**The threat to geopolitical stability posed by ‘compatriot politics’ in Russia’s European near abroad**

Map 1: Russia’s Near Abroad

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**Introduction**

When the Soviet Union was formally dissolved in December 1991, its constituent republics became sovereign states after up to 70 years of Soviet rule, although all had been Tsarist imperial possessions for far longer. Russia itself became a state rather than an empire and, having suffered a geopolitical collapse, its alignment with the West was the expected outcome. As late as 2003, Vladimir Putin himself was credited with effecting a smooth transition from ‘the traditional Western image of Russia as a largely obstructive presence to one where it was a major and above all constructive contributor’.[[1]](#footnote-1) However, by 2008, there were warnings that Russia’s increasingly assertive foreign policy was a threat to European stability, promising even ‘a new Cold War’.[[2]](#footnote-2) The following year, the political atmosphere in the wake of Russia’s war with Georgia was such that one British newspaper suggested that Moscow’s traditional May Day military parade commemorating victory over Germany represented not that war’s end, ‘but Russia’s readiness for a new fight’.[[3]](#footnote-3) Exactly three years later, Putin triumphantly celebrated the annexation of Crimea before a vast crowd in Red Square. The same day, he paid a victorious visit to Sevastopol, declaring that Crimeans had righted a historic wrong by deciding ‘to be together with Russia’.[[4]](#footnote-4) As he spoke, fighting in eastern Ukraine killed at least 20 people as separatists sought to emulate Crimeans with, it appeared, Moscow’s covert assistance. Russian forces were poised on the Ukraine border, threatening direct intervention, and hastily reinforced NATO exercises were taking place in the Baltic States. Russia, it seemed, was revising the 1991 settlement.

This is, perhaps, unsurprising. Russia’s conception of itself was always going to make integration with the West difficult. Boris Yeltsin’s government failed in its attempts to do so, partly because Russia’s political elites were unwilling to embrace the necessary transition but also because the West, distracted by events elsewhere, failed to appreciate the extent of Russia’s post-1991 psychological trauma. For many Russian politicians, becoming part of the West was anathematic given the traditional image of Russia as a great power. Moreover, it would have been seen by proud former servants of the Soviet Union, such as Putin, as a source of shame. Consequently, after 1991, the goal of re-emerging as a superpower gradually came to predominate in Russian politics. Under Putin’s leadership, Russia’s government abandoned any serious attempt to integrate with the West. Indeed, by 2014, it had set itself in opposition to it, not least with the creation of the European Union-competitor organisation the Eurasian Union.

The centrepiece of Russia’s ambition to regain its former power is to restore hegemony over its near abroad, the region comprising the post-Soviet ‘successor states’. The challenge it faces, however, is that the political choice of many of these states, particularly those in Europe, is to align not with Russia, but with the West. Because Moscow finds this unacceptable, it seeks to steer these states back within its orbit. It has at its disposal various means to attempt this, but one of its most potent is what can be called ‘compatriot politics’, through which Russia can present its interference in the affairs of its neighbours as its right and duty as guardian of its ‘compatriots’ abroad. It achieves this by exploiting ethnic or linguistic faultlines unleashed or created in successor states by the dissolution of the USSR, through which it manipulates legacy Russian-speaking populations or creates ‘compatriot’ populations through the extension of Russian citizenship.

This dissertation will examine ‘compatriot politics’, and show how Russia uses it to influence states in its European near abroad (a region comprising Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, the Baltic States and the Southern Caucasus states).[[5]](#footnote-5) It contends that ‘compatriot politics’ represents a threat to European stability because Russia has both the motive and means for its use and, as events in Georgia and Ukraine demonstrated, exploits opportunities when they present themselves. The dissertation is divided into two parts. Part 1 explores Russia’s foreign policy background, why it seeks to revise the order in its near abroad and how its employs ‘compatriot politics’. It will centre on three hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1: Russia seeks to stem Western encroachment in its European near abroad and restore regional hegemony; all post-Soviet states are potentially vulnerable unless they behave in a way that it satisfactory to Moscow.** Russia perceives itself as a global power equal in status to the United States and seeks to re-establish those credentials, especially by halting what it sees as Western encroachment upon its near abroad. In 1991, the Russian Federation’s relationship with the other Soviet republics, which constituted its empire in all but name, changed abruptly from one of domestic to one of foreign relations. But Moscow has appeared unwilling to accept the reality of its former satellites’ independence and regards its right to regional hegemony as incontestable. Consequently, since 1991 Russia has resisted successor states’ engagement with the West, especially with NATO and the EU, even if in the 1990s its ability to do so effectively was compromised. Set against Russia’s conception of its own security, its position is not irrational. Moscow does not believe that NATO or the EU are benign and fears encirclement. It also sees democratic movements in the successor states as constituting unwelcome Western influence and posing direct threats to both its international status and domestic stability. Accordingly, Russia’s principal objective in its near abroad is to prevent states from being drawn out of its zone of normative jurisdiction. This hypothesis contends that this means that any near abroad state is vulnerable to Russia’s ‘new era of muscular intervention’[[6]](#footnote-6) unless its political choices meet the approval of Moscow. Russia aims to keep successor states sufficiently unstable in order to maintain coercive leverage over them, and accomplishing this rests greatly on Moscow’s employment of ‘compatriot politics’.

**Hypothesis 2: ‘compatriot politics’ can be potentially employed throughout the European near abroad because Moscow’s conception of who constitutes a ‘compatriot’ is a deliberately elastic one.** ‘Compatriot politics’ is a highly flexible policy tool which potentially provides Moscow with a pretext for interference in every one of the successor states. The break-up of the Soviet Union left some 25 million ethnic Russians scattered, with various degrees of concentration and suffering varying degrees of discrimination, throughout the near abroad.[[7]](#footnote-7) For many Russians, especially nationalists, the issue is an emotional one because it draws upon Russia’s historic self-identification as the ultimate guarantor of Slavic identity. Notwithstanding that many of the Russian diaspora have assimilated with their new states, Moscow keeps the issue of their welfare alive. It typically presents all Russian-speakers in its near abroad as ‘compatriots’ requiring Russian guardianship, with a subtext that they should look principally to Moscow for protection. The implication that foreign citizens of Russian origin remain essentially Russian is consistent with Moscow’s concept of nationality, which is extremely elastic. Under Russian citizenship laws, almost any Russian-speaker in the near abroad is eligible for citizenship, regardless of the potential infringement of other states’ sovereignty that this implies. Whether Russian-speakers are Russian citizens or not, however, all are considered ‘compatriots’ and a potential *cassus belli* for Russian interference in its neighbours’ affairs. However, in those successor states without obvious ‘compatriot’ populations, Moscow has demonstrated that it can create them through the mass issue of Russian citizenship.

**Hypothesis 3: ‘compatriot politics’ allows Russia to present interference in the sovereign affairs of neighbouring states as both a moral duty and legitimate under international law.** Despite its revisionist objectives, Moscow is unlikely to risk a major confrontation with the West through overtly indefensible violations of international law. The ‘protection’ of Russian ‘compatriots’ provides not only a ready pretext but also a ready defence because, although Moscow decries Western interventions in, for instance, Kosovo and Iraq as breaches of sovereignty in violation of international law, the principle of protecting one’s own citizens in foreign territories is well established. Consequently, ‘compatriot politics’ allows Moscow to construct a legalistically-framed defence of its actions, often borrowing from the language of Western interventions. It claimed that its intervention into the sovereign territory of Georgia was both a right under international law and a moral ‘responsibility to protect’ because it was in defence of Russian citizens against ‘genocide’. For its intervention in Ukraine, it also claimed to be legally defending Russian citizens, but stretched its argument to encompass Russian-speaking ‘compatriots’. These claims give Moscow sufficient benefit of the doubt to deflect unified international sanction and bolster domestic support. Drawing on its long experience of propaganda, Russia also targets both domestic and international audiences with powerful information campaigns that seek to add both legitimacy and substance to its actions.

Together, these elements give Russia the potential to employ ‘compatriot politics’ across the near abroad to achieve similar outcomes as its *de facto* control of Transdniestria in Moldova, its *de facto* sovereignty over Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, and the annexation of Crimea. In Part 2, case studies will examine the last two of these:

**Georgia.** Although the Abkhazia and South Ossetia conflicts originated within Georgia itself, Russia bears much responsibility for their evolution from the moment of Georgian independence. Moscow kept the conflicts ostensibly ‘frozen’ from 1994, using them as part of a strategy to maintain ‘managed instability’ in Georgia in order to ensure its compliance. However, prior to the 2008 Russo-Georgia conflict, Moscow was accused of manufacturing a pretext for direct intervention through the distribution of Russian passports to South Ossetians and Abkhazians, who welcomed the opportunity for disassociation with Georgia but whose ethno-cultural affinity to Russia was tenuous. This was seen as an implicit threat to the West-leaning Georgia against direct action in the regions, and Moscow ultimately justified its intervention and occupation of both territories by claiming it was acting under its legal right and moral duty to protect its own citizens from Georgian aggression. Supporting Russia’s intervention was a robust information campaign which included ultimately discredited allegations of widespread atrocities. The intervention subverted Georgia’s pro-Western ambitions and made a resolution of the conflicts almost impossible.

**Ukraine.** The 2013 Euro-Maidan uprising was to Putin both a shock, because Ukraine is seen by Russia as the most important post-Soviet republic, and a blow to his standing because of his investment in the deposed Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich.Moscow was not directly responsible for the uprising, but it was dismayed by the installation of a pro-Western interim administration which it viewed as illegitimate and denounced as fascist. It seized the opportunity and its highly organised takeover of Crimea was conducted rapidly. Moscow claimed to be legitimately protecting its naval facilities in Sevastopol, its own citizens and Russian-speaking ‘compatriots’. Subsequently, it has encouraged – many claim directly supported – separatists in Eastern Ukraine, again claiming to be acting in the interests of ‘compatriots’. But with the possible exception of Crimea, Russian-Ukrainians were far more ambivalent towards their Russian identity than Moscow claimed. Russia’s use of its own military forces masquerading as indigenous ‘pro-Russian militia’ was supplemented by the staging of dubious referenda and a powerful information campaign employing methods, it seemed, drawn from the Soviet era. The crisis in Ukraine is still unfolding at time of writing, which means that the ‘compatriot politics’ which existed as a potential tool of Russian policy became in February 2014 a real one, and therefore a richer if highly dynamic source of research. A judgement on where to draw an end point – end-June 2014 - has been necessary, even if this element of the dissertation is subject to rapid dating.

‘Compatriot politics’ allowed Russia to manufacture both a pretext and a defence for direct intervention into the sovereign territories of both states. Georgia and Ukraine’s ethno-political problems were not directly created by Russia, but they were encouraged and exploited by Moscow as leverage against both countries. Furthermore, whereas Russia did not directly initiate either Georgia’s offensive against South Ossetia or the Maidan uprising, in both cases it had prepared the ground by nurturing or creating ‘compatriot’ populations, and it seized the opportunities for intervention when they presented themselves.

**PART 1 – MOTIVE AND MEANS**

**Russia’s Foreign Policy context**

The shock of the dissolution of the USSR and the crisis of the early 1990s had profound effects on Russia’s view of both itself and the world. Russia endured ‘one of the greatest economic depressions in peacetime in modern history’.[[8]](#footnote-8) The currency was devalued, unemployment and inflation increased disastrously, and national income and real wages collapsed. Industrial output halved, partly because Russian manufactured goods were obsolescent and partly because Russian industry failed to make the necessary adaptation away from Soviet command economics. There was widespread corruption across government, often synonymous with the organised crime which thrived, free from any effective restraint. The principal effect of a failed attempt to enact an economic liberalisation programme was to enrich fabulously a small number of *oligarkhi*, but few others saw any benefit. Rising poverty and deteriorating welfare and health systems meant that for the first time in decades Russia experienced higher mortality rates, malnutrition and the re-emergence of contagions, including typhus. The Russian government struggled to find an appropriate response because ‘the process of transition from a command system to a free-market economy, from a totalitarian regime to a democratic system of which Russia had little experience, was unprecedented in world history’.[[9]](#footnote-9)

One consequence of the attempt to introduce a Western form of democracy in conditions of economic and social failure was that liberal democracy itself came to represent a discredited model for many Russians.[[10]](#footnote-10) The West was unprepared for Russia’s profoundly changed circumstances and struggled to adapt. For Russians, this seemed something of a betrayal: they perceived that the West was both unwilling and incapable of supporting them in changing to the political, economic and social systems which for decades it had proclaimed were superior. Even the support offered, such as an IMF loan package, was thought to have been largely expropriated or embezzled and its impact was not registered by the majority of Russians.[[11]](#footnote-11) Nostalgia grew for the imperfect but reliable Soviet model. This was especially true by 1998, when a new financial crisis reversed the minor recovery Russia had achieved and left it again reliant on support from the West.

Against this background, the shocks to Russia’s view of its own power and standing in the world were equally profound. Yergin captures the sense of dislocation that many must have felt after 1991:

‘It is hard for a Westerner to imagine what the sudden collapse of the Soviet empire must feel like for a Russian. It is though the entire American sphere of influence in the world had abruptly collapsed, the NATO alliance had disappeared, and the western third of the United States had declared independence … [it] topples all assumptions that Russians grew up with, increases their insecurity, and obliges them to rethink their place in the world and in their own country’.[[12]](#footnote-12)

From its position as a superpower in a bipolar global system, Russia suffered a precipitate geopolitical decline to add to its domestic problems. Moreover, many Russians felt bewilderment at the denigration of Soviet military, economic and cultural achievements,[[13]](#footnote-13) none more so than the former Communist *nomenklatura* of which, significantly, Putin was a member. Yeltsin aspired to regain Russian power, but in the 1990s only Russia’s nuclear weapons and its permanent membership of the UN Security Council gave Russia any tangible influence, although they proved of little actual utility. It was powerless to prevent former Baltic republics and Warsaw Pact satellites from seeking membership of both NATO and the EU, jeopardising what was from Moscow's perspective a vital security buffer. That NATO failed to disband at the conclusion of its Cold War purpose, and indeed claimed a new global security role, were themselves causes of resentment. But its subsequent eastwards expansion was perceived not only as a security threat but also strengthened an old belief amongst many that the West was instinctively hostile to Russia.[[14]](#footnote-14) NATO's declarations that enlargement did not threaten Russia's security did nothing to dispel such concerns, not least because the underlying motivation of many of the applicant states was plainly security against Russia. Indeed, many believed that the principal rationale for NATO’s continued existence was to prolong the containment of Russia. Moscow’s impotence was further exposed by its failure to influence in any meaningful sense NATO interventions against fellow Slavs in the Balkans and Kosovo, the latter the cause of particular anger for Putin. Only within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) could Russia maintain any real influence, though even there it was severely constrained by its economic and political weakness. Moscow was also frustrated that it was largely powerless to influence the fate of most of the estimated 25 million ethnic Russians who in 1991 unexpectedly found themselves in newly-independent states which were celebrating their freedom from Russian rule. These humiliations have not been forgotten in the Kremlin.

Russia’s foreign policy has been traditionally underpinned by the view that international relations is fundamentally a competition between great powers over regions of influence. Its approach has historically been imperial, often messianic and frequently cynical. It has typically pursued pragmatic balance-of-power politics, with national interest, economy and prestige paramount.[[15]](#footnote-15) Russia’s alliances, Tsarist and Soviet, were typically rooted in national interest and expediency. Some were with obvious ideological allies, for instance the 1873 alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary which was motivated by ‘shared anti-liberal and anti-democratic principles and interests’.[[16]](#footnote-16) Others were driven by political necessity, such as the 1812 alliance with Britain, the 1892 Entente with France and the 1939 Nazi-Soviet Pact which brought together two authoritarian but mutually hostile systems. There is also a strand of Russian foreign policy that views other great powers as ‘self-interested and manipulative’, a legacy of a progressive disenchantment with fellow European powers in the period after the Napoleonic wars which saw Russia trade its partnership with Europe ‘for a wary cynicism, an introverted nationalism, and a belief in raw power’.[[17]](#footnote-17) Putin’s foreign and security policies seem to fit comfortably within this historic paradigm: mistrust of other powers tempered with the need to engage with them in order to ensure stability and security. Certainly, his early foreign policy had a strong underpinning of pragmatism.[[18]](#footnote-18) Against some domestic political opposition, the immediate moral support he offered President George Bush after the September 2001 terrorist attacks gained him considerable credit in the US administration, which he was able to leverage to present Russia’s ruthless treatment of the Islamist insurgency in Chechnya as its contribution to the ‘global war on terror’. Conversely, Putin allied with France in opposition to the 2003 Anglo-American invasion of Iraq. But notwithstanding such cooperation with Western states, the strong, underlying strand of Russian policy remained ‘bent on the recovery of [Russia’s] assets, its authority, and its capacity to intimidate’.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Putin’s ultimate objective is to regain the power lost since 1991.[[20]](#footnote-20) His is not the only perspective within Russian society on Russia’s place in the world, but it represents the dominant one in the current political arena. His former membership of the KGB imbued him with a sense that Russia, despite the shocks of the 1990s, was entitled through size, position and history to a global status equal to any other, especially the USA. He famously described the dissolution of the Soviet Union as ‘a major geopolitical disaster’,[[21]](#footnote-21) which he attributed both to weak Russian leadership and to the West’s ruthlessness in exploiting Soviet weakness.[[22]](#footnote-22) He was explicit from the start of his first presidency that his aim was to increase Russia’s power and restore its dignity in the world.[[23]](#footnote-23) In this he drew on support from the *silovoki*, former Soviet military and security officials who he appointed to key positions. They brought with them, it has been claimed, a Soviet mentality and view of the world, a belief that Russia had been humiliated and that its natural greatness and power should be reasserted. Moreover, they view the West as ‘a foe bent on stopping them [and have] a deep-rooted belief that the West is Russia’s natural enemy.’[[24]](#footnote-24) Accordingly, the claim that Russia has been, is and will remain a great power became ‘a mantra for the Russian political leadership under Vladimir Putin and a prominent feature in current Russian foreign policy’.[[25]](#footnote-25) This did not lack popular support. A journalist assessed the mood in Moscow in 2007 as ‘defined by a resentful, intolerant nationalism, driven by a perception that Russia is under siege from hostile forces abroad’.[[26]](#footnote-26) An underpinning element of such nationalism was a mythologised conception of Russian history. This was nothing new: Russians had long been encouraged to view Russia’s story as a heroic one, populated by the hardy, ingenious and long-suffering Russian people whose vast land provided both protection and inspiration.[[27]](#footnote-27) But under Putin’s regime this self-perception was reinforced, and assertive nationalism became mainstream: in 2013, Putin praised the arch-nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovsky as one of the ‘brilliant people in the political arena’.[[28]](#footnote-28)

By the time of Putin’s second term as president, Russia had abandoned its ambition to align with the West and sought a return to its historic role as an independent great power. A stabilised political system and a growing economy, neither of which were available to Yeltsin, allowed Putin and Medvedev to make a more credible bid to reinvigorate Russia’s great power credentials. Moscow’s objectives were redefined: soft dominance in the former Soviet space, equality with the world's principal power centres, particularly the USA, and membership of a new multipolar global order.[[29]](#footnote-29) There is some debate whether the Kremlin has, or indeed is capable of pursuing, a grand strategy to achieve these objectives.[[30]](#footnote-30) Nevertheless, it has articulated its intent. At the 2007 Munich Security Conference, Putin made it clear that the international order, set up after 1991 when Russia was weak, was no longer either valid or accepted.[[31]](#footnote-31) The Kremlin’s 2008 Foreign Policy Concept (FPC)[[32]](#footnote-32) is implicitly anti-Western in sentiment. It expresses opposition to ‘traditional cumbersome military and political alliances’ and highlights what it calls the ‘differences in understanding of a genuine meaning and consequences of the end of the Cold War’. It suggests that ‘global competition is acquiring a civilizational dimension which suggests competition between different value systems’. Furthermore, the West is accused of reacting to the loss of ‘its monopoly in global processes’ through a ‘continued political and psychological policy of "containing" Russia’. Ultimately, the 2008 FPC ‘looks forward’ to the emergence of a ‘new world order’. In other words, NATO and the EU are obsolescent, the Western model is in decline and a new order of values and power is both required and emerging, with Russia a central player. Moscow’s Strategy 2020 paper is even more explicit in its aim to transform ‘the Russian Federation into a world power’.[[33]](#footnote-33)

This, then, is the background to Russia’s approach to its international relations under Putin’s leadership. It is based on a traditional need for security and stability, but is characterised by increasingly blunt opposition to the West and a determination to restore Russia’s superpower credentials. Consequently, under Putin Russia has become progressively more assertive and openly revisionist.[[34]](#footnote-34) That is not to say that there are no dissenting voices in Russia over its ambitions, or whether it actually has the capability to match its rhetoric. Even Russia’s leaders, despite their ‘claims to greatness … at the same time recognise that the country has many problems and weaknesses’’.[[35]](#footnote-35) However, if there is a question whether Russia has the ability to restore itself as a genuine superpower, it undoubtedly seeks to be perceived as one. The centrepiece of this ambition is to restore hegemony over its near abroad, most importantly over the European successor states where Western influence has made the greatest inroads. A range of official Russian government documents published between 2008 and 2010 indicated that one of the principal means of achieving its main goal of becoming a leading state in world affairs was preserving its influence in the post-Soviet region.[[36]](#footnote-36) Consequently, it is in its European near abroad where Russia poses the greatest threat to geopolitical stability.

**Hypothesis 1: Russia seeks to stem Western encroachment in its European near abroad and restore regional hegemony; all post-Soviet states are potentially vulnerable unless they behave in a way that it satisfactory to Moscow.**

The Russian perception of the states in its near abroad is not straightforward. Part of the shock of 1991 was that Moscow’s relationship with the 14 republics which seceded from the USSR and broke away from the Russian Federation changed abruptly from one of domestic to one of foreign relations. But from the moment of the dissolution of the Union, Russia has appeared unwilling to accept the reality of its former satellites’ independence, with senior Russian politicians questioning their fundamental legitimacy.[[37]](#footnote-37) Part of this was a refusal to recognise the reality of the loss of empire, unlike other post-imperial European powers.[[38]](#footnote-38) Russia’s historic roles as the pan-Slav and Orthodox Christian champion, and defender of European civilisation, are national myths and the imperial legacy invokes deep sentiment amongst many Russians, Putin included. But there also remains an enduring sense of superiority over the near abroad. In the self-perception of many Russians, Russia’s ‘sense of national identity and national interests arose in conjunction with its imperial destiny, and was inseparable from it’.[[39]](#footnote-39) Former republics, especially non-Slavic ones, are often viewed as ungrateful beneficiaries of benign, if sometimes necessarily firm, Russian rule. Russia’s approach is perceived by Irakli Menagarishvili, Georgia’s foreign minister under Eduard Shevardnadze, as rooted in an imperial principle that every territory added to the empire was considered Russian; in his view, Moscow is steeped in the historical legacy of Tsarist ‘gathering of Russian lands’.[[40]](#footnote-40) Even Russia’s use of the term ‘near abroad’ implies that the successor states are different from other foreign countries.[[41]](#footnote-41) In his famous Assembly speech of 2005, Putin not only dwelt on the ‘geopolitical disaster’ of the past, he also emphasised that Russia should 'continue its civilising mission on the Eurasian continent … [to] … enrich and strengthen our historic community’.[[42]](#footnote-42) From Moscow’s perspective, Russia’s right to maintain dominance in the near abroad is therefore incontestable. Moreover, the Kremlin has a long tradition of viewing sovereignty as a relative concept, a strand of thinking that believes that great powers have the right to determine how lesser countries act. Indeed, parallels could be drawn between Moscow’s use of force in Georgia and Ukraine and Soviet interventions in Hungary or Czechoslovakia under Brezhnev’s doctrine of limited sovereignty.[[43]](#footnote-43) Furthermore, for Putin’s regime such notions could only have been reinforced by Western interventions from the Balkans to Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, which in Moscow’s eyes set a modern precedent for the undermining of state sovereignty. These considerations, when combined the legacy of the humiliations of the 1990s and ‘Russia's political heritage [as] one of force rather than persuasion, coercion rather than consent’,[[44]](#footnote-44) suggest that it was inevitable that Russia would seek an active, controlling role in its near abroad.

Accordingly, Russia resists the engagement of the successor states with the West wherever it can. Moscow sees Western involvement in its near abroad as a zero-sum process, invariably diminishing its status, relative power and influence.[[45]](#footnote-45) Moscow has repeatedly stated its claim that the West broke a promise not to expand NATO into Eastern Europe,[[46]](#footnote-46) and was dismayed that when NATO did so it failed to pay appropriate attention to Russian concerns even when it encompassed former Soviet republics.[[47]](#footnote-47) Russian hostility to the organisation occasionally bewilders Western leaders, but although Moscow’s reaction can partly be ascribed to wounded pride, it is also entirely consistent with Russia’s pragmatic conception of its own security. Russia’s history is one of imperial expansion, but also of internal instability, outside pressure from neighbouring powers and invasion from both east and west.[[48]](#footnote-48) NATO expansion prompted fears of foreign forces and permanent military bases near Russia’s borders which could eventually be used against its allies in its neighbourhood; the war in Kosovo only strengthened this perception.[[49]](#footnote-49) The 2000 FPC stated that ‘Russia retains its negative attitude towards the expansion of NATO’[[50]](#footnote-50), but at the time Russia lacked the tools to prevent it. However, whereas NATO membership for former Warsaw Pact states was bad enough, the accession of the three Baltic States encroached on former Soviet territory,[[51]](#footnote-51) and in the context of Russia’s 1990s geopolitical losses and wounds to national self-esteem, plans to extend NATO further towards Russia’s historic heartlands in Ukraine, as well as in Georgia, were perceived to represent ‘not only a systemic challenge to Russia's great power aspirations, but an existential threat to Russia's very existence’.[[52]](#footnote-52) Consequently, Moscow is determined to prevent any further expansion. The 2008 FPC restates Russia’s ‘negative attitude’ towards further NATO expansion, ‘notably to the plans of admitting Ukraine and Georgia … as well as to bringing NATO military infrastructure closer to the Russian borders … which violates the principle of equal security [and] leads to new dividing lines in Europe’.[[53]](#footnote-53) The Strategy 2020 paper calls the issue a ‘determining aspect of relations’ between Moscow and NATO.[[54]](#footnote-54)

EU enlargement is also a problem for Moscow. The 2000 FPC highlights the ‘concrete problems [of] an adequate respect for the interests of [Russia] in the process of EU expansion and reform’ and the EU's ‘emerging military-political dimension’.[[55]](#footnote-55) This was clearly a warning to the EU not to expand further eastwards. Even EU association agreements, far short of full membership, are perceived by Moscow to draw states into a single EU space and conversely out of Russia's zone of influence. But Russia also resists the spread of Western norms in general. For instance, the 2003-2004 ‘colour revolutions’ in Georgia and Ukraine were welcomed in the West as representing the spread of democratic culture. But from the Russian perspective they were perceived as a ‘direct threat from western influence which sought to undermine Russia’s return to international affairs and to intervene in its domestic affairs’.[[56]](#footnote-56) Ukraine and Georgia’s West-leaning ambitions exacerbated Russia’s perception of encroachment and encirclement. They were also seen as potentially destabilising. Moscow’s view of the post-Soviet space as a distinct normative jurisdiction was crystallised in Putin’s mind by the colour revolutions, and his imperative was to prevent contagion. The Kremlin drew a clear link between the Orange Revolution protests in Kiev and protests in Russia in 2005 over welfare benefits, which was also accompanied by some Russian officials moving away from Putin’s agenda.[[57]](#footnote-57) Therefore, post-Soviet states have taken on an existential importance in maintaining Russian domestic stability. Moreover, Russian successes in challenging Western influence in its neighbourhood can exert a unifying and potentially distracting effect on much of Russian society, however ephemeral the effect.

Yet Moscow’s intent to maintain dominance over its near abroad did not originate with Putin. Rather, it was articulated soon after the dissolution of the USSR. Prominent members of Yeltsin’s government, most of whom had served as Soviet officials, believed not only that Russia should endeavour to regain its former status, but as a global power - and few argued to the contrary despite the evidence - it was natural that it should do so. There was no suggestion then of reoccupying former Soviet republics, but that they should remain firmly within Russia’s historic sphere of influence.[[58]](#footnote-58) Russia’s foreign minister Yevgeni Primokov’s[[59]](#footnote-59) ‘doctrine’ called for peaceful reassertion of Russia’s influence in the former Soviet area.[[60]](#footnote-60) Moscow’s initial approach was to maintain formal linkage between the Russian Federation and ex-Soviet republics through the CIS. Initially, it was rather ineffective. But in the late 1990s Russia attempted to develop it into a more meaningful organisation, well short of a new USSR but undoubtedly under Russian hegemony in order to ensure the political loyalty of member states, preferential economic opportunities for Russian business and a pre-eminence of Russian language and culture.[[61]](#footnote-61) But it was more than just a means for Moscow to maintain its influence, it also served as an important buffer both to NATO enlargement and, in the south, Islamist radicalisation.[[62]](#footnote-62) The 2000 FPC stated that Russia aims to ‘form a good-neighbour belt along the perimeter of Russia's borders’;[[63]](#footnote-63) it does not specify for the benefit of the neighbours concerned exactly what being ‘good’ entails, but it seems clear that this judgement would be Moscow’s alone to make. In 2002, former Russian foreign minister Andrei Kozyrev[[64]](#footnote-64) told the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe that the former Soviet territory was a 'post-imperial space where Russia has to defend its interests by all available means, including military and economic ones'[[65]](#footnote-65) Furthermore, Putin said in his 2003 Federal Assembly speech that ‘the CIS countries belong to Russia's strategic sphere of influence and are close neighbours, with which it has centuries-long, historic, cultural, economic ties’.[[66]](#footnote-66) There should have been no surprise, therefore, when after the 2008 Russo-Georgia war Medvedev called the region ‘a zone of privileged interests’ for the Russian Federation. Putin’s grand project for his third presidency, announced during the election campaign, was the creation of the Eurasian Union as a counterweight to the EU. It was not the USSR reborn, but there was no question of a truly equal relationship between its members and it was therefore a means for Moscow to cement its influence on successor states and decisively isolate them from the EU and NATO.

The challenge Moscow faces is that many successor states find EU and NATO membership a far more attractive proposition than remaining within the sphere of influence of their former imperial master. This does not, obviously, accord with Moscow’s intent, and well before its interventions in Georgia and Ukraine, Russia’s ‘soft’ influence in its near abroad has been complemented by more coercive policies. Since 1991, Russia’s approach has been to maintain ‘managed instability’ in certain successor states in order to ensure their subservience.[[67]](#footnote-67) Gia Nodia of Ilia State University in Tbilisi believes that it was not, indeed is not, in Russia’s interest to allow the consolidation of strong independent states in its sphere of interest, and that Moscow seeks to keep them weak and undermine their legitimacy by exploiting internal divisions.[[68]](#footnote-68) In particular, it has exploited ethno-territorial conflicts which broke out in former republics as the Soviet Union disintegrated. These conflicts were the product of historic, indigenous tensions which had been both fuelled by Soviet nationality policies and contained by Soviet rule, and were unleashed as the Union broke up. Georgia faced a double separatist conflict in Abkhazia and South Ossetia; Armenia and Azerbaijan fought over Nagorno-Karabakh, and Moldova faced separatist revolt in Transdniestria. In all these conflicts, Russia presented itself as the region’s honest broker, mediating ceasefires and deploying peacekeepers. However, Russia’s role was in reality as a supporter of secessionist forces as part of a concerted effort attempt to maintain influence over its neighbouring states and reassert Russian power.[[69]](#footnote-69) These were precursors to Moscow’s recent, far more assertive approach towards its near abroad. It prefers to influence states through peaceful means to remain within its orbit, but it has shown that it is prepared to coerce them if they are unwilling to do so.

**The states vulnerable to Russian revisionism.**

A brief survey of the European successor states indicates that any is potentially vulnerable to Russian coercion unless its political choices align with the intent of the Kremlin. Belarus, Armenia and to a lesser extent Azerbaijan all currently seem acceptably obliging towards Russia. Alexander Lukashenko’s Belarus, autocratic and reliably pro-Moscow, is a founder member of the Eurasian Union and appears to be precisely where Russia wishes it to be. In the case of Armenia, Russia hasexploited as leverage on Yerevan the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Azerbaijan, a conflict for whose escalation both the Soviet and later Russian governments deserve some of the blame.[[70]](#footnote-70) Interestingly, in a precursor to later events in Ukraine, a principal cause of the initial violence was a declaration of unification with Armenia by the Nagorno-Karabakh parliament after a self-administered referendum; a declaration not recognised by Moscow.[[71]](#footnote-71) In the long term, Armenia was unlikely to prevail over the far richer Azerbaijan without Russian support and this, plus the influence Moscow could exert through its treatment of the large Armenian diaspora in Russia (which was indispensable to Yerevan for the value of its remittances), gave Russia decisive influence. This manifested itself in Russian bases in Armenia, continued membership of the CIS, the absence of any move to join NATO and, in September 2013, renunciation of a proposed EU association agreement, announced by Armenian President Sargsyan after a meeting with Putin in Moscow.[[72]](#footnote-72) Significantly, Russia had recently agreed with Baku a $1 billion arms deal, further pressuring Yerevan to sign the deal lest Russia withdraw its support and leave Armenia to face Azeri forces equipped with weapons Moscow itself had sold them.[[73]](#footnote-73) Azerbaijan under the autocratic President Aliev also seems broadly where Moscow wishes it to be, although the relationship is not without tension. Azerbaijan’s association agreement with the EU[[74]](#footnote-74) may cause some difficulties, although actual EU membership currently seems remote because Azerbaijan’s government is far from a democratic one. However, the implication of Russia’s actions in Ukraine, that borders can be readily revised, has been of concern to Baku, especially as Moscow is satisfied with Armenia’s defection from the EU and probable membership of the Eurasian Union.[[75]](#footnote-75)

However, Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova and the Baltic States are not where Russia wishes them to be (Georgia and Ukraine are considered in detail in Chapter 2). Moldova remains in the CIS but seeks eventual EU membership - what the Moldovan government calls an ‘irreversible strategic objective’[[76]](#footnote-76) - and signed an association agreement in June 2014. However, Moscow has potential leverage through the unresolved conflict in the Moldovan region of Transdniestria, a conflict which originated over fears of Moldovan unification with neighbouring and culturally-connected Romania. Russia’s sponsorship of the Dniestrian separatists played a crucial role in the conflict. Even though the Transdniestrian population is only around a third ethnic Russian, Moscow exploited the perceived threat to the interests of Russian-speakers by encouraging the formation of a separatist movement even before the dissolution of the USSR. It then leveraged the conflict to apply pressure on Moldova whilst supporting the separatists with financial and military aid, and after Moldovan independence the separatists were able to prevail over government forces because of direct support from the Russian army.[[77]](#footnote-77) The conflict has remained ‘frozen’ since, with Moscow offering continued economic and political assistance and maintaining a military presence.[[78]](#footnote-78) There seems little question that Transdniestria could not survive without Russian support, nor that Russia has within its gift the ability to resolve the dispute.[[79]](#footnote-79) But in the light of events in Ukraine, there has been recent speculation that Moscow might move to ‘thaw’ the conflict in order to coerce [Chișinău](ms-appx://wikimediafoundation.wikipedia/wiki/Chi%C8%99in%C4%83u) as it moves closer to the West.

Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia are the only states in the former Soviet space never to have been members of the CIS, and are the only states to be members of both NATO and the EU. They are therefore furthest from Russia’s orbit. Indeed, they are a clear demonstration of how former Soviet republics can slip away from Russia’s influence during a time of weakness, a lesson not lost on the Kremlin. There are a number of areas of tension between Moscow and the three states. Principally, Putin has made no secret of his dislike of their EU and NATO membership, but there is an underlying dispute over the meaning of the states’ independence. In the mind of many Russians, the Baltic region was legitimately occupied as traditional parts of the Russian empire, and voluntarily integrated into the USSR. However, for most Balts of non-Russian background, their states were illegally annexed and occupied following the Nazi-Soviet pact, and occupied again in 1944-45.[[80]](#footnote-80) There remains a legacy of Baltic nationalist sentiment aimed at Russia, not just over forcible integration into the Soviet Union, but also over subsequent Russian immigration; indeed, the essence of post-independence nationalism was ‘anti-Russian and anti-Moscow’.[[81]](#footnote-81) Estonia has a particular significance for Putin because he is said to believe that Estonian collaborators had betrayed his father during the Second World War.[[82]](#footnote-82) Russia is especially sensitive to perceived denigration of the Soviet war effort; in 2007, it was accused of inciting rioting in Tallinn and of mounting cyber-attacks on Estonia following the relocation of the ‘Bronze Soldier’ Soviet war memorial.[[83]](#footnote-83) Moscow also has strategic concerns over the potential isolation of Kaliningrad with its Baltic Fleet facilities. Nevertheless, the Baltic States’ large Russian-speaking minorities are the greatest source of tension. Moscow regularly protests, with some justification, over the treatment of Russian speakers. The 2000 FPC stated that ‘Russia stands for putting … relations [with Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia] onto the track of good neighbourliness and mutual cooperation. An indispensable condition is respect … of Russian interests, including the key question of respect for the rights of the Russian-speaking population’.[[84]](#footnote-84) There are undoubtedly fewer opportunities for Russia to interfere in the affairs of these states because their EU and NATO membership raises the stakes of any confrontation. Yet Moscow appears to keep alive the issue of Russian-speakers as a means of maintaining a foothold in their affairs. It is no coincidence that Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova and the Baltic States, none of which is politically where Moscow wants it, attract far more of Moscow’s attention than those with which it is broadly satisfied.

**Hypothesis 2: ‘compatriot politics’ can be potentially employed throughout the European near abroad because Moscow’s conception of who constitutes a ‘compatriot’ is a deliberately elastic one.**

‘Compatriot politics’ is one of a number of coercive foreign policy tools available to Moscow. Most obviously there is military force. Russia’s nuclear capability is of limited utility in its neighbourhood, although it perhaps has value in deterring the West from an aggressive military response against Moscow’s interventions. Russia’s conventional forces are of overwhelming size compared to those of post-Soviet states, but they remain only part-modernised and their mixed performance in both Chechnya and Georgia was the cause of much consternation in Moscow. Fully modernising them promises to be expensive. The unreformed Russian economy, already strained by the requirement to fund annual increases in overall state spending, might struggle to support Moscow’s ambitious defence reform programme, estimated as representing up to 3% of GDP for new equipment alone.[[85]](#footnote-85) Another tool Russia has is its economic power. Well before his first presidency, Putin identified Russia’s energy resources as a means of both regaining its economic strength and recovering its foreign policy influence.[[86]](#footnote-86) Energy as a form of coercive diplomacy has had twofold utility. First, it has been used against former satellites dependent on its gas supplies, for instance the Baltic States[[87]](#footnote-87) and Ukraine in 2006, 2009 and 2014. Second, Western European countries’ dependencies on Russian energy imports have been leveraged to disrupt a coordinated response to its actions. Through the use of embargos and visa restrictions, Russia has also exploited the economic dependency of successor states on both Russian trade and remittances from diasporas. However, the energy ‘nuclear arsenal’ and economic coercion are proving increasingly counterproductive.[[88]](#footnote-88) Western countries are increasingly wary of their dependency on Russian energy and have sought to diversify their supply; a process accelerated after the Crimea crisis. Former Soviet republics hit by trade sanctions have been impelled to diversify their economies. Georgia, upon which Russia applied energy and export sanctions, was spurred to diversify its energy imports and liberalise its economy.[[89]](#footnote-89) Moldova, for years the subject of trade embargos, threats of energy disruption and threats of sanctions against the large Moldovan diaspora resident in Russia, has also diversified its economy.’[[90]](#footnote-90)

But ‘compatriot politics’ is an alternative policy tool of considerable potency. Russia’s definition of a ‘compatriot’ is extremely broad and largely defined by Moscow, allowing for its self-appointed ‘duty’ to protect them to be extended throughout the near abroad. It allows Russia to remind states of the possibility of its interest in their internal affairs, potentially giving Moscow all it needs for maintaining control over them.[[91]](#footnote-91) It is flexible and can to be adapted to the ethno-linguistic characteristics of a particular state. In Moldova, Ukraine and the Baltic States, where there are significant Russian-speaking populations, Moscow bases its claims on ethno-cultural arguments centring on Russian identity. In Georgia, where ‘compatriot’ populations were created through the mass issue of citizenship, Moscow bases its claim on a legalistically-framed duty to defend Russian citizens. It is also insidious, nurturing or creating ‘compatriot’ populations quietly and without garnering much attention outside of the states concerned. Moreover, ‘compatriot politics’ does not necessarily have to adhere to a complete, formed strategic plan, but can shape an environment so that when opportunities present themselves, they can be seized. Consequently, it has become a core element of Russian strategy in its near abroad.

One of the legacies of Soviet nationality policy was that the dilution of non-Russian republics with Russian settlers, designed to suppress ethno-nationalist feeling, also had the effect of leaving Russian populations ‘behind’ when the USSR dissolved. The break-up of the Union left some 25 million ethnic Russians scattered, with various degrees of concentration, across all the successor states. Consequently, each of the former Soviet republics has some legacy Russian-speaking population, an emotional issue within Russian politics partly because it appeals to Russian self-identification as the pan-Slav champion, and partly because it is a reminder of the failure to preserve the Union in 1991. It was one of the reasons Putin called the collapse of the USSR a ‘geopolitical disaster’ in his 2005 Assembly speech.

In principle, it is no surprise that Russian transnational affinities endured after 1991. Moreover, Moscow has grounds for concern. Legacy Russian-speaking populations had not voluntarily emigrated to another state’s jurisdiction, thereby forsaking their automatic right to protection by their state of origin; they migrated internally within a home state they did not expect to disappear. Most spoke only Russian because that was the USSR’s official language and there was no legal requirement for them to speak any other. Their experience after 1991 must have been disorientating. They were no longer privileged members of Soviet society, as ethnic Russians outside the Russian Federation typically were, but in many cases were now marked out for discrimination by their newly independent fellow-countrymen keen to repay their perceived imperial oppression. Moreover, Russian-speakers in the successor states did not know whether their allegiance was to their new state or to the Russian Federation. In Ukraine, Russian-speakers were granted full citizenship, but in Estonia and Latvia, a requirement for full citizens to speak the indigenous language had the effect of disenfranchising large numbers of ethnic Russians. In Moldova, post-independence language laws requiring Romanian fluency appeared to be aimed specifically against the Russian-speaking elite’.[[92]](#footnote-92) Such treatment unsurprisingly alienated Russian-speakers and angered Moscow. In the early 1990s there were predictions that there would inevitably be conflict over the rights and social position of ethnic Russians living in the near abroad, and Russian nationalists called for the reassertion of Moscow's influence throughout the region.[[93]](#footnote-93)

However, twenty years on, most post-Soviet states now have no legal discrimination against Russian speakers, and a bilingual younger generation has largely assimilated with their home state, with which most principally identify. Even in Latvia, the only remaining state where legal discrimination against the Russian language is in place, the position of ethnic Russians is not as dire as Moscow asserts. Undoubtedly, Russian complaints of the treatment of Latvia’s large ethnic Russian population have some legitimacy. A prohibition on citizenship for non-Latvian speakers, a law designed primarily to protect the Latvian language, renders some, especially older, Russian-speakers as ‘non-citizens’. This ‘democratic deficit’ was criticised in 2006 by OSCE election monitors.[[94]](#footnote-94) As late as 2008, more than a third of a million people remained effectively stateless.[[95]](#footnote-95) But although Russian nationalists often liken the treatment of the Russian-speaking minority to that of black Africans under apartheid,[[96]](#footnote-96) and Moscow periodically issues warnings about their welfare, even in the 1990s very many Russian-speakers were content to be Latvian.[[97]](#footnote-97) They welcomed membership of NATO for the security it brought and the EU for the opportunities it gave them for travel and work. Moreover, Latvia’s Russian-language media do not alwaysfollow Moscow’s line and some knowingly reflect ‘Western’ messages. This gives some indication that Russian-speakers ‘stranded’ after 1991 are not, as Moscow portrays, a monolithic and universally oppressed group, but have a more complex mix of identities, loyalties and preferences.

But if Moscow’s intent is to maintain a controlling influence over its near abroad, it is not in its interest to encourage Russian-speaking minorities to assimilate with their parent society. Under Putin’s leadership, Russia presents all Russian-speakers in these states as ‘compatriots’ requiring Russian oversight of their rights, with a subtext that they should look to Moscow, rather than their own governments, for protection. Undoubtedly some, possibly many, ethnic Russians in the successor states profess loyalty first to Russia. But Moscow seeks to exploit the entire group for its own interests. The 2008 FPC states that the rights of Russian-language populations are ‘of fundamental importance’ to Russia’.[[98]](#footnote-98) Since 1991, Moscow seems to have made little obvious effort to encourage Russian-speakers in successor states to integrate into their home state; instead, it has put pressure on governments to accommodate them. Russia has invested considerable effort to preserve Russian culture in successor states. At a 2007 conference in Moscow to discuss the ‘deteriorating state of Russian’ in the former Soviet Union, Russia’s foreign minister Sergei Lavrov expressed concern over the status of Russian and the restrictions placed on those who spoke it,[[99]](#footnote-99) even though the ultimate welfare of ethnic Russians might have been better promoted by encouraging them to master their own state’s language. But this would not suit Moscow, because the status and treatment of ‘compatriot’ minorities represent a powerful justification for maintaining a close interest in the internal affairs of its neighbours. Even in the Baltic States, now geopolitically part of the West, Moscow maintains strong ‘Kremlin-friendly networks of influence in the cultural, economic and political sectors’ through its links into Russian-speaking minorities.[[100]](#footnote-100)

Moreover, Russia’s concept of nationality is extremely elastic. The 2000 FPC, published shortly into Putin’s first presidency, asserted that Russia would ‘uphold in every possible way the rights and interests of Russian citizens and fellow countrymen abroad. … Practical relations with [CIS member-states] should be structured with due regard for ... the interests of the Russian Federation, including in terms of guarantees of rights of Russian compatriots.’[[101]](#footnote-101) The distinction between citizens, ‘fellow countrymen’ and ‘compatriots’ is not expanded upon but the implication is that it encompasses all Russian-speakers. In the 2008 FPC, Russia pledged to provide ‘comprehensive protection of rights and legitimate interests of Russian citizens and compatriots abroad’; again, this implied that other states’ citizens of Russian origin remained essentially Russian. The Russian Federation Citizenship Law of 2002 already reached beyond Russia’s borders, allowing citizenship for those born in the USSR but who had not accepted citizenship of their own state, as long as they were ‘in command of the Russian language’.[[102]](#footnote-102) However, in February 2014 Putin signed into federal law an amendment which allowed any individual to apply for citizenship ‘if they know Russian and use it in their everyday home and cultural lives, and if they or their direct ancestors permanently lived in the Russian Federation’.[[103]](#footnote-103) In other words, any Russian-speaker in the post-Soviet space with ancestry in Russia – undoubtedly the majority - is eligible for Russian citizenship, regardless of whether they are already citizens of states which have been independent for more than 20 years. Moreover, in most cases they would have to renounce their existing citizenship. Russian state media presented this amendment as part of a campaign to attract qualified professionals into the country, which is hardly unreasonable given Russia’s economic and demographic challenges. But, in light of events in Georgia and Ukraine, this extension of citizenship has the potential to be used for other purposes. Indeed, Russian state media noted that the new law could also allow ethnic Russians in the Baltic States a means of resolving their ‘non-citizen’ status,[[104]](#footnote-104) but did not mention that this risks impinging on the sovereignty of the states concerned. Nor did it note that no country in the non-Baltic near abroad allows dual citizenship, so extending Russian citizenship there would amount to an act of subversion. But even before the 2014 amendment to the citizenship laws, citizenship appears to have been deliberately extended *en masse* within the Russian-speaking minority in Transdniestria,[[105]](#footnote-105) and in February 2014 a bill was passed in the Duma to enable a similar mass issue of passports in Ukraine.[[106]](#footnote-106) Russian citizenship is typically welcomed by recipients. It may afford them the opportunity to work in Russia, travel more freely, resolve ‘non-citizen’ status or receive more generous Russian financial benefits than are available in their home state. Nevertheless, it usually violates the citizenship laws of the states concerned. More importantly, the issue of passports within ethnic Russian minorities allows Russia to create in a neighbouring state a population that is at once both Russian-speaking and Russian by citizenship, a double justification for interest in their affairs. However, not all legacy Russian-speaking populations in successor states are either large or concentrated, and where obvious ‘compatriot’ populations do not exist, Moscow has demonstrated that it can create them. In South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Russian passports, and therefore citizenship, were issued rapidly and *en masse* despite the infringement of Georgian sovereignty it entailed. In all these cases, the ease with which passports seem to have been obtained by their recipients contrasts with apparent difficulty in obtaining citizenship elsewhere. During his annual phone-in in 2013, Putin was challenged to explain why the actor Gerard Depardieu had been able to obtain Russian citizenship almost overnight whilst others ‘end up having to wait many years … and sometimes do not even get citizenship in the end’.[[107]](#footnote-107) It appears, therefore, that the vagueness in Russian citizenship law is deliberate, because it allows Russia to define compatriots extremely broadly, enabling it ‘to turn up the volume where it needs to in a way that is often cynical and calculating’.[[108]](#footnote-108) It is a key element of ‘compatriot politics’.

It seems no coincidence that Russia’s concern for the rights of ‘compatriots’ appears strongest in states whose political choices are disagreeable to Moscow: Georgia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova and Ukraine. Elsewhere, it is largely silent. Nor does it seem coincidental that it is in these states where Russian citizenship seems most freely available. This reinforces the perception that Moscow is more concerned with manipulating neighbouring states than the welfare of Russian ‘compatriots’.

**Hypothesis 3: ‘compatriot politics’ allows Russia to present interference in the sovereign affairs of neighbouring states as both a moral duty and legitimate under international law.**

The ‘protection’ of ‘compatriots’ provides Moscow with not only a ready pretext to interfere in the affairs of near abroad states, but also a ready defence. Although Moscow decried recent Western interventions as breaches of sovereignty in violation of international law, it argues that protecting one’s own citizens in foreign territories constitutes a different situation and is a valid and legal state responsibility. Russia is no stranger to interventions under a legalised framework. Historically, it was to protect co-religionists. In 1768, Russia coerced the Polish leader Stanislas to sign the ‘Perpetual Treaty’ which enshrined the religious rights of a Russian-backed confederation of Protestants and Orthodox Christians, and when civil war broke out after Polish patriots rejected the Russian domination implied by the treaty, Russia intervened to ‘protect’ the confederation.[[109]](#footnote-109) In 1774, the Treaty of Kutchuk Kainarji gave Russia the right to intervene on behalf of Orthodox Christians in the Ottoman Empire, a privilege which Catherine the Great ‘ruthlessly exploited’.[[110]](#footnote-110) Modern ‘compatriot politics’ offers Moscow a not wholly dissimilar framework around which it can construct a defence of its actions. Article 51 of the UN Charter gives states ‘the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence’ against attack.[[111]](#footnote-111) Thompson argues that it has become generally accepted, through the precedence of non-combatant evacuation operations carried out by a number of states in recent years, that this right extends to the protection of nationals abroad through extra-state intervention, as long as there is an imminent threat to nationals, the foreign state is unwilling or unable to protect them, and measures of protection are confined to the nationals concerned.[[112]](#footnote-112) Furthermore, violations of state sovereignty under the ‘responsibility to protect’ principle were legitimised in 2009 by the UN, allowing states to intervene to prevent ‘genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity’.[[113]](#footnote-113) Even though Russia frequently criticised Western nations for undertaking operations under these provisions, Moscow has employed both to legitimise its own interventions, typically using similar language to that used by the West. It claimed that its intervention in Georgia was legitimate because it was to prevent atrocities and genocide against Russian citizens (the recently passportised South Ossetians). In Crimea, Russia stretched the bounds of international law further. It introduced a new concept of protecting Russian-speaking ‘compatriots’, regardless that they were not Russian citizens. But the Kremlin defended strongly its ‘right’ to intervene, notwithstanding that the outcome of its intervention was not just the protection of ‘Russians’ but the annexation of the territory. The Crimea intervention also saw Russia exploit the outcome of a dubious secession referendum, which Moscow argued had further bolstered the legitimacy of its case. But, as the examples of Georgia and Ukraine showed, such appeals to international law helped give Moscow sufficient benefit of the doubt to limit unified international condemnation. Moreover, Russia tends to create legality through its own sovereign legal framework, on the basis that domestic legal authority confers legitimacy; Ukraine is a recent example.[[114]](#footnote-114)

Russia’s attempts to legalise its actions raises concern across the near abroad, including the Baltic States, that Russia could justify intervention anywhere where there are Russian minorities or citizens.[[115]](#footnote-115) Moreover, for successor state governments concerned about Russia’s policy towards them, the Crimea referendum seems to have set an alarming precedent: all a Russian-speaking minority might have to do to attract Russian intervention is hold a unilateral referendum. It is perhaps no coincidence that on the same day Putin visited the newly-annexed Crimea (and as Moldova moved closer to an EU association agreement), Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dimitri Rogozin visited Transdniestria and was presented with a petition for unification with Russia.[[116]](#footnote-116) Moreover, in March 2014, the population of the Russian-speaking Moldovan autonomous region of Gagauzia voted apparently overwhelmingly for integration into the Eurasian Union in an unauthorised, Crimea-inspired referendum.[[117]](#footnote-117)

Russia also defends its actions through belligerent and nationalist information campaigns. Russia has a long history of propaganda, especially during the Soviet era, and members of Putin’s circle understand its methods (Putin recently appointed Dmitry Kiselev, a stridently-nationalist news presenter, to head the newly-created state news service *Russia Segodnya*)*.* There are two elements to Moscow’s information campaigns. The first is a tightly regulated national media output aimed at winning domestic support, often through emotional calls to Russia’s duty to its ‘compatriots’. The second is a global campaign, through international, state-funded media channels such as RT, to add both legitimacy and substance to Moscow’s foreign policy. Western audiences are a particular target.

**CHAPTER 2: OPPORTUNITIES**

**Georgia**.

Map 2: Republic of Georgia.



**Background**.

Georgia, in common with the Caucasus in general, has a population shaped by migration and imperial competition. From the emergence of the first Georgian state, its historic characteristics were internal instability and pressure from more powerful neighbours, each a cause and effect of the other. As the Russian empire expanded southwards in the 18th century, Christian Georgia offered a valuable southern buffer and routes through the Caucasus, and was annexed in 1783.[[118]](#footnote-118) Under Russian imperial rule, Georgians resisted strongly ‘Russification’, which was regarded by Russian administrators as liberation from backwardness but by Georgians as a threat to their language and nationhood.[[119]](#footnote-119) Subsequent Russian efforts to stifle intensifying cultural awareness encouraged national cohesion amongst the historically fractious Georgians, but growing Georgian nationalism also deepened their sense of difference from other ethnic groups and sowed the seeds of future confrontation. Soviet nationality policies were also partially responsible, both institutionalising and promoting ethnic differences within Georgian society. Stalin established a pragmatic federalist structure which aligned administrative boundaries along ‘ethno-territorial’ lines, but this had the effect of promoting a predominantly Georgian identity across most of the republic but a Soviet identity within autonomous regions.[[120]](#footnote-120) The complementary political system led to Georgian domination of government and consequent resentment amongst non-Georgian groups.[[121]](#footnote-121) In autonomous regions, however, the political privileges the system accorded minorities laid the ground for later claims of legitimacy for their separatist aspirations.[[122]](#footnote-122)

As Soviet rule weakened, Georgian nationalism found room to flourish, and the violent suppression by Russian troops of a demonstration in Tbilisi in 1989 unleashed a surge of nationalist anger against the Soviet regime, which for most Georgians was synonymous with Russia. In 1990, Georgia elected the extreme nationalist Zviad Gamsakhurdia and the following year seceded from the USSR under the terms of the Soviet constitution. Subsequently, Georgia faced the challenges of all Soviet republics thrust abruptly out of a command economy, with an inheritance of trade dependency and economic distortions after years of Soviet central planning.[[123]](#footnote-123) Georgia’s fragile political system and unbalanced economy were rapidly exposed, and political and social disputes were given free reign as civil rule disintegrated and powerful mafia-style gangs flourished. A near-collapse in the economy led to a crisis in state finances, inflation, infrastructure deterioration and serious social problems. Georgian nationalism, in its most anti-Russian, anti-minority form was exemplified in the unpredictable Gamsakhurdia, whose damaging and inflammatory policies were matched only by his inability to control the situations they provoked. Through his authoritarianism, incompetence and clumsy handling of Georgia’s minorities, he largely created the environment in which he was violently deposed in December 1992. His successor Shevardnadze inherited dysfunctional civil and state security apparatus, a bankrupt economy and rampant disorder.

Georgia’s autonomous republics were the source of its most serious conflicts and left a deep fissure in the newly-independent state. The removal of constraints on ethno-political tension provided by Soviet rule released not only powerful Georgian nationalist movements, but also in the autonomous regions equally irreconcilable movements seeking independence from Tbilisi. Gamsakhurdia’s ‘Georgianisation’ policies, designed to reduce minorities to the status of ‘guests’ within Georgia, were particularly incendiary and consequently Abkhaz and Ossetian elites sought to exploit the Soviet political structures bequeathed to them to organise formal resistance against the growing threat to their cultural survival. Georgians asserted that because both regions fell within Georgian territory before Russian rule, their ultimate status within the Georgian state was non-negotiable. However, the separatist governments contended that the dissolution of the Soviet Union rendered Georgian sovereignty over them illegitimate.[[124]](#footnote-124) Neither Ossetians nor Abkhaz trusted any Georgian offer of autonomous status and there was little appetite for compromise on either side.

South Ossetia is small, with a 1989 population of around 98,500 which included around 28,000 ethnic Georgians.[[125]](#footnote-125) It was something of an oddity even by Soviet standards, with the North Ossetia-Alania ASSR viewed as the Ossetian homeland,[[126]](#footnote-126) and South Ossetia an autonomous oblast within the Georgian SSR. Georgian independence therefore meant that the two parts were within separate states. Nevertheless, there was little history of strained relations between Georgians and Ossetians prior to 1991, partly because, unlike in Abkhazia, they were mostly co-religionists. However, tensions increased as Soviet control waned, especially over the status of the Ossetian language, and after independence Gamsakhurdia’s government proved entirely hostile, abolishing the Ossetians’ autonomous status and openly calling for their expulsion into North Ossetia. An Ossetian declaration of independence in 1990 and an overwhelming pro-USSR vote in the 1991 All-Union Referendum provoked Georgian outrage, prompting an escalating cycle of clashes and the hardening of resolve. In early 1992, Tbilisi launched an offensive when the Ossetians attempted to join the Russian Federation, but Georgia’s poorly-equipped forces were beaten back by Ossetian fighters bolstered by local Russian troops, probably acting independently.[[127]](#footnote-127) The deployment of a joint Georgian/Russian/Ossetian peacekeeping force under the 1992 Sochi agreement stabilised the situation, but the violence of the brief war had made it far less likely that either side would compromise their demands on the final status of Ossetia.

Although Abkhazia is notionally Muslim, the causes of its conflict had less to do with religion than with political and territorial control. The 10th century principality of *Abkhazeti* covered much of western Georgia, and consequently most Georgians accept Abkhazia’s right to autonomy, but not under any circumstances its independence. However, Abkhazians claim that their status as a separate SSR from 1921-31 is a legal basis for independence. The Georgian relationship with the Abkhaz was always more difficult than with the Ossetians. Under Soviet rule there was resentment over Tbilisi’s perceived failure to recognise Abkhaz culture or promote Abkhazia’s economic development.[[128]](#footnote-128) Georgian migration and the consequent imposition of the Georgian language raised tensions further.[[129]](#footnote-129) Against this background, an environment of political intransigence was created which diminishing Soviet power was increasingly incapable of suppressing. Although the positions taken by the respective governments in 1991, full autonomy within Georgia on one hand and a confederative union of equal status on the other, appeared reasonable, in the atmosphere of the time compromise proved impossible. Sukhumi’s reinstatement of the 1925 constitution in August 1990 was effectively a declaration of independence and outraged Tbilisi’s nationalist government. The nullification of internal borders in Georgia’s declaration of independence further inflamed the situation. When the Georgian defence minister unilaterally dispatched his own paramilitaries into Abkhazia on a flimsy pretext, war broke out. A Moscow-brokered ceasefire failed in the face of ill-disciplined Georgian militias and a defiant Abkhaz government. This confused environment allowed the reappearance of Gamsakhurdia and the spread of conflict into Georgia as his Zviadists attempted to seize control. This gave the Abkhaz and their allies the opportunity to wrest control of Abkhazia almost completely and prompted the flight of some 250,000 Georgian refugees. Only with Russian help was Shevardnadze’s authority restored and the disintegration of Georgia averted, but at the price of membership of the CIS and other concessions. In Abkhazia, Georgian villages were systematically destroyed[[130]](#footnote-130) and the return of Abkhazia’s Georgians was resisted for both political and demographic reasons. The nature of the conflict entrenched mutual mistrust on both sides and made a resolution of the conflict much more difficult.

After Russian intervention, both South Ossetia and Abkhazia remained functionally separate from Georgia, with their own parliaments, economies and security forces. Neither conflict, nor the extreme violence and ethnic hatred which characterised them, was inevitable following independence. But the political dynamic within Georgia and the destabilising involvement of Russia made them more likely. Ultimately, the ‘striving for emancipation from Russia and for stronger Georgian ethnic hegemony over non-Georgian minorities cost Georgia dear’.[[131]](#footnote-131)

**Hypothesis 1: Russia seeks to stem Western encroachment in its European near abroad and restore regional hegemony; all post-Soviet states are potentially vulnerable unless they behave in a way that it satisfactory to Moscow.**

The consistent pressure that Russia has applied on post-independence Georgia originated well before Putin’s accession. Georgia’s enthusiastic secession from the USSR and the uncompromisingly anti-Russian nature of Georgian nationalism infuriated Russian nationalists who had long viewed Georgia, historically one of the Union’s most troublesome republics,[[132]](#footnote-132) with suspicion. Shevardnadze’s foreign minister, Irakli Menagarishvili, says that relations between Georgia and Russia were based from the start on an imperial/colony relationship, and since Georgian independence Russia has attempted periodically to revive a version of imperial rule.[[133]](#footnote-133) Nevertheless, for Moscow strategic interests were at stake which made it particularly sensitive to the situation in Georgia. In an unstable region of conflicted national identities, Russia’s concerns included its own ethnic diaspora, significant commercial investments, an important energy market and insurgent movements across the Georgia-Chechnya border. Moscow may have wished to keep Georgia unstable, but it was dismayed when it threatened to become a fully-fledged failed state because it made pacifying the North Caucasus more difficult.[[134]](#footnote-134) Moreover, Russia was already unhappy that Georgia did not do more to support its counter-insurgency efforts in Chechnya.[[135]](#footnote-135) Abkhazia, with its Black Sea coast, deep-water ports and border with Russia, was especially important to Moscow. More broadly, the loss of controlling influence over Tbilisi risked jeopardising Moscow’s influence within the wider South Caucasus region. Consequently, Georgia suffered ‘the largest amount of Russian interference in its domestic affairs’.[[136]](#footnote-136)

No Georgian president has enjoyed especially favourable relations with Russia. Gamsakhurdia’s nationalism was entirely unacceptable, coming as it did at a time of profound crisis for the Soviet Union. There were suggestions that Russian garrisons in Tbilisi supported the 1992 uprising against him. Shevardnadze was more acceptable. His generally knew how to deal with Russia, and Moscow exerted nothing like the level of pressure on Georgia as it did following the Rose Revolution; however, this was probably also because Georgia was weak and mismanaged, and Russia had control of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.[[137]](#footnote-137) Nevertheless, some in the Russian administration had not forgiven Shevardnadze for his role as Soviet foreign minister in the collapse of the USSR, and claims were made that attempts on his life in 1995 and 1998, though blamed on Zviadists, had Russian sanction and support.[[138]](#footnote-138) In 1998, Georgia accused Moscow of inciting a failed army mutiny and of encouraging Ajarian separatists to ally with the ethnically Armenian region of Samtskhe-Javkaheti, in order to influence negotiations on the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan gas pipeline.[[139]](#footnote-139)

The regions of the Caucasus are particularly vulnerable to ethno-political dispute, and none more so than Georgia. Ethnic disunity was one of the main reasons Russia was originally able to gain a foothold in the region, and Soviet nationality policies reinforced a deep sense that nationality and ethnicity were almost inseparably linked.[[140]](#footnote-140) Consequently, the manipulation of minorities has proved the most effective element of Moscow's policy to maintain influence over Georgia, and Tbilisi has repeatedly accused Moscow of seeking to destabilise Georgia through support for separatist movements. These claims have grounding. From the moment of its independence, Georgia’s legitimacy was questioned from above by Russia and from below by the separatists, and the combination of Russia’s desire to reassert influence over Georgia and the separatists’ aim of breaking from Tbilisi facilitated cooperation between them.[[141]](#footnote-141) In 1991, Georgian and Russian forces in Ossetia came close to open conflict, forestalled only by violence in Tbilisi and urgent negotiations between Shevardnadze and Yeltsin. By 1992, Russian hardliners were advocating Russian citizenship for South Ossetians, a precursor to later events.[[142]](#footnote-142) In the same year, Georgia alleged that Russia permitted armed North Caucasian volunteers to pass unhindered into Abkhazia, and gave military support to the separatists. Indeed, there is evidence that Russian troops in former Soviet bases supported the Abkhazian separatists by concentrating and arming fighters, providing instructors and operating heavy weapons and unmarked aircraft, to decisive effect. It is not clear to what extent Moscow directly controlled events – Moscow’s central authority in the early 1990s was limited - but Shevardnadze suggested at the time that the conflict was in reality one between Georgia and Russia.[[143]](#footnote-143) Irakli Menagarishvili claims that Russian pacification of the conflicts was wholly self-serving, and that in 1992-93 Georgia ‘was under full Russian control’, with no strategic independence, unwilling membership of the CIS, Russian military bases on Georgian soil and, in the separatist regions, the ‘abnormal’ presence of Russian peacekeepers who Tbilisi viewed as anything but impartial.[[144]](#footnote-144) Giorgi Muchaidze, a former Georgian defence ministry official, claims that Moscow ensured its remaining military bases were located where they might prove useful to destabilise Georgia: in Abkhazia, in Samtskhe-Javkaheti, in Ajaria ‘to bolster the power of the pro-Kremlin Ajarian leader’, and in Tbilisi ‘to interfere with Georgian politics’.[[145]](#footnote-145)

Russian strategy towards Georgia has been summed up as having three elements: Moscow claimed the right to intervene in separatist disputes notwithstanding Georgian sovereignty, claimed to be an ‘honest broker’ but refused to accept any compromise which might have yielded a settlement, and installed permanent deployments of ‘peacekeepers’.[[146]](#footnote-146) Russia’s peacekeeping role became ‘a policy instrument in the hands of government officials … [giving] these regions economic, political and military support while acting to preserve a conflicted status quo as a means of leverage in relations with Georgia.[[147]](#footnote-147) Unquestionably, the *de facto* independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia after 1993 depended almost entirely upon Russia,[[148]](#footnote-148) and Georgian offers of autonomy were rejected by the separatist administrations without complaint from the Kremlin. It seems clear that whilst the principal causes of these conflicts originated within Georgia, Russia bore considerable responsibility for their evolution.

It was, however, the accession to Georgia’s presidency of the provocative and nationalistic Mikheil Saakashvili that caused the greatest friction between Tbilisi and Moscow, and ultimately led to war. Russia did not welcome the Rose Revolution, viewing it as an ‘anti-constitutional coup’ fostered by the West.[[149]](#footnote-149) Moscow’s concerns included the revolution’s anti-Russian sentiment, the potential for independent policy, democratic reform and the potential export into Russia of discontent with its own regime. It became especially concerned by the fiercely pro-Western Saakashvili’s NATO and EU aspirations and American economic and military support, the latter putting American troops as part of the ‘war on terror’ in the Caucasus foothills, close to the Russian border. But it was the personal animosity between Putin and Saakashvili that made relations particularly difficult. They began, however, as ‘cordial and constructive’.[[150]](#footnote-150) Eka Tkeshelashvili, a senior government minister under Saakashvili, claims that he initially sought good relations with Russia - his first visit abroad was to Moscow - but he appointed cabinet members against Russian wishes and was thus guilty of ‘not accepting limited sovereignty in return for Russian approval and support’. Georgia’s developing economy and increasing self-confidence was proof, she says, to Russia that Georgia was a sovereign state and therefore fundamentally unacceptable to Moscow.[[151]](#footnote-151) Russia’s responses were energy sanctions, visa restrictions and a trade embargo, but these proved counterproductive. Georgia diversified its economy and energy supply away from Russian dependency, in the process reducing the relative value of diaspora remittances, and redoubled its efforts to join the EU and NATO. Moreover, one of Saakashvili’s centrepiece election pledges was to restore Georgian rule in Ajaria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. He achieved the first, and by achieving the others he would not only have removed a major obstacle to NATO membership, he would also have removed Russia’s direct presence on Georgian soil and therefore Moscow’s most effective remaining means of leverage. Russia understood that Georgia was slipping out of its orbit.

Russia's 2008 war with Georgia was its first against another state in the post-Cold War period and caused a crisis in relations between Russia and the West. Gia Nodia says he predicted in 2006 that war was coming, because Russia had exhausted all other means of coercing Georgia. He expected that Russia would engineer a crisis in Abkhazia but believes its government was not prepared to agree, whilst Ossetians were happy to cooperate because they felt most threatened by Georgian efforts to regain control.[[152]](#footnote-152) One possible reason that Moscow acted when it did was that the 2008 NATO Bucharest summit did not rule out future membership for Georgia. But in the context of Russian policy since 1991, the NATO issue may only have accelerated Moscow’s plan to discipline Georgia, punish the upstart Saakashvili and send a message to other successor states which harboured Westwards aspirations.

That is not, however, to absolve Tbilisi of blame for the commencement of hostilities. Tensions in the region had already been inflamed by Saakashvili’s nationalist rhetoric,[[153]](#footnote-153) and in the days before the war there was provocation on both sides of the South Ossetian border.[[154]](#footnote-154) But the suggestion that Saakashvili took a ‘calculated gamble’ to divert attention from his own authoritarian tendencies[[155]](#footnote-155) is disputed by senior Georgian officials in office at the time.[[156]](#footnote-156) They say that the conflict took Tbilisi by surprise, and that senior cabinet ministers were absent from Tbilisi on routine engagements. They accept that Georgian forces crossed the border first, but claim this was a hastily-planned pre-emptive effort because Russian forces were already advancing from North Ossetia. Russia has repeatedly denied this, claiming that it responded to Georgian movement into South Ossetia. The report of the EU Fact-Finding Commission of the Conflict in Georgia (IIFFMCG) generally supports this claim.[[157]](#footnote-157) Nevertheless, the rapid and overwhelming Russian response indicates some degree of anticipatory planning, with the 58th Army in North Ossetia ready to move after exercising there.[[158]](#footnote-158) One explanation is that Russia’s invasion was planned in principle but opportunistic in execution; the situation was then exploited to achieve long-standing policy aims.[[159]](#footnote-159) Given the history between the two states since 1991, this seems likely.

Russian troops briefly threatened to besiege Tbilisi but ultimately withdrew, having systematically destroyed Georgian military and naval bases within the areas it occupied. Georgian government officials from that time all are certain the Russian objective was regime change, a leaf taken from the 2003 American-led invasion of Iraq, but this objective was abandoned because of the threat of another Chechnya and the mobilisation of world opinion, not least US firmness and a visit to Tbilisi by leaders of Eastern European states in a show of solidarity.[[160]](#footnote-160) Not surprisingly, within Abkhazia and South Ossetia the war was broadly welcomed,[[161]](#footnote-161) but its violence hardened separatist resolve and a resolution of the disputes became even more unlikely when Russia recognised their independence.[[162]](#footnote-162) Moscow’s message to Tbilisi was clear: Russia would not be further defied. Moreover, a message was sent to other successor states that they should take due account of Russia in making their policy decisions (that no CIS state recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia indicates the unease within Russia’s neighbourhood). Some assessed the war to be part of a wider Russian strategy, to demonstrate to the West that it was still a force in international politics and that its regional concerns ‘were more than just empty rhetoric’.[[163]](#footnote-163) One British newspaper called it ‘a proxy war’ between Russia and the West.[[164]](#footnote-164) Another summed up the war’s multiple effects, saying that it ‘reasserts Russia’s hegemony over the Caucasus, assuages the humiliations of the past 20 years, subverts Georgian democracy – and defies and defangs American superpowerdom’.[[165]](#footnote-165)

In terms of control over Georgia, has Moscow succeeded? Eka Tkeshelashvili believes that Moscow is broadly content with where Georgia is now: a fifth of its territory is occupied, it is more politically divided and its resilience against Russian action may now be more restricted.[[166]](#footnote-166) However, Gia Nodia believes that Russia is not yet satisfied, and wants Georgia to be more pro-Russian, weaker, more politically divided and no longer considered a ‘showcase state’ by the West; nevertheless, notwithstanding Georgia’s continuing pro-Western aspirations, he says a more ambivalent and malleable Georgia is generally acceptable.[[167]](#footnote-167) Certainly, the Georgia’s Prime Minister speaks publically of seeking the ‘unique’ position of good relations with Russia whilst still pursuing EU and NATO ambitions.[[168]](#footnote-168) But in March 2014, Russia’s ambassador to NATO reiterated Russia’s absolute opposition to Georgian membership of NATO, saying it would be ‘a huge mistake’, [[169]](#footnote-169) and Georgia’s president warned Georgians to ‘be vigilant’ of Russian interference before the signing of an EU association agreement in June 2014.[[170]](#footnote-170) As for the separatist regions, Vasil Sikharulidze believes that Abkhazia and South Ossetia remain useful to Russia, which can exploit them to undermine Georgian sovereignty, keep Georgia weak and ensure NATO and EU membership ‘remains a dream’.[[171]](#footnote-171) One possible endorsement of this view is that, unlike Crimea, so far South Ossetia has been given no opportunity to unite with their transnational kin in the Russian Federation despite having little prospect of being a viable independent state. As for Abkhazia, its relationship with Moscow is somewhat uneasy. Sukhumi remains committed to full independence and has shown signs of unhappiness at being a Russian protectorate, perceiving that *de facto* occupation has left it more constrained and at the mercy of Russian policy towards Tbilisi. There is also deep concern that Abkhaz cultural and ethnic identity is threatened by Russian domination. Moscow suggested in November 2013, that it seeks to diminish its subsidies and replace it with investment, which led to Abkhazian fears that Russians would take ownership of much of their land, particularly along the coast.[[172]](#footnote-172) In May 2014, in a situation not without irony, increasing nationalist sentiment and resentment of Russian dominance were assessed to have prompted a ‘coup’ that deposed Abkhazia’s pro-Moscow president.[[173]](#footnote-173)

The Georgian case seems therefore to support the hypothesis. Russia's 2008 intervention was a continuation of its policy, enacted from the moment of Georgia’s independence, of imposing itself against Georgian wishes for selfish, but not altogether illogical, geopolitical reasons. Moscow was largely successful until the Rose Revolution, when Georgia moved too close to the West and, equally significantly, the West was poised to move closer to Russia. As a consequence, Georgia made itself vulnerable to direct Russian intervention. Moscow seized an opportunity in August 2008 to coerce Georgia and send a powerful message to Tbilisi, to its near abroad, and to a global audience.

**Hypothesis 2: ‘compatriot politics’ can potentially be employed throughout the European post-Soviet space because Moscow’s conception of who constitutes a ‘compatriot’ is a deliberately elastic one.**

After 1991, Abkhazia and South Ossetia were united in their hostility to the uncompromising nationalism and insensitivity of the new Georgian state, but they pursued different objectives. Abkhazians sense of historic nationhood is strong and they sought outright independence. For Ossetians, the principal goal was unification with their ethnic kin to the north. The situation in both regions, however, was ripe for exploitation by Russia. The conflicts in 1992-93 left them under Moscow’s *de facto* control, free from Georgian rule but economically weak. Their vulnerability allowed Russia to ingratiate itself with the separatists through direct and indirect economic aid, including infrastructure investments and, in April 2008, by lifting an economic embargo imposed in the original ceasefires.[[174]](#footnote-174) Russian companies invested in both regions and Russia’s armed forces equipped the separatists despite their supposed neutrality. But creating a ‘compatriot’ population in Abkhazia and South Ossetia by granting citizenship was undoubtedly the most significant element of Moscow’s policy.

The fractious Caucasus, viewed with suspicion by many Russians and a region where ‘people define themselves principally by ethnicity’, [[175]](#footnote-175) is not an obvious location for willing acceptance of Russian citizenship. Abkhazians and Ossetians are far from ethnically Russian. Many speak some Russian, but they communicate mainly in their indigenous languages. But passportisation was a mutually beneficial move for both Russia and the separatists. For Moscow, it further undermined Tbilisi’s influence in the regions just as Georgia under Saakashvili was finding ways to circumvent its other means of influence. It allowed Russia to pay pensions to Abkhazians and South Ossetians under highly favourable terms not available to citizens in the Russian Federation, and certainly better than those offered by the Georgian state, thus making the offer of citizenship doubly attractive.[[176]](#footnote-176) For Ossetians, Russian citizenship was especially desirable because many wished for incorporation into the Russian Federation, a goal repeatedly expressed by the South Ossetian leadership.[[177]](#footnote-177) Russia also exploited Abkhazian and South Ossetian insecurity. With citizenship came implicit Russian security guarantees, further strengthening the separatist governments, distancing them further from Georgia and towards Russia, and discouraging them from seeking a resolution to the conflict. In a 2004 visit to Moscow, the Ossetian leader Eduard Kokoity said that ‘Russian citizens living in South Ossetia are confident that Russia will provide them with the necessary support’; in return, the Russian Foreign Ministry stated that ‘Russia cannot remain indifferent when it comes to the security of the Russian citizens living in South Ossetia and protecting their rights and interests’.[[178]](#footnote-178) In 2006, Abkhazia’s foreign minister said that Tbilisi’s increasing defence spending and its ‘provocations’ had ‘forced Sukhumi to prepare for potential hostilities’ and that he expected Russia to provide security guarantees because, with the majority of Abkhazians by then holding Russian passports, ‘each state should protect its citizens’.[[179]](#footnote-179) This expectation was not unfounded: in 2007 Russia’s Foreign Minister Lavrov said that Russia was responsible for the residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia because the majority of them held Russian passports and were therefore ‘our citizens’.[[180]](#footnote-180)

Data with regard to the actual extent of passportisation is limited. Nevertheless, media reports give the impression that was both widespread and en-masse. It seems to have begun around 1999, and by early 2005, the Abkhaz leader Sergei Bagapsh claimed that ‘presently, 80-82% of our citizens have Russian passports ... and I think that by the end of this year almost 100% … will have [them]’.[[181]](#footnote-181) During a visit to Moscow in the same year, Kokoity said that South Ossetia ‘is actually already part of the Russian Federation’, because about 95% of population held Russian passports.[[182]](#footnote-182) These claims contrast with the data from the last Soviet census in 1989, in which only 16.4% of those living in Abkhazia and 2.2% of those in South Ossetia identified themselves as ethnically Russian.[[183]](#footnote-183)

Moscow presented the distribution of Russian passports as a human rights obligation to address the recipients’ unresolved international legal status, to enable them to travel abroad and to give them ‘social support’.[[184]](#footnote-184) However, Russia’s claim that it acted on humanitarian grounds is questionable. There seems to have been no obvious Russian concern over the passport issue in the 1990s, when the need for travel out of the separatist regions was just as necessary and only partly addressed by the use of Soviet passports.[[185]](#footnote-185) Gia Nodia rejects Russia’s argument; as he puts it, ‘Putin is pragmatic and not apparently humanitarian’.[[186]](#footnote-186) Irakli Menagarishvili says that passportisation was an approach ‘worked out by the Special Services’, carried out despite strong Georgian objections by the Russian Migration Service which exempted Abkhazians and Ossetians from a revised Russian visa regime for Georgians. [[187]](#footnote-187) Nevertheless, it is far from clear that passportisation was a coordinated Kremlin policy from the start. Bribery or corruption are equally valid explanations and the sclerotic Russian system is unlikely to have facilitated such a planned strategy.[[188]](#footnote-188) But the Kremlin may not have disapproved and made no obvious efforts to stop the issue of passports. In any case, Moscow certainly embraced the citizen population that the passportisation produced, because it increased its *de facto* control of the separatist regions and provided a ready alibi for intervention in 2008.[[189]](#footnote-189) Russia also seemed to take note of the potency of passportisation that was demonstrated in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. There were claims that some Russian units involved in the invasion of Georgia carried with them bundles of blank passports ready to be issued to anyone who wanted one.[[190]](#footnote-190) It may also have led Moscow to employ it as a more deliberate strategy in Ukraine.

The passportisation of its separatist regions, whilst welcome for the recipients themselves, was seen by Tbilisi as an ‘implicit threat’ against direct action in the regions.[[191]](#footnote-191) It was also viewed as illegitimate and illegal, an abrogation of Russia’s peacekeeping and conflict mediation duties. The possession of citizenship is a right under the 1954 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons.[[192]](#footnote-192) But although the regions’ citizens were de facto stateless before they acquired Russian passports, it was because they had rejected Georgian citizenship rather than been denied it, preferring to remain stateless than become Georgians.[[193]](#footnote-193) From Tbilisi’s perspective, passportisation was a politicised act of Russian foreign policy, carried out by the Foreign Ministry (rather than the Interior Ministry as was usual) and using a uniquely simplified procedure. Georgia saw it as challenging its territorial sovereignty and subverting efforts to resolve the disputes Russia was supposed to support. As early as 2003, before the Rose Revolution and its subsequent Saakashvili/Putin animosity, the Georgian envoy to the UN told the UNSC that Russia:

‘continues and even accelerated granting of citizenship en masse to the population of Abkhazia … separatist leaders of Abkhazia frequently state they are citizens of the Russian Federation … [its objective is] exerting effective control over Abkhazia under the pretext of protection of the Russian citizens from the ‘barbaric’ Georgians. I assume there is no need to assess the detrimental effect of this action on the process of the conflict settlement.’[[194]](#footnote-194)

It was obvious that the benefits of the separatists’ relationship with Russia outweighed anything that Georgia could offer short of full independence, and there was a real fear that Moscow was in effect conducting a covert seizure of both regions. In 2006, Saakashvili said that ‘the painful, but factual truth is that these regions are being annexed by … the Russian Federation - which has actively supported their incorporation through a concerted policy of mass distribution of Russian passports - in direct violation of international law’.[[195]](#footnote-195) Some predicted that passportisation afforded Moscow the ready excuse of intervening in their citizens’ interests in any future conflict. In 2008, these predictions proved true.

The passportisation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia has also made some Georgians suspicious that Moscow might employ a similar approach on another of Georgia’s ethno-political faultlines. In particular, they fear that Russia seeks to passportise through its consulate at the Swiss Embassy in Tbilisi the predominantly Armenian region of Samtskhe-Javkaheti, where local tensions reflect both the historically uneven Georgia-Armenia relationship[[196]](#footnote-196) and the legacy of Gamsakhurdia’s policies. Eka Tkeshelashvili claims that Russia is using the attraction of seasonal employment in Russia to lure the residents of a poor region to obtain passports.[[197]](#footnote-197) In the wake of Russia’s action in Ukraine, Georgian media reports warn of a Kremlin plan to better facilitate Armenia’s Eurasian Union membership by establishing a corridor between Russia and Armenia by linking Samtskhe-Javkaheti with South Ossetia; the means, the reports suggest, will be by Russian troops based in Tskhinvali ‘protecting’ passportised Russian citizens.[[198]](#footnote-198) However, whilst it is plausible that Russia is trying to passportise Samtskhe-Javkaheti’s Armenians, subsequent destabilisation could only work if the Armenian government agreed. Although Russia has leverage over it, Yerevan needs good relations with Georgia because it is otherwise isolated, with no diplomatic relations with either Turkey or Azerbaijan.[[199]](#footnote-199) Nevertheless, in light of events in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgian fears of a repeat elsewhere are understandable.

In Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the concept of a Russian ‘compatriot’ was extremely elastic. It was extended to people who were neither ethnically Russian, had ever lived in the Russian Federation, nor necessarily spoke Russian. Under international law they were legally citizens of another state, however much disputed, and Russia infringed Georgia’s sovereignty in offering them its own citizenship. Indeed, the IIFFMCG report concluded that the ‘passportisation’ of Abkhazia and South Ossetia violated international law.[[200]](#footnote-200) Unquestionably, Russian citizenship resolved for its recipients difficulties in travelling abroad and provided the regions with both economic support and security. But it also gave Russia a justification for maintaining control over them and ultimately conducting what amounted to an annexation of the territories in 2008. Citizenship became a means of coercion, allowing Moscow, in effect, to expand its *de facto* territories beyond its *de jure* borders. The case of Georgia indicates that, because the dissolution of the USSR left so many intractable ethno-political disputes, ‘compatriot politics’ can be employed even in successor states where few obvious Russian compatriots live.

**Hypothesis 3: ‘compatriot politics’ allows Russia to present interference in the sovereign affairs of neighbouring states as both a moral duty and legitimate under international law.**

Russia has consistently defended its actions in Georgia by presenting them as legitimate under international law. In the initial conflicts in the early 1990s, Moscow portrayed itself as a neutral mediator, offering peacekeeping forces and contributing to UN observer missions. It regularly denied that the passportisation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was anything other than addressing an urgent humanitarian obligation, despite the recipients having been offered citizenship of their *de jure* state. Moreover, when Russia blockaded Georgia in 2006, Moscow defended its exemption of two regions despite their legal status as a part of Georgian territory.[[201]](#footnote-201)

But Russia’s greatest challenge, partly because it attracted so much international attention, was to defend its 2008 invasion. Moscow offered three principal, mutually supporting justifications. The first was the protection of Russia’s own peacekeeping force, the second was the protection of Russian citizens and the third was the prevention of ‘atrocities and genocide’. Of these, only the first appears legitimate, albeit that Georgia had long contended that the peacekeepers were highly partial. The others remain dubious. Moscow claimed its intervention was valid under Article 51 of the UN Charter, arguing that it had a duty to protect against Georgian aggression ‘the life and dignity of Russian citizens wherever they are’.[[202]](#footnote-202) In a letter to the UNSC, Russia’s ambassador Vitaly Churkin stated that:

‘we are dealing with the illegal use of military force against the Russian Federation … [Russia] had no choice but to use its inherent right to self-defence enshrined in Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations … to protect the Russian peacekeeping contingent and citizens of the Russian Federation from the illegal actions of the Georgian side and to prevent future armed attacks against them.’[[203]](#footnote-203)

Furthermore, Russia’s foreign minister Sergei Lavrov referred to the UN’s ‘responsibility to protect’ principle, implying that Russia was obligated to defend South Ossetians from Georgian-perpetrated ‘genocide’.[[204]](#footnote-204)

The problem with these claims is that Russia created its citizen population in South Ossetia through its issue of passports in violation of Georgia’s sovereignty and, moreover, was hardly a neutral party to the circumstances in which they became endangered. Evidence for a humanitarian crisis is also scant. Despite Moscow’s original claims of genocide and thousands of civilians killed, Russian officials subsequently told the IIFMCG that 162 South Ossetian civilians had been killed, and the IIFMCG report concluded that ‘allegations of genocide committed by the Georgian side in the … conflict and its aftermath are neither founded in law nor substantiated by factual evidence’.[[205]](#footnote-205) Indeed, there was more evidence of atrocities perpetrated by Ossetian militiamen who trailed in the wake of the advancing Russians. A report by the NGO Human Rights Watch accused Russia of failing ‘overwhelmingly’ in its duty under international humanitarian law as an ‘occupying power … [by] allowing South Ossetian forces, including volunteer militias, to engage in wanton and widescale pillage and burning of Georgian homes and to kill, beat, rape, and threaten civilians’.[[206]](#footnote-206) Moreover, the scale and intensity of the Russian operation went far beyond the direct protection of those allegedly under threat. No Russian citizen or anyone else was directly threatened outside South Ossetia, therefore neither Article 51 nor the ‘responsibility to protect’ could logically be extended to the occupation of Abkhazia or to the invasion of Georgia proper. Indeed, the IIFMCG report concluded that ‘Russian military action outside South Ossetia was essentially conducted in violation of international law’.[[207]](#footnote-207) Furthermore, Moscow’s defence of its recognition of Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence was contradictory, citing Kosovan independence as a precedent even though Moscow had strongly opposed it. In fact, it is perhaps no coincidence that much of Moscow’s language seemed borrowed from Western interventions, not least in the Balkans. Judgements on the legality of Moscow’s invasion made by Russia’s Constitutional Court were also used as part of its defence, but such self-authorisation of its activity did not make it any more valid in respect to international law. [[208]](#footnote-208) Littlefield contrasts Medvedev’s references to a humanitarian catastrophe and universal norms of behaviour with Moscow’s ‘different position on the well-being of foreigners and non-russkii Russian citizens’ within the Russian Federation, where Russian citizens in Chechnya are killed in large numbers and where others elsewhere are victims of xenophobia and the denial of human rights.[[209]](#footnote-209) Nevertheless, ‘compatriot politics’ allowed Moscow to construct a legalistically–framed defence of its actions in Georgia. Its appeals to international law and comparisons with contentious Western interventions seemed sufficient to dilute the international response to its actions.[[210]](#footnote-210) Without the existence of a ‘compatriot’ population in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, it is difficult to see how it might have been so successful in constructing such a justification for an invasion of a neighbouring state and the *de facto* seizure of around a fifth of its territory.

The military action was complimented by an orchestrated influence campaign. Within hours of the commencement of fighting, Putin and Medvedev made a series of extraordinary allegations, both speaking in vivid language of atrocities supposedly committed by Georgian troops. Russia's ambassador to Georgia was quoted as saying that due to the Georgian offensive Tskhinvali ‘no longer exists; it is gone.’[[211]](#footnote-211) One official Russian press statement later claimed that ‘South Ossetia was subjected to genocide … slaughter and mass expulsion’.[[212]](#footnote-212) The fact that evidence for these allegations remains virtually non-existent is perhaps not the point. Even if the propaganda was exaggerated, if Russia’s objective was to make the situation seem confused and sow seeds of doubt to slow the Western response, it appears to have been successful. Gia Nodia says that Moscow aims to ‘get in first with the global audience’ to deflect attention from its own violations of international law by copying the language of Western humanitarian interventions, such as references to genocide or atrocities, and by pointing to alleged Western double standards. Russian propaganda, he claims, keeps as close as possible to Western norms, for instance that Russia had halted genocide just as the West claimed it had in Kosovo. [[213]](#footnote-213) Indeed, Medvedev borrowed directly from the West when he described the situation as ‘Russia’s 9/11’,[[214]](#footnote-214) despite the distinct lack of similarities. Vasil Sikharulidze gives credit to President Bush, because after 9 August no Russian claims were taken seriously in Washington.[[215]](#footnote-215) But by then the Russian advance had taken it well into South Ossetia. The Russian information campaign also served its own domestic audience, where there was genuine popular support for the Russian action and virtually complete domestic political approval. Although the campaign drew upon historic mistrust of Georgians, and on Russians’ dislike of Saakashvili, the existence of a Russian citizen population allowed for a much more emotional appeal: the defence of ‘compatriots’ against intolerable Georgian aggression.

**Ukraine**

Map 3: Ukraine.



**Background**.

The strategic importance of Ukraine to Russia should not be underestimated, nor should its emotional attachment, especially towards Crimea. One of Europe's largest states, Ukraine holds a special place in the Russian national imagination. The wellspring of the original Rus and one of early modern Europe’s most powerful states, it laid the foundation for Ukrainian and Russian national self-identity and deep historic, economic and social connections exist between Russia and Ukraine. Over several centuries, Imperial Russia expended considerable energy reconquering the territory of Ukraine from, variously, Lithuanian, Polish and Ottoman rule. Russian migration into Eastern Ukraine followed Russia’s annexation of Crimea from the Ottoman Turks in 1783 after Catherine the Great sent troops to intervene in a civil war. Catherine’s intervention was ‘part of a much broader ‘Greek Project’ to capture Constantinople and restore Orthodox supremacy’,[[216]](#footnote-216) and is still celebrated in Russia as a military and diplomatic triumph, retaining totemic status in Russia’s part-mythologized conception of its history. Ethnic Russians settled in the east of the country, most well before the twentieth century and not, as elsewhere, under Soviet nationality policies. They can therefore be viewed as natives rather than immigrants.[[217]](#footnote-217) The ethno-linguistic composition of the west, however, reflects that it was once part of Poland and then Austria-Hungary until it was annexed by Stalin as part of the 1939 non-aggression pact with Germany. Ukraine endured a devastating civil war following the First World War and was violently contested during the Second, during which some Ukrainians supported the German occupation. The country became independent in 1991 following a referendum in which 90% of the population voted for independence. However, unlike elsewhere, Ukraine ‘never fought for its sovereignty and did not use its new powers of self-determination to turn itself into a modern state’.[[218]](#footnote-218) Though one of the USSR’s principal industrial and agricultural republics, it did not fulfil its economic potential. Although Kiev was recognised by all as the capital, divisions endured between the Russian-speaking, industrialised east and the more nationalist-minded west. Nevertheless, a number of observers are certain that the majority of Ukrainians, no matter in which part of the country they live or whether or not they speak Russian, are proud to be Ukrainian and wish to retain that identity.[[219]](#footnote-219)

Crimea is to some extent a special case. It is geographically distinct, has a proportionately large Russian population[[220]](#footnote-220) and its history stands it apart from the rest of Ukraine. Many Russians, not just nationalists, place great importance on what it represents for their sense of identity and have long contested both the legitimacy and the morality of Nikita Khrushchev's decision in 1954 to grant the peninsula to Ukraine. Many in the Russian leadership recall with nostalgia Crimea’s Soviet past as a holiday destination for the Soviet elite, but it also has more practical significance. The Black Sea fleet had been based in Sevastopol since Imperial times and Crimea has untapped hydrocarbon deposits. Undoubtedly, the sentiment that Crimea should be ‘returned’ to Russia was a strong one. It was not, however, an obvious location for serious ethnic violence. Crimean Russians were afforded broadly inclusive institutions, a high degree of autonomy and cooperation by Kiev and Moscow in settling disputes; moreover, there was no persecution of Russian-speakers.[[221]](#footnote-221) There were nevertheless some tensions. Like the rest of Ukraine, Crimea voted for independence in 1991, but in early 1992, when the Ukrainian government unilaterally downgraded Crimea’s status by amending a previous agreement, the Crimean parliament held a referendum proposing that the 1954 transfer of Crimea from Russia be nullified. Despite efforts by a repentant Kiev to address the problem, Crimea was declared independence. This challenge was later resolved and there were no further attempts at secession before 2014, but tension between Kiev and Crimea endured. Crimean Russians retained their strong sense of identity and remained politically organised, regularly mobilising to protest for cultural and language rights, greater autonomy, and against improved rights for Crimean Tatars.[[222]](#footnote-222) The Minorities at Risk dataset drew a distinction between Russians elsewhere in Ukraine and Crimean Russians, who they assessed as exhibiting higher indicators for potential rebellion. It also noted, however, the region’s high degree of autonomy and that ‘Crimean Russians are subject to no state repression and very little societal discrimination’.[[223]](#footnote-223) However, Crimea remained a particular focus for Moscow, which issued periodical warnings that the rights of Russian-speakers were under threat, and the issue of Ukrainian territorial integrity was regularly tied to good relations with Russia. Well before 2014, it was noted that Crimea could become the target of more active Russian interference. A former senior FCO official recalls speaking to Russian officials who described Crimea has ‘ours … a historic wrong that will be righted’.[[224]](#footnote-224)

**Hypothesis 1: Russia seeks to stem Western encroachment in its European near abroad and restore regional hegemony; all post-Soviet states are potentially vulnerable unless they behave in a way that it satisfactory to Moscow.**

In common with its approach to other successor states, Russia has attempted to exert influence on Ukraine since its independence. But Ukraine is seen differently from other former Soviet republics. If the near abroad is the most important region in the world for most Russians, then Ukraine is unquestionably the most important country in that region.[[225]](#footnote-225) Indeed, for them, it is not really ‘abroad’ at all. It is perceived as being part of the Russian heartland rather than a former imperial possession, and many Russians find it difficult to perceive it as wholly independent.[[226]](#footnote-226) Putin, like many others in the Russian leadership since 1991 and in common with Russian nationalists, never came to terms with Ukraine’s sovereignty, seeing the country ‘as a non-state which ultimately belongs to Russia’.[[227]](#footnote-227) Thus there is greater resentment amongst nationalists of Ukraine’s independence and the part it played in the break-up of the Soviet Union. The ‘disaster’ of 1991 is crystallised in the existence of a sovereign Ukraine.

Consequently, when post-Orange Revolution Ukraine began to express EU and NATO ambitions, they were much more alarming to Moscow than Georgia’s had been. Ukraine is closer, bigger, strategically more important, more Russian and far more significant in terms of sentimental attachment. NATO and the EU would encroach into Russia’s historic heartlands to an extent that was entirely unacceptable to Moscow. Moreover, the Orange Revolution posed a greater challenge to Putin’s increasingly authoritarian model of government than the Rose Revolution did in more remote Georgia. Consequently, Russia increased significantly its pressure on Ukraine. It was helped by the fact that popular support for the Orange Revolution was not nearly as overwhelming as had been for Georgia’s Rose Revolution the previous year, with many Russian-speakers unhappy with the outcome.[[228]](#footnote-228) Russian politicians in the Duma increasingly insisted that Ukraine’s Russian-speaking minority was suffering persecution by being depriving of language and cultural rights, even though the actual evidence of such ‘outrageous violations of human rights’ was minimal and most Ukrainians managed to communicate in some combination of both languages.[[229]](#footnote-229)

Even after Victor Yanukovich had been restored as president in 2010, Moscow seemed to feel it had to maintain pressure on Kiev. It was evident to the Kremlin that Yanukovich was pulled between his own impulse to keep close to Russia and eventually join the Eurasian Union, and the desire of many Ukrainians, including many Russian-speakers, for closer ties with the West. For Putin, Ukrainian membership of the Eurasian Union is an issue of great importance, because the new organisation is arguably only truly viable if its core membership includes Ukraine alongside founder members Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan.[[230]](#footnote-230) It was inevitable, therefore, that when Kiev began to discuss an association agreement with the EU, Moscow would increase its pressure even further. Although Putin said in 2013 that he would respect whatever decision Ukraine took in regard to its membership of the Eurasian Union versus the EU,[[231]](#footnote-231) at the time it seems likely he was confident that Kiev’s choice would be along Moscow’s lines. Moscow’s actions certainly seemed designed to hinder the Agreement process and ensure Ukraine chose Russia and the Eurasian Union. It exploited Ukraine’s economic dependencies. Putin spoke of the gas price advantages Russia could offer Ukraine, with the implicit threat that such advantages would not be available should Ukraine choose the EU. He also made clear that if Kiev signed the Agreement it would face sanctions, including punitive trade restrictions ranging from customs delays to bans on imports of Ukrainian coal, glass and even chocolate.[[232]](#footnote-232) As the date of the Ukraine-EU negotiations in Vilnius drew closer, Russian state media issued warnings that Ukraine would lose its Russian markets and its manufacturing industries would be overwhelmed by cheap EU goods, many of which find their way into Russia (the latter was a spurious argument because any EU goods entering Russia through Ukraine would still be subject to Russian tariffs).[[233]](#footnote-233) A $20 billion deal on aid and gas supply was offered which the EU could not match – indeed, the Association Agreement was never aimed at such direct financial support for Ukraine. Although the language Russia used was principally of economics, its motives were nevertheless ‘driven primarily by geopolitics … Moscow cared less about economic disagreements than about undermining Ukraine's president’.[[234]](#footnote-234) Moscow could also exercise personal leverage over Yanukovich, whose career had been punctuated with allegations of corruption and violence against opponents and whose political survival depended to a great extent on Russian patronage.[[235]](#footnote-235) All this pressure seemed to have worked. Following a meeting between Putin and Yanukovich, the speaker of the Ukrainian parliament announced on 21 November 2014 that legislation freeing the imprisoned former president Yulia Timoshenka, due to be passed that day and an EU condition for the Association Agreement, would not be passed. On the same day, Kiev announced that EU negotiations had been suspended and no agreement would be signed.[[236]](#footnote-236) This triggered the Maidan uprising.

The uprising put a stop to the immediate prospects of Ukraine joining the Eurasian Union. For Moscow, it also challenged the Russian system of government itself: a successful overthrow of the Yanukovich regime might have highlighted that there were alternatives to Putin’s ‘sovereign democracy’ and unleashed similar discontent within Russia. The Kremlin saw the Maidan uprising as Western-sponsored and financed, conducted by what it portrayed as ‘fascists’ and resulting in an illegitimate government. Sergei Lavrov said in June 2014 that the ‘seeds for the current crisis’ were sown at the 2008 NATO summit when NATO leaders ‘declared that Ukraine would be in NATO’: a critical threat to Russia’s national security which ‘Russia would simply not accept’. Although he claimed, perhaps disingenuously, that Russia would not necessarily object to Ukraine joining the EU, ‘provided that Ukrainians comprehend and accept fully the economic repercussions this would bring’, he said that a NATO Ukraine was ‘unacceptable'.[[237]](#footnote-237) This link between the Maidan crisis and NATO echoes similar statements by Moscow during its disputes with Georgia, and underlines that Russia’s interest is not confined simply to economics or the legitimacy of Ukraine’ government.

However, with its economic pressure clearly not working, ‘compatriot politics’ offered Moscow the perfect pretext for a decisive intervention in Ukraine. The Kremlin’s aims appeared twofold. First, a short-term goal of disrupting Ukraine’s interim government and preventing its closer association with the West and, second, a longer-term goal to bring Ukraine back towards Russia’s orbit and eventually into the Eurasian Union. To achieve these objectives, it appears that Moscow seeks to keep Ukraine sufficiently destabilised to be both unattractive to the West and pliable for the Kremlin. Moscow’s first move was in Crimea, where it could justify a complete takeover of the peninsular by claiming to be protecting both its citizens and Russian-speaking ‘compatriots’. It went on to annex Crimea remarkably quickly: it took less than a month from the departure of Yanukovich on 23 February 2014 for Crimea’s incorporation into the Russian Federation to be ratified by the Duma on 17 March. However, it is unclear whether Moscow followed a fully-planned strategy whose objective from the start was annexation. Unquestionably, incorporation into the Russian Federation was welcomed by most Russians and many (though probably far from all) Crimean Russian-speakers. But it seems more likely that Moscow seized a series of opportunities that presented themselves as the fast-moving situation unfolded. But for Putin, it represented a diplomatic triumph. The Maidan uprising also gave Moscow a justification for renouncing or amending previous agreements with Ukraine, including the 2010 Kharkov agreement on the basing of Russia’s fleet in Sebastopol[[238]](#footnote-238) and agreements the price of Russian gas.[[239]](#footnote-239) These measures indicated that any agreement can potentially be overturned if Moscow views its neighbours as insufficiently compliant.

The crisis prompted concerns that Moscow’s ambition might lead it to expand its territory further by employing similar means as it had in Crimea. Moscow declared its strong backing for Russian-speaking separatists in Eastern Ukraine, and it is highly likely that it directly supported them. Russia has been accused of dispatching its special forces to organise and equip ‘pro-Russian’ militias, and in some cases even sending its own citizens to fight alongside them or to ferment unrest. However, although ‘compatriot politics’ had worked spectacularly in Crimea, in eastern Ukraine it might have found its limits. Part of the reason may have been that Moscow could not achieve a decisive outcome there with the same speed it had in Crimea or previously in Georgia. The West had more time to react, and harboured no doubts about Moscow’s objectives. The UK Foreign Secretary spoke in April 2014 of his grave concern ‘about the situation in Crimea and in the east of Ukraine … [t]here can be no justification for this action, which bears all the hallmarks of a Russian strategy to destabilise Ukraine’.[[240]](#footnote-240) Consequently, the threat of stronger Western sanctions seemed to be giving Moscow pause for thought. Some media reports speculated that Moscow also recognised that pro-Ukrainian sentiment in the regions was far higher than in Crimea, and that trying to engineer the situation as it had in Crimea might provoke an unacceptably violent backlash.[[241]](#footnote-241) This may have been why, on 7 May 2014, Putin called on pro-Russian groups in Eastern Ukraine to postpone a planned referendum on independence, or when on 24 June he asked the Duma to annul a resolution allowing Russia to deploy its forces into Ukraine.[[242]](#footnote-242) However, it is possible that these were deliberately empty gestures. The referendum went ahead and Moscow has continued to support the objectives of separatists in a growing insurgency. The downing of Ukrainian aircraft through sophisticated air defence systems and the appearance of main battle tanks in the hands of insurgent militias (tanks which NATO said had been in Russia only days previously)[[243]](#footnote-243) did nothing to reduce the perception that Moscow was directly arming the separatists.

Notwithstanding that the recently-elected Ukrainian government went ahead and signed an association agreement with the EU in June 2014, there is no question that the country is now far more unstable than it had been before the Maidan uprising. This will undoubtedly suit the Kremlin; indeed, the outcome in Crimea has probably exceeded its expectations. But to suggest that Moscow entirely engineered the crisis would be to overstate the case. Whereas Moscow had voiced concerns for the welfare of ethnic Russians in Ukraine, it had shown no overt willingness to support rebellion.[[244]](#footnote-244) Rather, it sought to influence Ukraine towards remaining in its political orbit, and direct intervention took place only after the Maidan uprising, which Moscow would have thwarted if it could. It seems, therefore, that its annexation of Crimea and subsequent activity in Eastern Ukraine were opportunities seized, albeit willingly, rather than created. It was ‘compatriot politics’ that allowed these opportunities to present themselves.

**Hypothesis 2: ‘compatriot politics’ can potentially be employed throughout the European post-Soviet space because Moscow’s conception of who constitutes a ‘compatriot’ is a deliberately elastic one.**

There are unquestionably ethno-linguistic divisions in Ukrainian society, but they are not nearly as stark as those described in official Russian rhetoric. Although Russian-speakers have a strong group identity, most are bilingual and ethnic tension was extremely rare except perhaps in Crimea, where in fact much of it centered on the Tatar population. The Minorities at Risk dataset suggested that ethnic Russians in Ukraine exhibited a ‘moderate risk’ for rebellion, particularly in the eastern regions where they are geographically concentrated and politically mobilized, but it noted that they did not face repression and that they were unlikely to engage in anything other than conventional political activity.[[245]](#footnote-245) Even after the departure of Yanukovich during the Maidan uprising, ethnic Russians faced no systematic threats or violence. Ultimately, most Ukrainian citizens regarded themselves foremost as Ukrainian.[[246]](#footnote-246) Moscow certainly exaggerated the divisions it sought to exploit.

Nevertheless, Russian efforts to destabilise Ukraine through the supposed defence of ‘compatriots’ in Crimea and eastern Ukraine was no surprise to some commentators.[[247]](#footnote-247) It fits the ‘compatriot politics’ model well. Ukraine’s importance in the Russian imagination, together with Russia’s historic self-identification as the Slavic and Orthodox champion, means that Moscow’s assertion that Russian-speaking ‘compatriots’ required protection would have been both understood and supported by many Russians. On a visit to Kiev in 2013 in company with the Patriarch of All Russia, Putin declared that Ukrainians and Russian were ‘one people’.[[248]](#footnote-248) The large Russian-speaking populations in Eastern Ukraine, and in Crimea particularly, could therefore be readily exploited by Moscow in order to present its interference as acting in their interest. Moreover, there seems little doubt that many Russian-speaking Ukrainians were dismayed at the outcome of the Maidan uprising. They were also appalled by the interim Ukrainian government’s impetuous (though short-lived) legislation removing Russian as an official state language.[[249]](#footnote-249) Crimean Russians were most opposed to the interim government, but cities in Eastern Ukraine were reported as more uncertain: few felt much sympathy towards the Maidan protestors, but most wished in principle to remain Ukrainian.[[250]](#footnote-250) Despite this ambivalence, Moscow rose to their defence, with the language issue a particularly potent source of ammunition. Russia was also helped by the fact that for the past 20 years its passports had been distributed in Ukraine. Many went to pensioners in Crimea who were former Black Sea Fleet workers, but others went to Ukrainian citizens despite being in contravention of Ukrainian law which forbids the holding of dual nationality.[[251]](#footnote-251) Thus Moscow could present itself as protecting simultaneously both ‘compatriots’ and its own citizens. It was perhaps no accident that Moscow appointed Vladislav Surkov, a Kremlin advisor tasked with dealing with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, to lead on the Ukraine situation.[[252]](#footnote-252)

Moscow also exploited the ready access provided by its long land border with Ukraine and its large military garrisons in Crimea (which were probably reinforced as the Maidan protests intensified). Russia was accused both of deploying its own troops in Crimea, in contravention of basing agreements, and of importing its own citizens into Ukraine to stir up division. Evidence to support this appears abundant. A surprisingly well organised ‘self-defence militia’, uniformed in Russian army-pattern camouflage dress (though without insignia) and armed with Russian-issue weapons, appeared in Crimea almost overnight. There were undoubtedly some local residents who wished to take up arms against the Kiev interim government, but before they could be properly mobilised Moscow quite obviously deployed its own troops masquerading as members of an indigenous ‘pro-Russian militia’. In fact, despite repeated denials that Russian forces were involved in Crimea other than to protect their own installations, Putin later stated that ‘Russia created conditions … with the help of special formations and the armed forces … for the free expression of will by people living in Crimea and Sevastopol’.[[253]](#footnote-253) Later, as disturbances spread in Eastern Ukraine during March and April 2014, indigenous separatists were almost certainly supplemented by Russians sent to bolster pro-Moscow demonstrations. The Ukraine Border Service reported in late March 2014 that daily it was stopping from entry to Ukraine around 500 Russian ‘tourists’, many of whom were in possession of military clothing and equipment and had no obvious reason to be travelling into Ukraine.[[254]](#footnote-254) These moves also fit with the ‘compatriot politics’ hypothesis, because they created the impression that ethnic Russians were so desperate for emancipation from Ukrainian oppression that they were prepared to use force to achieve it.

**Hypothesis 3: ‘compatriot politics’ allows Russia to present interference in the sovereign affairs of neighbouring states as both a moral duty and legitimate under international law.**

Russia claimed legitimacy for its intervention in Crimea based on the protection of Russian interests, especially the Black Sea Fleet, and its citizens. It also tested the bounds of international law by claiming to be protecting Russian-speaking ‘compatriots’. But it dismissed charges by Western states of violations of international law by accusing them of hypocrisy, and presented the annexation of Crimea as being consistent with democratic norms. This was despite the fact that Crimea’s referendum was overseen by armed and masked ‘self-defence forces’, many of whom, as noted above, Putin later admitted were Russian soldiers. Notwithstanding that there was much genuine support amongst Crimea’s majority Russian-speaking population, the referendum was a poorly disguised imitation of a proper democratic process. A similar referendum took place in the self-styled ‘Donetsk People’s Republic’ in early May 2014. Not only was it illegal under Ukrainian law, but polling stations had out-of-date electoral registers, the referendum question was ambiguous and the process was again overseen by armed men. Moreover, although many residents of Donetsk voted for secession out of frustration with events in Kiev, there seemed to be nothing like the same level of popular support as seen in Crimea. Many of those who supported Kiev were reported to have not voted either through fear or because they did not recognise the referendum’s legitimacy.[[255]](#footnote-255) Yet these parodies of democracy allowed Moscow to present its part in the crisis as support for the valid aspirations of Russian ‘compatriots’, without which they would suffer under the illegitimate, nationalist Maidan regime.

The accompanying information campaign was vigorous.[[256]](#footnote-256) Just as for the Georgian war, its aims seem to have been first, to maintain domestic support and, second, to further reduce the likelihood of a coherent international response. From the start, Russian state media was consistent in its message that that the USA and the EU bore responsibility for the ousting of Ukraine’s legitimate government and the country’s subsequent destabilisation. It asserted repeatedly that Ukraine’s interim government was not only illegitimate and determined to persecute ethnic Russians, but also ‘fascist’ – a highly pejorative label in Ukraine because of its experiences under German occupation in 1941-44. On one occasion, Russian state media blamed ‘far-right extremists’ for a fire which killed more than 40 pro-Russian activists in the Odessa Trades Union building, despite a lack of evidence.[[257]](#footnote-257) As the crisis unfolded, separatist referenda were compared to other independence polls, such as that in Scotland, to demonstrate their legitimacy. The referendum in Donetsk, for instance, was ‘a product of an extraordinary information war’: the number of polling stations was reduced to increase the illusion of a high turnout and provide media pictures of long queues of voters.[[258]](#footnote-258) Other elements of the campaign were at times brazen and seemed to echo Soviet propaganda. Pictures shown on Russian state media purporting to be those of refugees fleeing the crisis in Crimea were revealed to be footage of queues at the Poland/Ukraine frontier for regular cross-border shopping trips.[[259]](#footnote-259) In Crimea, the same woman appeared on Russian state media under five separate identities.[[260]](#footnote-260) As fighting in Eastern Ukraine intensified, images shown on Russian state media of atrocities purported to be by Ukrainian forces on ethnic Russians were revealed to be doctored images from Bosnia in the 1990s or, ironically, of violence suffered by Russian citizens in Chechnya.[[261]](#footnote-261) Nevertheless, the campaign seems to have been successful, in domestic terms at least. Russian support for the annexation of Crimea was overwhelming, with Putin’s personal ratings and national self-confidence higher than they had been for years.[[262]](#footnote-262) For its intervention in Ukraine, Russian propaganda could mine a rich seam of Russian sentiment. It was ‘compatriot politics’ at its most potent.

**CONCLUSION**

The shock of the dissolution of the USSR was profound, shattering assumptions of Russian power and prestige, and creating new realities with which many Russians struggled to come to terms. Vladimir Putin exemplifies the strand of Russian thought that believes that it is Russia’s inviolable right to equality with the world’s principal powers and seeks to recapture its lost status by challenging the post-1991 geopolitical order, which it sees as imposed upon it when it was weak. The centrepiece of this ambition is regaining hegemony over the post-Soviet successor states of its near abroad, whose independence Moscow never truly recognised. Yet this did not begin with Putin. Even in the 1990s, when its means were limited, Russia pursued an active, controlling role in its near abroad, aiming to encourage instability wherever it could in order to undermine the sovereignty of successor states and thereby ensure their subservience to Moscow. In the process, the seeds of ‘compatriot politics’ were sown. Ethnic Russians in Moldova were insulated by Moscow from their future *de jure* state even before independence, and Russia expressed repeated concern, often justifiably, over the treatment of Russian-speakers throughout its near abroad. After 2000, Russia was better able to coordinate the implementation of its policies and the harnessing of Russian-speaking, ‘compatriot’ minorities as a tool of foreign policy became increasingly prominent. Notwithstanding that many Russian-speakers in successor states had increasingly assimilated into their parent societies, they were encouraged to identify principally with Russia and look to Moscow as the ultimate guarantor of their rights. Furthermore, as Georgia demonstrated, the notion of the ‘compatriot’ was expanded to include non-ethnic Russian, non-Russian speaking populations through the *en masse* distribution of Russian citizenship. Much of this was incremental and opportunistic, sometimes even accidental. But in Ukraine, ‘compatriot politics’ seems to have been refined, with more deliberate cultivation of Russian-speaking identity going hand-in-hand with passportisation; and the particular circumstances of the situation allowed Russia to simultaneously assert that it was legally protecting its interests, its compatriots and its own citizens.

It should be acknowledged that Russia has legitimate interests in respect to ‘compatriots’ abroad. The dissolution of the Soviet Union was an unprecedented event, and many ethnic Russians who were thrust abruptly and unwillingly into new and often hostile post-imperial states unquestionably suffered discrimination which any government in Moscow would have found difficult to ignore. Many Russian-speakers have appreciated Russia’s interest in their welfare; indeed, many in Crimea appeared to genuinely welcome integration into the Russian Federation. Moreover, the residents of South Ossetia and Abkhazia were willing recipients of Russian citizenship because of the support and security guarantees it provided. But whilst these truths should be recognised, they should not obscure the violations of its neighbours’ sovereignty implicit in Russian ‘compatriot politics’. Moscow has made little effort to support the assimilation of Russian-speaking minorities into states which have overcome their early reflex to exact retribution upon them. Instead, it has encouraged their sense of difference and invariably overstated it. It has exploited ethno-political faultlines in post-Soviet states for its own interests, undermining processes of conflict resolution which it was supposed to support. In Georgia, passportisation was a precursor to even an more obvious breach of sovereignty when Moscow intervened to ‘protect’ its citizens, including those in Abkhazia who were not under direct threat, despite the fact that it had contributed in no small measure to the circumstances in which their safety was threatened in the first place. Ukraine’s sovereignty was entirely subverted because the purported defence of Russian ‘compatriots’ led to the forced amendment of its borders. Elsewhere in Ukraine, divisions which were softened by a sense of Ukrainian identity have been encouraged and inflamed. These actions have been defended through justifications under international law, drawing upon contentious Western interventions for their inspiration. However, Russia’s vigorous opposition to those interventions exposes Moscow to the same charges of hypocrisy of which it had repeatedly accused the West. Moreover, Moscow’s often extraordinary information campaigns reinforce the perception that its interventions are insufficiently justifiable to stand on their own merits.

A strength of ‘compatriot politics’ is that it is insidious. The conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia appeared ‘frozen’ because their nature seemed unchanging and resolution seemed distant. But few outside Georgia took much notice of Russian passportisation of the regions, which not only fatally undermined resolution negotiations but also had the effect of extending Russia’s *de facto* frontiers by stealth, which Moscow exploited to the full in 2008. Tbilisi’s concerns that the same thing might be happening elsewhere in Georgia is therefore understandable, and whatever the truth of the matter, the very threat that passportisation might be taking place can be leverage in itself against Georgia. Elsewhere, Russia’s interest in Russian-speakers in successor states usually runs in the background of its relations with the states in question, punctuated occasionally by more strident critiques of their treatment. But, as events in Ukraine have demonstrated, it can be rapidly harnessed to destabilise a state. ‘Compatriot politics’ does not necessarily have to adhere to a complete, formed strategy, but can shape an environment so that when opportunities present themselves, they can be seized. It allows Russia to remind states of the possibility of its interest in their internal affairs, potentially giving Moscow all it needs to maintain control in its near abroad.

In keeping with traditional Russian foreign policy norms, Moscow views Western engagement with successor states as diminishing its status and influence and resists it wherever it can. It is no coincidence that Moscow’s concern for the rights of ‘compatriots’, or where passportisation takes place on a large scale, is more evident in those states which threaten to remove themselves from its orbit than in those which are more amenable to Russian influence. Georgia and Ukraine both aspire to not just EU but also NATO membership, the latter being a particular problem for Russia. Both states have now experienced Russian direct intervention. Moldova has ambitions only for the EU, but Russia appears to be increasing its pressure through its *de facto* control of Transdniestria. Even in the Baltic States, which are now geopolitically part of the West, Russia cultivates strong influence within Russian-speaking minorities and regularly raises the issue of their rights. Moreover, Russia’s interest in the ‘protection’ of its citizens in foreign countries contrasts with its treatment of others within the Russian Federation itself, most notably in Chechnya. The conclusion that Russia’s concerns for its ‘compatriots’ are primarily for geopolitical reasons is inescapable.

In the short-term at least, Moscow’s exercising of political power through ‘compatriot politics’ in has been largely successful. Crimea is under full Russian control and it is difficult to see how that situation might be reversed. The ethno-linguistic divisions in the rest of Ukraine are hardening and a bitter conflict, for which Russia can take no small share of the blame, is growing. Even if stabilised, it threatens to create another intractable ‘frozen’ conflict of the type Moscow has proved adept at leveraging elsewhere. South Ossetia and Abkhazia are firmly under Russian authority, in essence *de facto* parts of the Russian Federation notwithstanding that Russia (though few other states) recognised their independence in 2008. Moscow’s opinion of these states’ true sovereignty is perhaps revealed by the fact that neither has been permitted to freely pursue their desired destiny: integration into the Russian Federation in the case of South Ossetia and full independent status in the case of Abkhazia. Both regions are more useful to Russia as they are, as leverage against the still pro-Western Georgia. ‘Compatriot politics’ has also exerted a unifying and distracting effect on Russian society, thereby reinforcing the projection of Russian identity as a centre of global power. Publicly, Putin certainly seems supremely pleased with the way events have turned out. In April 2014, the head of Russian news agency *Rossiya Segodnya* said to him that the ‘cancerous tumor’ NATO was ‘suffocating him’. In response, Putin told him not to be afraid of NATO, assuring him that ‘Russia would suffocate everyone else’.[[263]](#footnote-263) It is unimaginable that a major Western leader would express openly a similar sentiment about Russia, even in jest.

In the longer term, however, it is difficult to assess whether ‘compatriot politics’ will prove such a successful strategy. Some of the ethnic and linguistic faultlines that Russia exploits have the potential to develop into conflicts beyond Russia’s power to manage. The emerging insurgency in Ukraine risks deteriorating into a more widespread civil war which, besides being an appalling outcome given that pre-conflict Ukrainian unity was generally stable, would not be in Russia’s interests. Further unintended consequences might unfold if the Russian nationalism which Moscow encouraged in Crimea results in problems with its Tatar population: the last thing Russia needs is another restless Muslim minority. More widely, the image of Russia as a constructive force in regional affairs will suffer if it is perceived as revisionist at the expense of its neighbours. After the 2008 war, Moscow made efforts to demonstrate that its invasion of Georgia represented a special case and that it took seriously its peacekeeping and mediation roles in Nagorno-Karabakh and Transdniestria.[[264]](#footnote-264) However, not only do both these conflicts remain unresolved, but events in Ukraine demonstrated the emptiness of Russia’s reassurances. Moreover, they showed that the Kremlin was unable to resist an opportunity. The message of Russia’s recent actions is that post-1991 borders are no longer sacrosanct, and thus Moscow risks souring its relations with most of its neighbours, affecting its regional position and reducing the appeal of the Eurasian Union. Indeed, it may even drive states ever more enthusiastically into the arms of NATO and the EU, because their offers are not rooted in coercion. Georgia remains stoutly pro-Western, not least because Moscow's approach since 1991 has made its population fervently anti-Russian. Georgia’s Defence Minister said in June 2014 that the threat of further Russian-sponsored destabilisation had made Tbilisi even more determined to achieve NATO and EU membership.[[265]](#footnote-265) Western sanctions are likely to increasingly affect Russia’s unreformed economy, and NATO seems already reinvigorated by events in Ukraine. Moreover, hitherto loose regional groupings, such as the Georgia-Ukraine-Azerbaijan-Moldova (GUAM) group, may be invigorated and increasingly focus on maintaining a united front against Russia. The Central European ‘Visegrad Four’ of Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic has already been ‘spurred by Russian sabre-rattling’ into renewed co-operation.[[266]](#footnote-266)

In summary, the evidence broadly supports the three hypotheses of this dissertation. Moscow seeks to stem Western encroachment and restore hegemony over its near abroad. To do so it attempts to restrict the sovereignty of all the successor states in order to achieve decisive influence over their political choices. ‘Compatriot politics’ allows Moscow to destabilise those states which resist this, harnessing Russia’s deliberately elastic conception of who constitutes a ‘compatriot’ to ensure that any and all successor states are potentially vulnerable. Moreover, the defence of ‘compatriots’ allows Russia to present legalistically-framed defences and appeals to moral duty to justify its interference in the sovereign affairs of its neighbours. Consequently, Russia hinders the development of all these states and obstructs their sovereign choices (albeit to a lesser extent, so far, the Baltic States). In extreme cases, the employment of ‘compatriot politics’ damages them profoundly. Notwithstanding that Russia’s objectives are primarily defensive in terms of protecting its sphere of influence rather than expanding it beyond the boundaries of the former USSR, ‘compatriot politics‘ is an existential threat to European geopolitical stability. It is allowing Russia to enact its revisionist objectives across the region. This is not just damaging to Russia’s regional relationships, but it has the potential to bring it into dangerous confrontation with the West. Although Moscow’s has managed thus far to confound concerted Western action, this may have its limits. Western states have since 1991 sought to export their normative values eastwards through the power of attraction, and whilst they generally respect the sovereignty of those states which resist this, they are hostile to what they perceive are attempts to coerce states away from them. After Ukraine, the West may now be more alert to Russian destabilisation of its neighbours through ‘compatriot politics’ and increasingly prepared to resist it.

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(Confidential details of interviewees who asked to remain anonymous can be passed to the Examination Board upon request)

Interviewee A: mid-level Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) civil servant. Interview conducted at 1600 hrs, Tuesday 7 April 2014.

Interviewee B: mid-level FCO civil servant. Interview conducted at 1700 hrs, Tuesday 7 April 2014.

Interviewee C: mid-level FCO civil servant. Interview conducted at 1600 hrs, Wednesday 8 April 2014.

Interviewee D: former senior FCO civil servant and Head of the Eastern Research Group. Interview conducted at 1030 hrs, 15 April 2014.

Interviewee E: former senior British diplomat. Interview conducted at 1100 hrs, Tuesday 29 April 2014.

Interviewee F: mid-level FCO Regional Advisor. Interview conducted at 1045 hrs, Thursday 1 May.

Irakli Menagarishvili: [Minister of Foreign Affairs](ms-appx://wikimediafoundation.wikipedia/wiki/Ministry_of_Foreign_Affairs_%28Georgia%29), 1995-2003; Deputy Prime Minister, 1993-1995. Now Head of the Georgia Strategic Research Centre. Interview conducted at 1100 hrs, Friday 2 May 2014, at Georgia Strategic Research Centre, Tbilisi.

Professor Gia Nodia: [Minister of Education and Science](ms-appx://wikimediafoundation.wikipedia/wiki/Ministry_of_Education_and_Science_of_Georgia), 2008. Chair of the [Tbilisi](ms-appx://wikimediafoundation.wikipedia/wiki/Tbilisi)-based [think-tank](ms-appx://wikimediafoundation.wikipedia/wiki/Think-tank) [Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development](ms-appx://wikimediafoundation.wikipedia/wiki/Caucasus_Institute_for_Peace%2c_Democracy_and_Development). Director of the International School of Caucasus Studies at the Ilia State University. Interview conducted at 1230 hrs, Friday 2 May 2014 at Ilia State University, Tbilisi.

Vasil Sikharulidze: Ambassador to the [United States](ms-appx://wikimediafoundation.wikipedia/wiki/United_States), 2006-2008; Minister of Defence, 2008-2009. Interview conducted at 1400 hrs, Friday 2 May 2014 at the Georgia Office of the Atlantic Council, Tbilisi.

Giorgi Muchaidze: member of the Georgian Delegation in Georgian-Russian negotiations on withdrawal of Russian bases from Georgia, and former senior Defence Ministry official. Interview conducted at 1400 hrs, Friday 2 May 2014 at the Georgia Office of the Atlantic Council, Tbilisi.

Eka Tkeshelashvili: Deputy Prime Minister and [State Minister for Reintegration](ms-appx://wikimediafoundation.wikipedia/wiki/State_Ministry_for_Reintegration_%28Georgia%29) of Georgia, 2003-2007; [Minister of Justice](ms-appx://wikimediafoundation.wikipedia/wiki/Ministry_of_Justice_%28Georgia%29), 2007-2008; [Minister of Foreign Affairs](ms-appx://wikimediafoundation.wikipedia/wiki/Ministry_of_Foreign_Affairs_%28Georgia%29) (May-December 2008); Secretary of the [National Security Council](ms-appx://wikimediafoundation.wikipedia/wiki/National_Security_Council_of_Georgia), 2008-2012. Now Head of the Georgia Institute for Strategic Studies. Interview conducted at 1600 hrs, Friday 2 May 2014, at the Georgia Institute for Strategic Studies, Tbilisi.

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