monitoring.

Target countries were selected based on current geopolitical dynamics as most likely to a) face Russian instigation or interference and b) potentially result in broader conflict, but other countries in the area face many of the same challenges, and the conclusions of this report are not necessarily limited to the countries assessed.

There is potential for Russian government instigation of these flashpoints, whether fomented from the beginning by Russian interference or organically formed and subsequently subjected to Russian exploitation. Direct outcomes of instigation vary, including internal political strife, political violence, and attacks on democratic institutions. Countering this instigation will help protect against the West being drawn into conflict, including militarily.

Ukraine

Ukraine, which has deep historical, cultural, and economic ties with Russia, is perhaps the most obvious flashpoint susceptible to Russian interference. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 provides the most stark example of the kind of instigation that increases risk of conflict between Russia and the broader West.

Ukraine was vital to the Soviet Union, housing much of its agricultural and defense production and with a population second among the Soviet republics only to Russia (Masters, 2023). Since its independence, it has sought closer alignment with the West and its institutions (the EU and NATO) while struggling with internal divisions; those in western Ukraine tend to favor closer ties with Europe, while those in the east support look more favorably upon ties with Russia (Masters, 2023). Among other reasons, the importance of Ukraine to Russia stems from a desire for a strategic buffer between Russia and NATO states in Europe, a sphere of influence comparable to that of the United States, a view that Ukraine is historically part of Russia, and a desire to recreate a sort of Russian Empire (Masters, 2023). When Russia annexed the Crimean peninsula in 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin cited protecting the rights of Russians and Russian speakers in the area, and this reasoning was repeated at the time of the 2022 invasion (Center for Preventive Action, 2024; “Transcript”, 2014).

As the war continues to unfold, and no matter the outcome, the Russian government will no doubt seek to continue to influence Ukraine and bring it further into its sphere of influence.

Armenia

Armenia has been a partner of Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and Russian influence has grown ever since. Russian border guards were stationed on Armenia’s borders with Iran and Turkey in 1992, a Russian military base has been operable in the Armenian city of Gyumri since 1995, and after the Second Karabakh War in 2020, Russian peacekeepers were deployed to Nagorno-Karabakh, the previously separatist region of Azerbaijan inhabited mostly by ethnic Armenians (Atasuntsev, 2023). However, since Russia remained largely neutral in a 2020 attack on Nagorno-Karabakh by Azerbaijan, and especially since it failed to prevent the September 2023 attack which resulted in Azerbaijan’s full control of the region, Armenia has accused Russia of abandoning its guarantee of protection (Atasuntsev, 2023; “Armenia”, 2023).

Moscow already did not look favorably upon Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. Pashinyan came to power after protests overthrew a pro-Russian government in 2018, and while he largely tried to keep the relationship with Moscow cooperative, Pashinyan’s government had contemplated reducing its ties with Russia even prior to the loss of the Karabakh region (Krivosheev, 2024). In October 2023, he accused Russia of attempting to overthrow his government (“Armenia”, 2023).

Yerevan has recently shown further signs of distancing itself from Russia. This year, Pashinyan has said Armenia's membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a Russian-led military alliance in Eurasia, is "frozen"; the head of Armenia's Security Council called reliance on Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union a mistake; Armenia stopped allowing Russian border guards to operate at Yerevan's airport; and Armenia joined the ICC, so that Putin could be arrested if he visited the country (Atasuntsev, 2023; Krivosheev, 2024).

Though some think Russia would not risk losing another economic partner amid its war in Ukraine, others imagine a worst-case scenario to be an attempt by the Russian government to bring about regime change using paramilitary and opposition groups, particularly as Armenia turns further to partners like France and Greece (Krivosheev, 2024; Higgins, 2023). Russia could also signal to Azerbaijan to initiate another military operation, or stir up unrest in Armenia in retaliation for its pivot to the West ("A humanitarian disaster", 2023; Zolyan, 2023). Even if new Western partners do not become full military allies of Armenia, conflict could involve them as international advocates, and escalation or spillover could result in active participation.

Belarus

Belarus, like Ukraine, has significant historical, cultural, and economic ties to Russia. Belarus' dictator president, Alexander Lukashenko, is rumored to have significant health issues after prematurely leaving a Victory Day parade in Moscow in May 2023 and not appearing in public for almost a week afterwards (Kuznetsov, 2023; "What happens", 2023). Though many Belarusian elites and potential successors have strong ties to Russia, which would like to have a pro-Russian leader in Belarus, many others prefer to keep some distance between the two countries (Kuznetsov, 2023; "What happens", 2023). After Lukashenko, if Belarusians decide to protest the transfer of power to another potential dictator, rising up in favor of democracy, Russian security forces could interfere to ensure a friendlier successor ("What happens", 2023)

Though Putin and Lukashenko practiced different foreign policies for many years, with Russia decidedly against the West and Belarus playing both sides, the two leaders began working more closely together in 2020 (Shraibman, 2023). That fall, Putin provided political support to Lukashenko and deployed Russian security forces to the border to deter protests against the fraudulent election that gave Lukashenko another five-year term and the following police crackdown on the opposition (Shraibman, 2023). This convinced Belarusian officials to stay, as it showed that Russia would not allow Lukashenko to fall.

This made Lukashenko more dependent on Moscow, but once the full-scale war in Ukraine began, Moscow became dependent on the stability of Lukashenko's government for military and political reasons (Shraibman, 2023). Lukashenko's agreement to allow Russia to deploy tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus, as well as train new conscripts there, makes Belarus useful to Putin, but they ultimately have different priorities: Lukashenko wants an independent Belarus, and Putin wants to loop it into a new empire (Dixon, 2022; Shraibman, 2023).

In the absence of an escalation of the war in Ukraine, the flashpoint could erupt in a few different ways. If Russia brings Belarus into the fighting, its small army could be devastated, leading to destabilization and absorption by Russia (Samorukov, 2022). If Ukraine wins the war, Putin could try to claim Belarus as compensation, and even if Putin is replaced, it could be by more hardline leaders with similar objectives (Shraibman, 2023). If Russia wins, destabilizing Belarus would have fewer consequences and Putin may be emboldened to take Belarus, which has no Western allies, as part of what he sees as Russia's rightful empire (Shraibman, 2023). Any breach of the sovereignty of Belarus, which borders NATO member states Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia, has the potential to involve the West upon escalation, as with the war in Ukraine.

Georgia

Georgia, which has been considered one of the West's closest partners in the South Caucasus, has long had aspirations to join the EU and NATO (these are enshrined in its constitution) (Dolbaia & Snegovaya, 2023).

In the past few years, however, Georgia has become closer to Moscow and further from democratic norms and its efforts to join the EU and NATO as the Georgian Dream party has consolidated power and become increasingly pro-Russian (Fukuyama & Evgenidze, 2023). While the EU agreed to open accession talks with Moldova and Ukraine in December 2023, Georgia has been given only candidate status (Hülsemann, 2024).

Since 2008, when Russia invaded Georgia and occupied 20% of its territory (the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia) in response to strengthened ties with the West, Russia has continued to militarize the occupied regions and use other tactics to push back against Georgia's Western-oriented foreign policy (Seskuria, 2021). Through its "borderization" policy, it has continued to encroach upon Georgia's territories, pushing the demarcation line of South Ossetia's border with the rest of Georgia further and further into the country (Dickinson, 2021; Seskuria, 2021).

Russian disinformation and propaganda has sought to portray aspirations for NATO membership as bad for Georgia and paint itself as not just the only party able to resolve the conflict, but the only power able to provide Georgia with the necessary security guarantees (Seskuria, 2021). Some think that a resurgence of Russian dominance over Georgia could encourage Putin into believing the same is possible in Ukraine (Kandelaki, 2023). The militarized border and conflict in the occupied regions also poses the threat of further conflict, particularly involving a country with relatively strong ties to the Euro-Atlantic coalition.

Moldova

In 1990, the Russian-speaking region of Transnistria in Moldova declared independence, with Russian backing, to remain in the Soviet Union as Moldova tried to break away (Lutsevych & Pasha, 2024; "What is Transnistria", 2022). A civil war in 1992 followed the United Nations' recognition of Moldova's indepdendence, but Transnistria's status was not settled ("What is Transnistria", 2022). Russia has significant political control in Transnistria and keeps military equipment as well as a permanent force of troops there ("What is Transnistria", 2022).

In February 2024, pro-Russian leaders of Transnistria appealed to the Russian government for protection, mirroring appeals Russia claims came from inside Ukraine (Lutsevych & Pasha, 2024). A Russia general has said that the Russian army would have access to Transnistria if it successfully cuts across southern Ukraine, potentially allowing it to capture Transnistria and use it to attack Ukraine from the west ("What is Transnistria", 2022). Moldova as a whole has no security guarantees, as it is not a member of the EU or NATO, and Russian control of Transnistria would put it closer to Romania, a NATO member ("What is Transnistria", 2022). Though this scenario is unlikely, Putin does see Moldova as historically a Russian territory, and it may be part of his aspirations to push the West out of Eastern Europe and regain control over former Soviet republics (Lutsevych & Pasha, 2024).

The Russian government seems to be targeting Moldova with disinformation, eroding cohesion, and interfering with its elections (Lutsevych & Pasha, 2024). Russia has threatened to keep Moldova from turning into another "anti-Russia," and Moldova's president has claimed that Moscow planned to use opposition protests and foreign mercenaries to stage a coup (Ibragimova, 2023). Particularly since the war in Ukraine began, Moldova has become a point of potential conflict.

Kazakhstan

Historically, Kazakhstan has been a close ally of Russia, and the two countries share histories, economies, cooperation on security, and a long border (Auyezova, 2022). Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, however, Kazakhstan has signaled its disapproval of the invasion and strayed from Russia on the issue, condemning attempts to annex Ukrainian territory and pledging to strengthen security cooperation with European countries (Auyezova, 2022). Kazakhstan has increasingly been turning to other partners, including China and Turkey (Auyezova, 2022).

Highlighting the increase in distance between Russia and Kazakhstan, during a visit to Russia in November 2023, Kazakhstan's President Tokayev chose to speak first in Kazakh instead of Russian for the first time, and in February 2024, he commented that there would be no doubt about the outcome of Russia's upcoming presidential election, seemingly taking a dig at Putin (Mallinson, 2024).

It is Moscow's intervention that helped Tokayev retain his position in the face of unrest, though; in January 2022, the Russian-led CSTO stopped a coup attempt by family of former President Nursultan Nazarbayev (Mallinson, 2024; Umarov, 2022). While Kazakhstan criticizes Russia's efforts at regional economic integration, the two countries' economies are increasingly intertwined, and Russia and its companies have much control over Kazakhstan's economy (Mallinson, 2024). Kazakhstan remains centralized and autocratic, and some think social unrest will increase as Tokayev's administration fails to enact promised reforms (Mallinson, 2024).

Some think it is possible that Russia may punish Kazakhstan for economic differences its a lack of support since the invasion of Ukraine; Russia could cut off its oil exports through the Caspian Pipeline Consortium or halt critical transfers of food items, and a deleted post by Dmitry Medvedev, former Russian president and current Security Council deputy chair, suggested that it could turn its focus to northern Kazakhstan after Ukraine (Umarov, 2022). Other prominent Russians have made similar suggestions (Stronski, 2022). While any invasion of Kazakhstan is unlikely, especially given Russia's struggle in Ukraine, Moscow will want to keep Kazakhstan as part of its sphere of influence, particularly as it seeks to form relationships with other partners.

Kyrgyzstan

Like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan has deep political and economic ties with Russia, though it does not share a border with it. Since the dissolution of the Soviet

Union, Kyrgyzstan has been considered the most free and democratic of the the Central Asian former Soviet republics and has had a particularly developed civil society (Russell & Cameron, 2023). However, since President Sadyr Japarov took office in January 2021, Kyrgyzstan has experienced democratic backsliding, with crackdowns on independent media, attacks on civil society, and a parliament-weakening referendum (Russell & Cameron, 2023). Its scores have dropped in various freedom and rule of law indexes, and though Kyrgyzstan has expressed disapproval of and even criticized Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Japarov administration has levied bans and fines against anti-war protests and protestors (Russell & Cameron, 2023; Stronski, 2022). These actions were reportedly pressured by Russia (Stronski, 2022). A draft of a recent "foreign agents" law signed by Japarov is almost identical to a Russian law that eviscerated Russian civil society (Russell & Cameron, 2023).

Though many see a broader weakening of Russian influence in Kyrgyzstan, the Japarov administration's apparent friendliness to Russian-style autocracy, view of Russia as a sort of protector, and role in aiding Russia with sanction subversion suggests Russian influence that aligns with its goals of maintaining a sphere of influence in Eurasia (Iskender, 2024).

Consequences of the Problem

While Russian instigation of these flashpoints can have any number of direct consequences, including democratic backsliding, political destabilization, and military conflict, the clearest, worst-case-scenario consequence for Western governments is a conflict that escalates and draws in Western countries, either from spillover onto NATO territory or support for certain countries and communities against aggression by Russia or pro-Russian actors.

Alternatives

For this analysis, policy alternatives more closely resemble alternative strategies than narrow policies, as broader strategies are more useful for multiple countries, leaders, and policymakers. While a policy alternative often carries the connotation of a specific agency policy or legislation, alternative strategies encompass what policymakers can do with the authorities and resources they have already been given. Thus, rather than specific, narrow policy alternatives, the analysis will provide broadly applicable strategy types, each with several options for concrete action. Broad strategies have the advantage of relevance to a wide array of policymakers and groups who will ultimately implement the policy, while providing the opportunity for more specified policies as implementation steps, depending on individual implementers and circumstances. The strategy options analyzed cover all all identified flashpoints where Russian instigation is likely and can be implemented by many different governments and institutions.

The alternative strategies presented are:

1. Encourage multilateral engagement with Russian-led institutions by target countries
2. Assist with domestic political reform and stabilization in target countries
3. Focus on countering disinformation in target countries

Discussion of evidence for potential solutions is included in the following descriptions.

Alternative 1: Encourage Multilateral Engagement

This strategy involves encouraging engagement by target countries with not just Western states and institutions, but also with Russian-led institutions and international organizations, to reduce tensions over influence in post-Soviet states.

Russia has historically projected influence through new regional organizations meant to promote cooperation. These include the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), with member states Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), with member states Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. Political issues have caused the CSTO's security operations to be limited in actual effectiveness, limiting the influence Russia has had over bringing member countries into a sort of security sphere (although it has

been successful in integrating Russian personnel into the relevant supranational bureaucracies) (Cooley, 2017).

This strategy is in opposition to pure competition with the CSTO and EEU and attempts to turn countries away from them. Instead, it advocates encouraging and permitting target countries to have members in and ties with these institutions and their members to reduce tensions (Cooley, 2017). Scholars have found that multilateralism can manage rivalries, lower transaction costs, and foster agreements – all results that can reduce tensions across international relationships (Woods, 2023).

This approach would acknowledge Russia's interests without necessarily allowing it total influence, undermining Russia's efforts to create a sphere of influence in its region according to its self-conception as a great power. This strategy could include signaling by the United States and/or NATO that it would allow, even encourage, allies, partners, and states otherwise of importance to Western liberal democratic priorities to form ties with Russian-led organizations such as the EEU and the CSTO (Cooley, 2017). If the relevant countries are already members of such organizations, other ties can be formed, and the mere signaling of Western openness to the idea could serve the strategy's purpose. This option would ease the pressure for these states to choose either pro-Russian or pro-Western orientation.

Releasing this pressure could not only encourage countries to increase ties with the West as well, in the absence of a perception of binding choice between exclusively Russia or the West, but it could also alleviate Russia's concerns about a lack of pro-Russian governments in its vicinity, which experts see as a driver of Russian foreign policy and intervention (Cooley, 2017). As the greatest security threats in the region often come from instability within, this option offers target countries a sense of security that could open up more Western engagement (Javaid, 2017). In many ways, these countries are increasingly open to collaboration with Western countries and institutions, decreasing the risk to the West of cooperation by target countries with Russia (Javaid, 2017). In fact, some scholarship suggests that independent economic engagement with the EU is necessary for EEU member countries because of the nature of the organization: it has issues with delegated powers vs. member commitments, mixes of current and future commitments, and hugely asymmetrical power relations (Dragneva, Delcour, & Jonavicius, 2017).

This strategy is available to both the United States and institutions such as NATO and the European Union. Initial implementation would likely be limited to public signaling, as Western countries would have no role to play in the formation of links between individual countries and non-Western institutions.

However, if this strategy plays out as expected, Western countries and institutions would then be able to shift to greater prioritization of ties with these countries in order to prevent total Russian dominance in the region. This approach is also applicable to all relevant post-Soviet flashpoints.

Alternative 2: Assist with Domestic Political Reform and Stabilization

Another approach is for Western states and institutions to focus on support for domestic reforms and political stabilization in flashpoint countries. Shoring up institutional defenses in these states to malign activities and external interference, especially from Russia, would help stabilize situations ripe for exploitation by the Russian government and prevent future destabilization that could invite interference.

There is evidence from research on Ukraine that "investing early in a robust civil society is not just an optional 'extra' but fundamental to a society's ability to deter, withstand, and repel the destructive intent of an external aggressor in times of peace and war" (Custer et al., 2023). Thus, it is necessary to monitor civil society health and fortify social resilience to prevent foreign influence and aggression (Custer et al., 2023). Research also suggests that the efficacy of political reform is dependent on differences in administrations and governments across countries; for example, after their color revolutions, reforms took place in Georgia because of its young, Western-educated, and NGO-experienced group of government officials, but not in Ukraine, as its government was largely made up of career politicians who had long been part of the corrupt system (Nasuti, 2016).

Implementation of this strategy would involve actions such as taking appropriate measures to hold corrupt officials and criminals to account according to the law; diplomatically and financially supporting legislation, law enforcement capacity, and political reform that protects against corruption and external influence; sanctioning individuals and companies who violate the law and/or human rights or participate in propaganda campaigns; advocating for the release of political prisoners and cessation of violence; and supporting civil society, among other actions. This would need to be done in a way that both respects the rights and freedom of these countries' residents and limits or avoids perceived security threats to Russia, who might view this involvement as a threat to their influence and double down on intervention. This could be achieved through continued dialogue with the Russian government, making clear that involvement supports the people of the respective countries rather than an interest in expanding NATO or the European Union, etc. It has also been recommended that countries study

how anti-corruption legislation is actually implemented in order to single out ways it can be improved (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2008).

Anti-corruption efforts tend to be most effective in countries with relative political stability, as well as with press freedom and more developed civil societies (Churchill, Agbodohu, & Arhenful, 2013). Thus, these programs may be more effective in countries such as Ukraine, Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova than others. Additionally, NGOs and international NGOs play the most active role in anti-corruption awareness campaigns, suggesting implementation should involve supporting these NGOs (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2008). For example, a successful e-procurement program in Ukraine that has curbed corruption and helped save billions of dollars in public funds was created by civic activists and data experts (Yukins & Kelman, 2022).

This option may only be applicable in some countries where foreign involvement is possible and the government is amenable to cooperation. In some countries, types of reform and involvement may be limited due to the level of government cooperation, current political circumstances, etc. Depending on the implementation plan, it is available to the United States as well as institutions such as NATO and the European Union.

Alternative 3: Focus on Countering Disinformation

A final option is to focus on countering disinformation by the Russian government and support media apparatuses and literacy in the relevant flashpoint countries to prevent information-based influence. Western governments and institutions would provide diplomatic encouragement and resource support for building the infrastructure and strategies necessary to combat pro-Russian information propaganda.

Research has found that media literacy education is effective in limiting the spread of disinformation; those who are media and information literacy-trained are better able to identify accuracy and less likely to share false stories (Adjin-Tettey, 2022). A voluntary security force in Estonia, a former Soviet republic, has found success in educating the public about disinformation; running cyberattack simulations; directly countering harmful narratives; “naming and shaming” individuals and online posts that spread disinformation; and advocating good social media practice (Robbins, 2020). Estonia has also created a Russian-language television channel as an alternative to Russian channels (Robbins, 2020).

Depending on the particular situation and needs, implementation could include the formation of governmental institutions with ties to civil society and research, as well as offices tasked with combating disinformation; publicizing cyberattacks; naming attackers and actors promoting disinformation; supporting local think tanks and civil society organizations in fact checking and investigative journalism that exposes disinformation; developing educational programs for critical thinking and information literacy; developing and supporting cyberattack simulations and coordination; the creation of media sources (including in the Russian language) that provide neutral, fair programming that still reaches pro-Russian populations; mobilizing citizens to counter disinformation; and publicizing threats. Many of these responses have been used in Czechia and Estonia (among other places) and can very likely be adapted to other countries that are targets of Russian influence (Seskuria, 2021).

Implementation will depend on the political space of the given country, the types of Russian disinformation attacks it receives, etc., and should be careful to focus broadly on disinformation, misinformation, and critical thinking broadly to avoid Russian perception of a threat, which could prompt the Russian government to take further action. This strategy is available to the United States as well as institutions such as NATO and the European Union.

Evaluative Criteria

Each of the alternatives will be evaluated by a series of criteria to determine the ultimate recommendation. These criteria are:

1. Effectiveness
2. Cost
3. Appropriateness of targets
4. Feasibility

Effectiveness

Effectiveness will be given a point value between 1 and 3, 1 being relatively ineffective and 3 being relatively effective. The value will be determined by how likely the alternative is to actually curb or prevent Russian interference across flashpoints, based on qualitative literature and expert assessment.

Cost

A cost in dollars for each alternative will be approximated using existing estimations for programs or actions that have already been implemented. This estimate will represent an approximate cost for one program or meeting which falls under the strategy's umbrella. Cost is derived from the costs for specific programs, not all costs associated with implementation that are implicit in governmental and diplomatic operations, as this will vary widely across governments. The estimate is intended to represent the degree of cost that taking implementation steps will involve in order to compare and differentiate between strategies. However, the estimated cost will be general, based on publicly available information, and subject to assumptions, so it should not be taken as an exact cost expectation associated with fully implementing the strategy. The cost criterion is meant to compare alternatives more than it is meant to accurately determine actual cost. The lowest-cost alternative will be given a point value of 3; the middle-cost alternative will be given a point value of 2; and the highest-cost alternative will be given a point value of 1.

Appropriateness of Targets

Appropriateness of targets will be represented by a point value between 1 and 3, 1 indicating that relative likelihood of Russian instigation in the target countries most affected by the strategy is low and 3 indicating that likelihood of Russian instigation in those countries is high. This ranking will be determined by using data on Russian influence of and interaction with each

country, including data on trade, migration, and remittances; whether Russia occupies territory in each country; whether Russia has military bases or troops stationed in each country; and whether the each country's current leadership is relatively pro-Russia or anti-Russia. For the trade data, as it is measured over time, some countries may show increasing ties, others may show decreasing ties, and some ties may have recently remained stable. This will inform an estimation of which countries are most likely to be targeted based on Russia's demonstrated "interest" in that country. Alternative strategies will then be assigned a value by whether and to what extent they are applicable to these prioritized countries. In all, the indicators suggest that Ukraine, Armenia, Belarus, Moldova, and Kazakhstan should perhaps be prioritized by the recommended alternative, as each of these countries stands out in two of the three indicators. See Appendix B for methodology and data used to determine priority target countries.

Feasibility

Feasibility: Feasibility will be measured by ranking each alternative by its potential to be meaningfully implemented by Western governments and institutions without triggering pushback from Russia. This ranking will be based on qualitative analysis of existing sources on previous interventions, current geopolitical and domestic situations, etc.

Analysis

Alternative 1: Encourage Multilateral Engagement

Effectiveness

This alternative receives an effectiveness score of **1**. Though in theory, encouraging regional cooperation should prevent target countries from feeling boxed in and lead to greater cooperation with Western governments in the future, this alternative does not directly combat the potential for Russian instigation, the effects are likely to be smaller, and impact could take much longer to see. Additionally, as is further explained in the *Appropriateness of Targets* section, the countries which this alternative may have some capacity for impact on are also somewhat less likely to be targeted, according to the trade, migration, and remittance data used.

Cost

This alternative is essentially a change in diplomatic stance, and any costs will be a) spread out across entire budgets through different implementation levels and b) different across governments and institutions. Thus, this alternative adds no program-associated costs on top of existing national or organizational budgets.

Cost for implementing this strategy is derived from an estimate of the cost for a United States diplomat to attend one meeting on the subject. This will vary by government or institution but is representative of one way to implement.

The 2024 base pay for FS-1, step 14 (the maximum hourly rate possible for a foreign service officer) is $159,950 (Resources", n.d.). Using the highest pay scale position reflects the maximum possible salary-related cost for an official and avoids underestimation due to varying pay scale level between officials. According to the U.S. Office of Personnel Management, dividing the annual rate of basic pay by 2,087 work hours in a calendar year (this number accounts for year-to-year fluctuations) determines the hourly rate of basic pay ("Computing", n.d.). Thus, the 2024 hourly rate for this pay scale position is $76.64.

As of March 24, 2024, the highest cost of living supplemental for the target countries is 35% for Armenia ("Post", n.d.). This would add $26.82 to the hourly base pay. As of March 24, 2024, the only danger pay supplemental among the target countries is for Ukraine, which is 35% ("Danger", n.d.). This supplemental is not factored in because Ukraine's pivot towards the West in

the past several years, especially since the February 2022 invasion by Russia, makes it an unlikely candidate for cooperation with Russian-led organizations, and this alternative should be implemented in other target countries.

Thus, with the $26.82 cost of living supplemental added, the highest possible hourly cost of labor is $103.464. The cost of labor for target countries other than Armenia would be lower due to the lower cost of living supplemental. Assuming 8 hours of meeting time to cover either an entire work day or several meetings on the subject, the cost of labor for one official would be $827.71. The cost of labor for a team of four officials would be $3,310.84. An in-country foreign service officer would not require travel or lodging expenses. Thus, the maximum possible cost of labor for a team of four foreign service officers to attend 8 hours of meetings to implement this strategy is **$3,310.84**. As this strategy has the lowest cost, it receives a cost point value of **3**.

Appropriateness of Targets

The target appropriateness indicators suggest that Ukraine, Armenia, Belarus, Moldova, and Kazakhstan should be somewhat prioritized.

Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan are already members of both the CSTO and EEU. This means that these countries may be open to further cooperation with non-Western institutions, but also that encouraging this kind of cooperation may not have much effect on their policy. Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova are not members of these organizations and may be open to additional cooperation or membership, but Ukraine's recent turn toward the West and Russia's invasion may indicate that it is not willing to establish ties with Russian-led institutions. The same is true for Moldova, which has been concerned about Russian interference and is potentially susceptible to further Russian military activity in Transnistria. In particular, this strategy targets Armenia and Belarus, because the EU is focusing on integration with these and they are Eurasian Economic Union members (Dragneva, Delcour, & Jonavicius, 2017).

Even taking into consideration Georgia's and Moldova's political factors and history with Russia which might make them more likely targets, this strategy is unlikely to make much headway or convince countries to change elements of their foreign policies. Thus, this alternative receives a target appropriateness score of **1**.

Feasibility

Logistically, this alternative is fairly easy to implement, as it is a change in diplomatic rhetoric and prioritization. It may require changes in travel

schedules, events attended, meeting plans, etc., but these are not abnormal for governments and international institutions.

Politically, however, this alternative is unlikely to be feasible. In Western politics, it will probably end up looking like weakness and a failure to pull countries away from Russian organizations. In political cultures which value cooperation with Western countries and see ties with Russia as a threat, this strategy would likely be viewed less as encouragement for countries to build their own stability using what is available to them and more as a "free pass" for Russian influence. Western leaders are unlikely to implement this strategy at all. Thus, it receives a feasibility score of **1**.

Alternative 2: Assist with Domestic Political Reform and Stabilization

Effectiveness

This alternative receives an effectiveness score of **2**. Not all target countries are likely to be open to foreign involvement, particularly from the West, and particularly in target countries with authoritarian governments, such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In countries with more freedom, more non-governmental organizations, and more residents who may welcome outside assistance with reform, such as Ukraine, Armenia, and Georgia, this strategy is likely to be more effective.

Cost

This strategy's single-program cost is based on several different example programs, averaged to estimate a cost for one related program (or the cost to significantly sustain an existing program).

One model program is a $398,000 allocation of grants to NGOs by the Armenian government, a portion of which was used for anti-corruption public awareness campaigns (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2008). In today's dollars, this would amount to $573,655.49. This value multiplied by 7, the number of countries analyzed, is $4,015,588.43, representing the cost for if this amount of funding was provided across all target countries.
The Central Asia Rule of Law Programme, implemented by the European Commission (the EU), has a total budget of $8.8 million ("Central", 2020). $8 million of this is provided by the EU. It is currently implemented across the five Central Asian countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – so if the budget is spread out evenly,

$1,760,000 goes to each country. Thus, the total budget for seven countries in a similar program would be $12,320,000.

The U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Overseas Prosecutorial Development, Assistance and Training (OPDAT), which assists countries with anti-corruption efforts, anti-money laundering efforts, and countering organized crime, among other efforts, has currently active bilateral programs in two of the target countries (Ukraine and Georgia) (Liedy, n.d.; "Office", 2023; "Worldwide", 2016). This program is funded mostly by the U.S. Department of State (Liedy, n.d.). From FY 2014 to FY 2019, OPDAT received about $363.5 million in obligations (United States Government Accountability Office, 2020). This would be approximately $60,583,333.33 per fiscal year. Because OPDAT has 42 offices (including Washington, D.C. and Puerto Rico), about $1,442,460.32 went to each office ("Worldwide", 2016). Thus, expanding to bilateral programs in the remaining 5 target countries would cost about $7,212,301.60 per fiscal year, excluding setup costs for the offices.

Freedom House's Citizens Speak Small Grants for citizen mobilization to address reform and accountability offers four $10,000 grants, meaning one round of grant funding would cost about $40,000 ("Call", 2021; "Moldova", n.d.). Thus, the total budget for seven countries would be $280,000. This is a good example of a small, relatively inexpensive option.

The USAID Kazakhstan Rule of Law Program (2020-2025) is an example of one large, high-cost program ("Kazakhstan", n.d.; U.S. Mission Kazakhstan, 2020). The budget for this program is about $7 million ("Kazakhstan", n.d.; U.S. Mission Kazakhstan, 2020). Thus, the total budget for seven countries in a similar program would be about $49 million. The single-country budget is used in the average cost for this strategy, as it represents what the cost of one similar program would be.

Finally, a transparent e-procurement system implemented in Ukraine designed to prevent corruption and save public funds cost $35,000 (from first few commercial platform operators) for the development of single database software, then $230,000 (from international donors) for the development of a single database unit, help desk, and project office (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2016). The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development funded e-procurement experts, and private donations and volunteers continue to fund and provide labor for the project (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2016). Thus, the total for setup was $265,000, and the total cost for similar programs in several countries would be $1,855,000.

Each target country has already implemented transparent e-procurement websites, so the solution is not included in potential ways to implement domestic reform, but it is representative of general costs associated with transparency and anti-corruption measures.

The average cost of each of these programs, using the single-country estimate for the USAID Kazakhstan Rule of Law Program, is $5,447,148.34. Thus, an estimated cost for a political reform or anti-corruption program is about **$5.4 million**. As this strategy has the highest cost, it receives a cost point value of **1**.

Cost will vary by implementing government and may be different for varying actions which fall under domestic reform, but these are representative of a few ways to implement. Though these programs differ in composition and time frame, they offer an array of options for implementation of this strategy within a common cost window.

Appropriateness of Targets

The target appropriateness indicators suggest that Ukraine, Armenia, Belarus, Moldova, and Kazakhstan should be somewhat prioritized. This alternative will apply mostly to countries somewhat friendly to Western assistance and more willing to combat corruption, especially Ukraine. This is also likely to include Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova. This strategy may be very effective in Ukraine, which has a higher appetite for freedoms and political reform than others, but is unlikely to be implemented well in Belarus or Kazakhstan. Thus, this alternative receives a target appropriateness score of **1**.

Feasibility

This strategy receives a feasibility score of 2. As evidenced by the Istanbul Anti-Corruption Action Plan, programs to tackle corruption, reform systems, create public awareness of corruption, etc., are feasible in Eastern European and Central Asian countries (“Istanbul”, 2024. According to the IMF, Georgia has had great success with reducing corruption and thus raising tax revenue (Mauro, Medas, & Fournier, 2019).

However, this may be somewhat difficult to implement by Western governments and institutions in particular; target countries will have to also take responsibility for reforms and play a part in program design and funding in order for this strategy to work. Thus, this alternative receives a feasibility score of **2**.

Alternative 3: Focus on Countering Disinformation

Effectiveness

This alternative receives an effectiveness score of **3**. Disinformation is one of the primary instigation and influence methods used by the Russian government, so a strategy focused on disinformation is likely to cover all target countries and directly combat Russian efforts. Target countries have a vested interest in keeping other states out of their information media, and existing programs, such as the mentioned efforts in Czechia and Estonia, have seen success and provide models for new and expanded efforts.

Cost

This strategy's single-program cost is based on several different example programs, averaged to estimate a cost for one related program (or the cost to significantly sustain an existing program).

One model program is a Russian-language television channel launched in 2015 by Estonia's state broadcaster. The annual budget for this channel is about $4.5 million (4 million euros) ("Estonia launches", 2015; Nielsen, 2015; Lucas & Pomeranzev, 2016). Though this may not be directly comparable to efforts in other countries, as state-owned channels would be likely to spread disinformation (Russian or not) in several of the target countries, it represents an estimated cost of establishing new media to provide alternatives to platforms which may spread Russian disinformation.

Another model program is USAID's Georgia Information Integrity Program, launched in 2020 and extending through 2025 ("USAID Launches New", 2020). The budget for this program, which is aimed to build resilience against disinformation and malign influence through mapping sources of disinformation, measuring the impacts of disinformation, disseminating fact-based messaging, and creating new ways to respond to disinformation, is $7.5 million ("USAID Launches Innovative", 2020). This example is representative of large, high-cost programs meant for one target country. The total budget for similar programs in all target countries would be $52.5 million.

Another counter-disinformation program design is grant funding by Western governments for non-governmental organizations. The U.S. Embassy in Belarus has offered $75,000 in grants for programs intended to counter Russian disinformation ("Statement", n.d.). This value multiplied by 7, the number of countries analyzed, is $525,000, representing the cost for if this

amount of funding was provided across all target countries (which is likely, as U.S. Embassies all over the world offer grant funding for NGO programs).

The average cost of each of these programs, using the single-country estimate for the USAID Georgia Information Integrity Program, is $4,175,000. Thus, an estimated cost for a political reform or anti-corruption program is about **$4.2 million**. As this strategy has the second-lowest cost, it received a cost point value of **2**.

Cost will vary by implementing government and may be different for varying actions which fall under domestic reform, but these are representative of a few ways to implement. Though these programs differ in composition and time frame, they offer an array of options for implementation of this strategy within a common cost window.

Appropriateness of Targets

The target appropriateness indicators suggest that Ukraine, Armenia, Belarus, Moldova, and Kazakhstan should be somewhat prioritized. This alternative will apply mostly to countries which are somewhat friendly to Western assistance and more willing to combat disinformation (especially Ukraine). Anti-disinformation efforts are likely to be most effective in target countries with some civil society architecture in place, like Ukraine, Armenia, and Georgia. The strategy may have the most impact in more pro-Russian countries, however, particularly if programs can be designed for implementation from outside the country. Thus, this strategy receives a target appropriateness score of **2**.

Feasibility

This strategy receives a feasibility score of **2**. Models for disinformation programs already exist, and the Western policy space is well aware of and willing to combat the disinformation issue. However, it may be more difficult in some countries than others based on local politics and pro-Russian sentiment, as well as government priorities and the extent of civil society and civic freedoms. Western governments, international institutions, and security apparatuses have historically been aware of and willing to address Russian disinformation influence, and civil society organizations concerned with Russian influence (where present) are likely to be on board with designing and implementing the relevant programming.

Outcomes Matrix

Alternative	Effectiveness	Cost Effectiveness	Appropriateness of Targets	Feasibility	Total
Encourage Multilateral Engagement	1	3	1	1	6
Domestic Political Reform and Stabilization	2	1	1	2	6
Countering Disinformation	3	2	2	2	**9**

Recommendation

Based on these projected outcomes, this analysis recommends a broad focus on countering disinformation. This does not mean that the other recommendations should not be implemented where appropriate, but that based on the indicators analyzed here, a disinformation focus will have the greatest impact and is most likely to be widely and successfully implemented in relation to the other strategies presented.

Implementation

Implementation of an anti-disinformation strategy will involve Western governments and their agencies, the bureaucracies of international institutions such as the EU and NATO, cooperative government agencies of target countries, NGOs in target countries, and international NGOs operating in target countries.

As outlined in the discussion of this strategy, specific program options include:

- Liaising with target country governments, where possible, about disinformation-combatting programs and supporting these programs through funding and advising
- Directly providing grants for anti-disinformation programs
- Seeking out collaboration with non-governmental organizations on program design and research
- Forming government offices and committees tasked with combating and/or raising awareness of disinformation
- Publicizing cyberattacks
- Naming attackers and actors promoting disinformation
- Supporting civil society organizations (both in-country and internationally) in fact-checking and investigative journalism that exposes disinformation
- Developing and funding educational programs for critical thinking and information literacy
- Creating and running cyberattack simulations
- Creating media sources (especially in the Russian language) with neutral, fair programming to provide an alternative to Russian disinformation and propaganda
- Mobilizing citizens to counter disinformation

Where these solutions exist, further investment should be provided to fill implementation gaps and improve effectiveness.

Setbacks may arise during implementation. Some challenges to anticipate include:

- Coordinating with non-governmental organizations where their activities are constrained or under heightened scrutiny by governments
- Coordinating with non-governmental organizations where local populations are skeptical of Western involvement and/or where there are high levels of pro-Russian sentiment

- Engaging with governments that are pro-Russian, authoritarian, or unfriendly to Western involvement
- Avoiding perception of threat by the Russian government (actions explicitly targeting Russian influence could prompt further influence efforts in retaliation)

Conclusion

The problem this report aims to address is the potential for Russian government instigation of several flashpoints in the post-Soviet sphere. These flashpoints, if subjected to Russian influence or exploitation, could ultimately bring Western countries into conflict, potentially with Russia. This report's analysis of three strategy solutions to this problem has determined that a **focus on countering disinformation in the target countries** is the best way to combat Russian interference and prevent escalation.

If implemented, anti-disinformation strategies could help stabilize the target countries, build relationships between these countries and Western states and institutions, contribute to the de-escalation of conflict, and ultimately strengthen the security of the post-Soviet region as well as the countries of the transatlantic alliance.

Appendices

Appendix A: International Organization Member States

European Union Member States

Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden

North Atlantic Treaty Organization Member States

Albania, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Montenegro, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Türkiye, United Kingdom, United States

Collective Security Treaty Organization Member States

Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan

Eurasian Economic Union Member States

Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan

Appendix B: Target Appropriateness Methodology, Data, and Conclusions

Russian Occupation Metric

The occupation metric is based on whether Russia actively occupies some area of the target country. Target countries with areas under Russian occupation are measured as more likely to experience instigation and influence. For the purposes of this analysis, Transnistria is considered to be occupied, as it is internationally considered part of Moldova, which has not sanctioned the presence of Russian troops there.

Country	Occupied	Not Occupied
Ukraine	*	
Armenia		*
Belarus		*
Georgia	*	
Moldova	*	
Kazakhstan		*
Kyrgyzstan		*

Occupied target countries: Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova

Russian Military Base Metric

The military base metric is based on whether Russia has a military base or stations troops in some area of the target country. Target countries with Russian military bases or troops are measured as more likely to experience instigation and influence. For the purpose of this analysis, military bases are those sanctioned by the host country (these do not include bases in occupied territories).

Country	Military Base(s)	No Military Base
Ukraine		*
Armenia	*	
Belarus	*	
Georgia		*
Moldova		*
Kazakhstan	*	
Kyrgyzstan	*	

Target countries with Russian bases: Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan

Leadership Metric

The leadership metric is based on whether the country's current (spring 2024) leadership is relatively pro-Russia/Russia-aligned, or relatively anti-Russia. Target countries with anti-Russia leadership are measured as more likely to experience instigation and influence. For the purposes of this analysis, Armenia's Prime Minister Pashinyan is considered relatively anti-Russia because of tensions between the two governments. Georgia's government is considered relatively pro-Russian because of its increasingly pro-Russian attitudes. The governments of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are considered pro-Russia because of their continued close ties with Moscow despite recent interest in other partners. It is recognized that this is an imperfect metric.

Country	Pro-Russia	Anti-Russia
Ukraine		*
Armenia		*
Belarus	*	
Georgia	*	
Moldova		*
Kazakhstan	*	
Kyrgyzstan	*	

Target countries with anti-Russia leadership: Ukraine, Armenia, Moldova

Trade Data

Trade data is sourced from the World Bank's World Integrated Trade Solution, whose Russian Federation page reports trade balance, exports, and imports between Russia and the selected countries ("Russian Federation", n.d.). The values for exports, imports, trade balance, export partner share, and import partner share were pulled for the years 2011 to 2021, as 2021 is the most recent year for which there is data. The determination was made that ten years, back to 2011, is a wide enough range to cover broad trends but narrow enough to include recent relevant political developments, foreign policy priorities, etc.

Russia stopped reporting detailed trade data after the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, so trends could have changed, but this data is a useful indicator of trends prior. Many experts believe that the invasion and subsequent war have acted as an accelerator for Russian interference.

Ukraine Trade Data

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports from Russia (thousand USD)	$18,064,358.06	$14,815,773.79	$15,215,254.51	$11,346,063.27	$7,163,121.74	$6,654,267.42	$8,355,538.75	$9,521,066.42	$6,619,028.67	$6,310,483.58	$8,128,982.59
Imports to Russia (thousand USD)	$20,000,465.96	$17,955,443.33	$15,790,890.01	$10,714,366.05	$5,642,800.66	$4,095,951.70	$5,226,243.32	$5,463,934.05	$4,845,318.58	$3,694,160.50	$4,155,331.14
Trade Balance (thousand USD)	-$1,936,107.90	-$3,139,669.54	-$575,635.51	$631,697.22	$1,520,321.08	$2,558,315.72	$3,129,295.43	$4,057,132.38	$1,773,710.09	$2,616,323.08	$3,973,651.45
Export Partner Share (%)	3.49	2.82	2.89	2.28	2.08	2.21	2.2	2.11	1.55	1.87	1.65
Import Partner Share (%)	6.53	5.68	5.01	3.74	3.09	1.97	2.01	2.27	1.96	1.59	1.42

Armenia Trade Data

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports from Russia (thousand USD)	$437,128.61	$447,886.82	$468,421.37	$534,840.78	$510,780.04	$1,032,784.46	$1,342,141.32	$1,341,378.20	$1,690,940.52	$1,660,450.30	$1,892,694.60
Imports to Russia (thousand USD)	$183,812.44	$300,710.54	$352,394.59	$314,171.47	$175,831.85	$397,749.13	$536,996.05	$627,045.24	$854,677.82	$646,508.59	$711,561.29
Trade Balance (thousand USD)	$253,316.17	$147,176.28	$116,026.78	$220,669.30	$334,948.19	$635,035.33	$805,145.27	$714,332.97	$836,262.71	$1,013,941.71	$1,181,133.31
Export Partner Share (%)	0.08	0.09	0.09	0.11	0.15	0.34	0.35	0.3	0.4	0.49	0.38
Import Partner Share (%)	0.06	0.1	0.11	0.11	0.1	0.19	0.21	0.26	0.35	0.28	0.24

Belarus Trade Data

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports from Russia (thousand USD)	$24,930,203.40	$21,380,404.71	$16,870,227.72	$16,539,841.09	$12,428,309.69	$14,762,304.90	$20,335,904.87	$22,779,795.97	$21,708,324.44	$15,978,568.13	$23,130,382.72
Imports to Russia (thousand USD)	$14,508,643.10	$12,991,857.14	$13,959,261.78	$12,316,244.01	$7,988,798.96	$10,215,334.48	$13,316,014.21	$12,906,404.97	$13,663,246.68	$12,604,663.87	$15,635,533.47
Trade Balance (thousand USD)	$10,421,560.30	$8,388,547.57	$2,910,965.94	$4,223,597.08	$4,439,510.73	$4,546,970.42	$7,019,890.66	$9,873,391.00	$8,045,077.77	$3,373,904.26	$7,494,849.25
Export Partner Share (%)	4.82	4.07	3.2	3.32	3.61	4.89	5.36	5.05	5.09	4.74	4.7
Import Partner Share (%)	4.74	4.11	4.43	4.3	4.37	4.92	5.12	5.37	5.53	5.44	5.33

Georgia Trade Data

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports from Russia (thousand USD)	$246,992.64	$684,416.06	$831,083.39	$799,474.73	$756,179.59	$654,855.80	$810,731.71	$956,794.39	$882,610.83	$794,644.22	$873,295.99
Imports to Russia (thousand USD)	$38,658.04	$97,961.04	$221,147.32	$335,813.24	$216,770.04	$203,211.50	$38,594,214.00	$398,195.81	$449,446.28	$424,694.74	$567,265.58
Trade Balance (thousand USD)	$208,334.60	$586,455.02	$609,936.08	$463,661.48	$539,409.56	$451,644.30	$424,789.58	$558,598.58	$433,164.55	$369,949.48	$306,030.41
Export Partner Share (%)	0.05	0.13	0.16	0.16	0.22	0.22	0.21	0.21	0.21	0.24	0.18
Import Partner Share (%)	0.01	0.03	0.07	0.12	0.12	0.1	0.15	0.17	0.18	0.18	0.19

Moldova Trade Data

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports from Russia (thousand USD)	$412,514.11	$393,361.82	$417,887.93	$411,178.36	$308,497.97	$946,331.59	$901,009.71	$1,204,617.77	$1,257,172.30	$954,094.79	$1,755,126.70
Imports to Russia (thousand USD)	$468,511.22	$476,954.40	$417,405.65	$311,380.03	$188,538.11	$255,470.33	$358,820.49	$355,547.23	$383,499.72	$353,226.65	$415,899.51
Trade Balance (thousand USD)	-$55,997.11	-$83,592.58	$482.28	$99,798.33	$119,959.85	$690,861.26	$542,189.22	$849,070.54	$873,672.58	$600,868.14	$1,339,227.19
Export Partner Share (%)	0.08	0.07	0.08	0.08	0.09	0.31	0.24	0.27	0.29	0.28	0.36
Import Partner Share (%)	0.15	0.15	0.13	0.11	0.1	0.12	0.14	0.15	0.16	0.15	0.14

Kazakhstan Trade Data

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports from Russia (thousand USD)	$14,173,690.41	$14,892,490.01	$17,218,175.41	$13,862,274.16	$10,301,605.71	$10,727,516.33	$13,844,260.06	$12,923,330.62	$14,286,933.46	$14,051,457.84	$18,493,813.46
Imports to Russia (thousand USD)	$6,912,746.13	$9,409,255.57	$5,664,930.62	$7,172,376.78	$4,275,012.98	$3,710,631.06	$5,093,562.14	$5,295,922.13	$5,710,129.82	$5,054,817.25	$7,132,346.69
Trade Balance (thousand USD)	$7,260,944.28	$5,483,234.44	$11,553,244.79	$6,689,897.38	$6,026,592.73	$7,016,885.27	$8,750,697.92	$7,627,408.49	$8,576,803.64	$8,996,640.59	$11,361,466.77
Export Partner Share (%)	2.74	2.84	3.27	2.78	3	3.55	3.65	2.86	3.35	4.17	3.76
Import Partner Share (%)	2.26	2.98	1.8	2.5	2.34	1.79	1.96	2.2	2.31	2.18	2.43

Kyrgyzstan Trade Data

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports from Russia (thousand USD)	$1,156,416.37	$1,634,061.29	$2,029,443.43	$1,737,661.05	$1,289,412.62	$1,245,849.17	$1,700,141.55	$1,635,408.17	$1,559,457.22	$1,456,872.16	$2,156,018.57
Imports to Russia (thousand USD)	$290,837.88	$195,743.02	$110,128.41	$70,911.84	$61,885.89	$191,165.40	$230,150.12	$248,325.51	$321,864.68	$239,569.12	$348,099.34
Trade Balance (thousand USD)	$865,578.48	$1,438,318.28	$1,919,315.02	$1,666,749.21	$1,227,526.73	$1,054,683.77	$1,469,991.43	$1,387,082.66	$1,237,592.54	$1,217,303.03	$1,807,919.22
Export Partner Share (%)	0.22	0.31	0.38	0.35	0.37	0.41	0.45	0.36	0.37	0.43	0.44
Import Partner Share (%)	0.1	0.06	0.04	0.02	0.03	0.09	0.09	0.1	0.13	0.1	0.12

The trade data used indicates that from 2011 to 2021, trade shares generally increased between Russia and the following countries: Armenia, Belarus for import partner share (Russia importing from Belarus) only, Moldova for export partner share (Russia exporting to Moldova) only, Georgia, Kazakhstan for export partner share (Russia exporting to Kazakhstan) only, and Kyrgyzstan for export partner share (Russia exporting to Kyrgyzstan) only.

Trade shares generally decreased between Russia and the following countries: Ukraine.

Other trade shares did not show a clear pattern or did not change much overall.

This is not clearly conclusive, but it suggests that if Russia values revenue from exports over product received from imports, then Armenia, Moldova, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan may be likely targets for influence or instigation. Given Russia's isolation during the war in Ukraine and sanctions imposed by many Western countries who are not buying Russian goods and resources, export revenue might be prioritized over imports. This assumes that the 2011-2021 trends have held since the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which may not be the case.

Migration Data

Migration data is sourced from the Migration Policy Institute's "Immigrant and Emigrant Populations by Country of Origin and Destination" interactive page, which provides total mid-2020 estimates of immigrant and emigrant populations by country of origin and destination ("Immigrant", 2024). These populations were divided by total population data of the target country, sourced from World Bank Open Data's 2020 estimates, to find percentages of the total population and account for country size ("Population", 2024).

Country	From Russia	To Russia	Population of Country (2020)	% Population from Russia	% Population To Russia
Ukraine	3,331,000	3,268,000	44,132,049	7.55%	7.41%
Armenia	19,000	527,000	2,805,608	0.68%	18.78%
Belarus	672,000	764,000	9,379,952	7.16%	8.15%
Georgia	37,000	450,000	3,722,716	0.99%	12.09%
Moldova	40,000	294,000	2,635,130	1.52%	11.16%
Kazakhstan	2,476,000	2,559,000	18,755,666	13.20%	13.64%
Kyrgyzstan	109,000	591,000	6,579,900	1.66%	8.98%

Emigration from Russia ranking:

1. Ukraine
2. Kazakhstan
3. Belarus
4. Kyrgyzstan
5. Moldova
6. Georgia
7. Armenia

Immigration to Russia ranking:

1. Ukraine
2. Kazakhstan
3. Belarus
4. Kyrgyzstan
5. Armenia
6. Georgia
7. Moldova

The migration data used suggests that Kazakhstan, Ukraine, and Belarus may be a priority for Russia, as they have the largest shares of emigrants from Russia as a percentage of their total populations. Kazakhstan has by far the largest share of Russian migrants, and there is a fairly steep cutoff of Russian emigrant shares after these top three countries.

This conclusion operates under the assumption that Russians living in other countries is more of an indicator for potential influence or flashpoint instigation than people from target countries living in Russia. The Russian government may use Russians or pro-Russian citizens living abroad as a reason for exerting influence or instigating a flashpoint or as a means of influence. Ukraine is the most obvious example of this phenomenon – Kremlin messaging for its invasion is based on "protecting" or fulfilling the wishes of ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking residents living in eastern Ukraine.

Remittance Data

Remittance data is sourced from the Pew Research Center's "Remittance flows worldwide in 2017" interactive page, which provides total 2017 remittances between countries based on World Bank Estimates ("Remittance", 2019).

Country	From Russia	To Russia
Ukraine	$4,043,000,000.00	$2,490,000,000.00
Armenia	$979,000,000.00	$12,000,000.00
Belarus	$545,000,000.00	$495,000,000.00
Georgia	$1,053,000,000.00	$75,000,000.00
Moldova	$533,000,000.00	$160,000,000.00
Kazakhstan	$226,000,000.00	$1,713,000,000.00
Kyrgyzstan	$1,904,000,000.00	$89,000,000.00

Remittances from Russia ranking:

1. Ukraine
2. Kyrgyzstan
3. Georgia
4. Armenia
5. Belarus
6. Moldova
7. Kazakhstan

Remittances to Russia ranking:

1. Ukraine
2. Kazakhstan
3. Belarus
4. Moldova
5. Kyrgyzstan
6. Georgia
7. Armenia

The remittance data used indicates that Ukraine is a likely priority for Russia and should be prioritized by the recommended alternative, as Ukraine ranks highest among the target countries for both receiving remittances from Russia and sending remittances to Russia. As explained in relation to the migration data, remittances received indicate Russians or pro-Russian citizens living abroad, which the Russian government may use as an explanation of or a means of influence. Ukraine is the most obvious example of this phenomenon – Kremlin messaging for its invasion is based on "protecting" or fulfilling the wishes of ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking residents living in eastern Ukraine. If operating under the assumption that Russia receiving remittances from target countries is more of an indicator for potential influence or flashpoint instigation than sending remittances to target countries, then the data indicates that Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Belarus may be the top three target country priorities. There are large gaps in remittance amounts between these three countries, and there is an especially obvious cutoff after Kazakhstan.

Summary

Occupation metric: Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova
Military base metric: Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan
Leadership metric: Ukraine, Armenia, Moldova
Trade data: Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan
Migration data: Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan
Remittance data: Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan

In all, these indicators suggest that **Ukraine, Armenia, Belarus, Moldova, and Kazakhstan** should perhaps be prioritized by the recommended alternative more so than Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, as each of these countries stands out in at least three of the six indicators.

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