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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Change or Continuity in Russia's Strategy towards Secessionist Regions in the 'Near Abroad'?

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ABSTRACT
The 2008 invasion of Georgia, followed by the recognition of the independence of the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the annexation of Crimea and the involvement in the war in Donbas, and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine have all marked the return to active Russian participation in separatist regions in the 'near abroad'. They took the international community by surprise. To be sure, the Russian Federation had played a role in all previous secessionist conflicts in the former Soviet space. Nonetheless, Moscow's post-2008 bold actions – open invasion, recognition of separatist regions and annexation of a neighbour's territory – have marked an innovation in Russia's foreign policy. This points to questions about how Moscow is legitimising these actions and whether the official narrative suggests a change in Russia's strategy towards secessionist conflicts in the 'near abroad'.

KEYWORDS
frozen conflicts; Russian foreign policy; near abroad; Crimea; Ukraine; legitimisation

At the beginning of 2022, despite intelligence information and Russian military build-up on the borders of Ukraine, many experts and diplomats did not expect Moscow to invade Ukraine (see *Politico* 2022a; 2022b). The recognition of the independence of the breakaway regions of Donetsk and Lugansk and possible intensification of fighting at their 'borders' was a scenario anticipated since 2014; however, a major war with Ukraine (called 'special operation' by Moscow) was unthinkable for many (Timofeev 2022). In March 2014, Western leaders had also been taken by "complete surprise" (Mearsheimer 2014, 85) when Russia annexed Crimea and started igniting a military conflict in Southeastern Ukraine (Donbas). While some experts had already predicted Moscow's revisionist behaviour during Vladimir Putin's second presidential mandate (Petersson 2017, 98), no one expected the Kremlin to go so far as incorporating foreign territories (see, among others, Manoli [2017, 4]; O'Loughlin and Toal [2019, 9]; Van Herpen [2015]; Charap and Colton [2017]). A "complete surprise" for the international community had been the 2008 war in Georgia as well (Mankoff 2012, 264). The events of early August 2008 caught Western governments, including the United States' (US) leadership (Joenniemi 2011, 103), totally off guard (Cornell and Starr 2009, 3; Joenniemi 2011; Popjanevski 2009). The subsequent recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was even more unexpected for the West, particularly given that Russia presented itself as the main objector to the recognition of Kosovo's independence (Mirzayev 2014, 201).

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Russia's involvement in secessionist movements in the former Soviet republics, however, was not a novelty *per se*. Moscow intervened in all the separatist conflicts that erupted in its neighbourhood at the beginning of the 1990s: that is, in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria. Indeed, Russia did not officially acknowledge its military involvement at the time, posing instead as a mediator and peacekeeper, and contributed to the 'freezing' (but not the resolution) of those conflicts. Over time, the international community indulged in this 'frozen' peace in the region, regarding Russian military intervention in the so-called 'near abroad' as an obsolete feature of Moscow's early 1990s foreign policy; thus, the 2008 Georgian war, the 2014 annexation of Crimea and war in Donbas and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine came unexpectedly. The West's surprise lay not only in Russia's return to military interventionism in its vicinity but also in the novelties in Moscow's actions, including overt war, official recognition of separatist regimes and annexation of a foreign territory. This leads one to question how Russia justifies these changes in its *modus operandi* and whether its narratives also suggest a change in its strategy towards the separatist conflicts in the 'near abroad'. By analysing the Russian official positioning towards the separatist conflicts in the former Soviet space in the 1990s and post-2008 respectively, this article will try to answer these questions.

Theoretical approach

In light of the research question and the qualitative nature of our methodological approach, we considered interpretivism as the most appropriate conceptual framework for this study. We assume that social constructions such as language and narratives, consciousness, shared meanings and instruments offer insights into reality (Myers 2020, 46), and that only through interpretation, the researcher can contextualise meaning and construct knowledge (Trent and Cho 2014, 641). Narratives explain facts by uncovering their relationships to one another and postulating significant relationships, connections or similarities between them (Bevir and Rhodes 2016, 10). They also play a critical role in the construction of political behaviour and help us organise facts cognitively into a design that helps us find order and meaning in our reality. Narratives make sense of events and situations; they forefront a particular sequence of events, implicit causes and expected consequences (Haste *et al.* 2016, 314, 317).

Interpretivist analysis is not intended to justify or prescribe a course of action, but focuses on a deeper descriptive understanding of phenomena, which could be used to better inform suggested outcomes (Diochon *et al.* 2011, 102). In order to interpret the meanings, human actions (the narratives) have to be examined in the contexts in which they occur, as contexts provide important clues about the meaning of the actions and ideas of individuals (Jeffrey 2021, 22).

Narratives play a crucial role in the construction of political behaviour both domestically and abroad (Subotic 2016, 612). In large part, politics is a language game through which authorities motivate behaviour (Hammack and Pilecki 2014, 73). Public narratives are purposefully constructed and used by political actors in order to shape their discursive environment and the behaviour of domestic and international actors (Miskimmon *et al.,* 2013, 1-3). Political actors strategically activate certain elements of a narrative while deactivating others (Subotic 2016, 611) in order to influence behaviours or

frame their own actions. At the same time, the judgement of decision-makers themselves is influenced by narratives. In other words, narratives construct the identities of actors and their interests (Hagström and Gustafsson 2019, 395).

Decision-makers construct foreign policy narratives to make sense of their actions, to give meaning to international politics and to legitimise their foreign policy actions in the eyes of their citizens. In parallel, however, foreign policy narratives also shape how the decision-makers think about foreign policy events, thus both enabling and constraining their actions. Narratives can suggest certain actions, the construction of the Self and the Other, enabling and legitimising domestic and foreign policy directions (Hagström and Gustafsson 2019, 395).

In order to construct knowledge (see Trent and Cho 2014) about the Russian strategy in the secessionist conflicts in the 'near abroad', we employed qualitative content analysis, considering at the same time the context in which the analysed narratives were constructed, namely the relations of Russia with the former Soviet republics and the Russian policymaking process.

To this end, we scrutinised a large spectrum of written documents and audio and video records (declarations, media interviews, memoirs, comments, speeches, articles, documentaries) containing statements of the chief Russian foreign policy-makers – the president, vice-president, prime minister, vice-prime-minister, foreign minister, chairs of the two chambers of the Russian parliament and Russian ambassadors to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and United Nations (UN) – with reference to Russia's positions towards the secessionist conflicts in question. Two periods were considered – 1990-1994 and 2008-2022 – coinciding with the two waves of Russian intervention in secessionist conflicts in the 'near abroad'. We gathered data from a wide range of sources in Russian and English: the websites of Russian official institutions (the presidency, ministry of foreign affairs, ministry of defence), the web pages of written and audio-visual media and news agencies like *Kommersant, Nezavisimaya Gazeta, Novaya Gazeta, Ria Novosti, Tass, RT, Pervyi Kanal, Rossiya 24*, as well as published memoirs and archival sources: collections of documents of international politics and newspapers (*Izvestia, Nezavisimaya Moldova, Komsomolskaya Pravda, Argumenty i Facty* – particularly for the 1990s, when they appeared only in print). A useful source of documents was the digitalised archive of Center Yelysin (https://yeltsin.ru/archive/).

In the first stage of research, we identified the key narratives (main topics/*master narratives*) in Russia's official discourse towards the 1990s separatist conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria, as well as towards the post-2008 war in Georgia, annexation of Crimea, war in Donbas and invasion of Ukraine. Subsequently, conducting an "intensive analysis" (Merriam 1989, 126), we scrutinised the similarities and differences between Russian official narratives towards the secessionist conflicts in the 1990s and in the post-2008 periods, explaining how they help us understand continuities and change in Russia's strategy in the secessionist conflicts in the 'near abroad'.

Our case studies include the conflicts of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, Crimea and Donbas (also considering preliminary evidence related to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine). Given the particularities of the conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh, where Russia officially played the role of a 'honest broker', intervening only indirectly in the conflict and supporting over time the central governments of either Yerevan or Baku and not the separatist entity itself, we did not include this case-study in our analysis. At the

same time, while Crimea was not a protracted conflict, it followed a secessionist path, declaring its independence on 11 March 2014 and then being annexed by the Russian Federation.

We contextualised the narratives by looking at both Russian relations with the former Soviet states and the Russian foreign policymaking process. This is highly relevant given the differences in the Russian domestic political situation in the two analysed periods. While the years 2008-2022 have been characterised by the verticalisation of power and continuity in political leadership, with a limited number of officials making declarations regarding Russian foreign policy, the beginning of the 1990s was marked by the multitude of official voices, the strife between the pro-Western and conservative forces as well as the overlapping of the separatist conflicts in the 'near abroad' with the process of dissolution of the Soviet Union and the national revival of the newly independent states. These latter factors directly impacted Moscow's narratives towards the separatist conflicts in the former Soviet states.

Russian foreign policy and the 'near abroad'[1]

The relations with the 'near abroad' have been a crucial issue in Russia's foreign policy. The disappearance of the Soviet Union affected the lives of millions of Russians who overnight became ethnic minorities in fourteen newly independent states, which were in the process of constructing national identities, based mostly on nationalistic policies. The Kremlin was confronted with a dilemma. On the one hand, building his legitimacy on the delegitimisation of Mikhail Gorbachev, Boris Yeltsin played heavily on anti-Soviet sentiment. On the other hand, Russia's leadership was trying to avoid the Yugoslav pattern – a breakup process leading to civil war. Within this context, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was conceived to be a mechanism for ensuring a 'civilised divorce' for the former Soviet republics.

The Kremlin's policy towards the 'near abroad' was also complicated by the process of transition from the Soviet state. Whilst new political institutions were created, old (Soviet) institutions continued to exist, causing severe institutional rivalries and decreasing government autonomy and capacity (Kästner 2008, 3). For instance, in 1990, when Andrey Kozyrev was appointed as Foreign Minister of the Russian Soviet Federalist Socialist Republic, Eduard Shevardnadze kept his position as Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs, and, until the end of 1991, the two Ministries shared competencies.

The resistance of old elites obstructed the government's capacity of Russia to exert its power and created tensions between the legislative and executive branches. The parliament and the President were both claiming a mandate from the electorate. However, while the largest faction in parliament was that of the Communists, President Yeltsin resigned from the Communist Party, which he later banned and dissolved (White 2011, 28).

The tension within the political leadership was very noticeable in Russia's positioning towards the separatist conflicts in the former Soviet space. As the next part of the article will show, Moscow had contradictory stances in all those conflicts in the 1990s. For

[1]By using this term, we do not mean to suggest that the Kremlin has special rights in the former Soviet republics, but emphasise the Russian perspective towards this area.

instance, while the Russian Parliament (Supreme Soviet) and Vice-president Alexander Rutskoi were radically nationalistic in their discourse, pleading for a more assertive role of Russia in the affairs of the newly independent former Soviet states, often threatening their sovereignty (Druey Schwab 2016, 166), Kozyrev and Yeltsin followed a more liberal approach, aiming not to spoil the relationships with the newly sovereign countries, emphasising respect for the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Taking the example of the Transnistrian conflict, the formulation of Russia's policy towards it, in spring-summer 1992, was determined by the confrontation between two power poles: the pro-liberal Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the conservative Ministry of Defence (Devyatkov 2009, 108). The situation was further complicated by the fact that, in early 1992, the Soviet Army had not yet been officially dissolved, which at times led to a lack of command over military actions in the 'near abroad', with segments of the army often behaving independently, challenging Moscow's official policy (Abushov 2019, 78).

The decision-making process improved with the redefinition of authority over the Soviet forces. However, in the meanwhile, the Russian military gained ground politically, and the MFA lost its monopoly on foreign relations (Kästner 2008, 35). These power struggles directly impacted Russia's narratives towards the separatist conflicts in the 'near abroad'. Even after the 1993 'small civil war', with the presidential power much consolidated, Russian policy remained incoherent. This can be explained by the fact that, under Yeltsin's leadership, there was a multitude of factions with very divergent views that had to be satisfied in order to ensure support for the regime. Consequently, Moscow's policies appeared inconsistent, erratic and sometimes contradictory (28).

In terms of the main foreign policy orientation, the defeat of the liberal reformers in the December 1993 parliamentary elections and the replacement of Kozyrev with Yevgeny Primakov as Foreign Minister marked Moscow's return to the great-power balancing paradigm, accompanied by the desire to establish its diplomatic and security hegemony throughout the territory of the former Soviet Union (Lynch 2002, 166). The new foreign policy doctrine implied that Russia could not regain its previous international status without maintaining its influence over the 'near abroad'. In order to keep the region close to Russia, Moscow promoted a series of institutions. Besides the CIS, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), the Customs Union of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan (which later became the Eurasian Economic Union) and the Union State with Belarus were aimed at binding the former Soviet republics to Russia and preventing their accession to any other international organisations of which Russia is not a member.

With Vladimir Putin (and Dmitry Medvedev) in power, the 'near abroad' remained high on Moscow's agenda. In addition, the Kremlin's approach towards the region became more assertive and its policy more cohesive. From the beginning, Putin sought a more active role in the area with a view to both imposing Russia's 'authority' in the 'near abroad' and forcing the West to take Moscow's claims to great-power status seriously (Mankoff 2009, 26). In one of his first speeches as President, Putin announced that the relations with the CIS members would be a priority for him, declaring, at the same time, that the former Soviet republics "can no longer expect concessional treatment as with 'buddy Yeltsin' and get away with it", but had to meet "Russian interests" (Bakshi 2000, 1283).

The Colour Revolutions in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and Kyrgyzstan (2005) determined the Kremlin to seek to further limit the foreign policy autonomy of the 'near abroad'. The pushing of some former Soviet republics for NATO membership or rapprochement with the EU was assessed by Moscow as a serious direct threat to its security. Consequently, the Kremlin became more assertive and did not refrain from using military force to prevent these countries from distancing themselves from Russia. The 2008 war in Georgia, the 2014 annexation of Crimea, the conflict in Donbas and the 2022 major war in Ukraine have illustrated how far Russia was determined to go to secure positions in its area of "privileged interests" (Medvedev 2008b) and how instrumental the secessionist conflicts in the 'near abroad' are for Moscow's foreign policy goals.

When looking at foreign policy decision-making, one has also to remark that, with Vladimir Putin in power, the process was centralised and streamlined. While Yeltsin sought to play on interclan rivalry, Putin submitted all groups to his authority (Laruelle 2009, 22): the parliament, the oligarchs, the media. Most media outlets were put under state control. With the oligarchs, a set of boundaries was established, based on the principle of mutual non-interference: the Kremlin would not interfere in their affairs, provided that the oligarchs did not interfere in politics (Kryshtanovskaya and White 2009, 287). The autonomy of the parliament was limited, and state institutions were populated with security service personnel (Kästner 2008, 7). To make a comparison, if during Gorbachev's rule, no more than 8 per cent of those who had leadership positions had a military or security background (collectively known as *siloviki*), this rose to 25 per cent during the Yeltsin years and reached 42 per cent of policy-makers by the end of Putin's second term (Kryshtanovskaya and White 2009, 301). This growth in the number of *siloviki* raised in the Cold War reflects Putin's own personality and professional background and explains, to a certain extent, the Kremlin's more assertive foreign policy in the former Soviet space. As an aide to President Medvedev said once, "when one resets a computer, one does not erase its memory" (Sussex 2012, 203). Looking through this lens, the return to Brezhnev's concept of "limited sovereignty", meaning that the former Soviet republics would be independent but not fully sovereign (Lo 2015, 111), appears a logical continuation of Russian foreign policy.

The verticalisation of power, where the autonomy of the parliament was limited and the government became an agency of presidential authority (Kryshtanovskaya and White 2009, 296), also meant the concentration of decision-making capacity in the hands of few individuals: the President and his trusted people. An illustrative example is Putin's confession that the decision to annex Crimea was taken by him and four other individuals on the eve of the closing of the Sochi Olympics (Putin 2015). According to Mikhail Zygar (2015, 336), the four were Sergei Ivanov, head of the Presidential Administration, Nikolay Patrushev, Secretary of the Security Council, Alexander Bortnikov, Director of the Federal Security Service (FSB), and Sergei Shoigu, Minister of Defence, all *siloviki* and all (except Shoigu) with a KGB/FSB past. However, as Gleb Pavlovsky (2015), a spin doctor close to the Kremlin, pointed out, President Putin is the one who makes the final decision on all important foreign policy issues (Pavlovsky 2015; Trenin 2015, 4). This also contributes to explaining the scarcity of political leaders who give views on Russian foreign policy matters and the coherence of the foreign policy itself.

As this section has highlighted, the assertiveness of Russian policy towards the 'near abroad' and the cohesiveness of the Russian foreign policymaking process varied over time. The next section will move on to discuss whether and how this has been reflected in Russian official narratives about the secessionist conflicts in the former Soviet republics.

Continuity and change in Russia's narratives about separatist conflicts

Official narratives in the 1990s

Russia's official narratives about the secessionist conflicts in the 1990s show a series of common patterns (*master narratives*), which reveal, first of all, a preoccupation of Russian policy-makers with encasing Moscow's actions in an international legal framework. When analysing the cases of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria, one can notice that the legal arguments play a dominant role, the invocation of fundamental concepts of international law (territorial integrity, humanitarian factor, right to self-determination, etc.) being always present, even if sometimes in contradiction with one another.

Russia's commitment to the principles of territorial integrity and sovereignty, for example, was highlighted during all the separatist conflicts of the 1990s. President Yeltsin made public declarations about the respect for these principles in relations with the former Soviet republics, even when the events on the ground posed certain challenges for Russia's interests. In August 1992, the Georgian army, with Russian military support, succeeded in occupying Sukhumi, the capital of Abkhazia. Even if this operation led to the death of over a hundred men, including several Russian citizens on vacation in the region, President Yeltsin referred to the events as "internal affairs of Georgia" (Yeltsin quoted in *Kommersant* 1992c). Whilst addressing the leadership of both Georgia and Abkhazia, he stressed that "Russia firmly supports the unity, sovereignty, territorial integrity of Georgia and does not support separatist appeals, no matter whom they come from" (Yeltsin 1992). Yeltsin also recognised the abolition of South-Ossetian autonomy by the Georgian authorities (*Kommersant* 1991) in response to the demand by South Ossetia to become an autonomous republic inside the USSR.

Unconditional support for the integrity, sovereignty and independence of the Republic of Moldova was also confirmed. First Kozyrev (see *Nezavisimaya Moldova* 1992, 1) and then Yeltsin clearly expressed their support for a "whole and indivisible Moldova", where Transnistria should "have its status, sovereignty, but within Moldova" (Yeltsin quoted in *Kommersant* 1992b). During a February 1993 meeting with Moldovan President Mircea Snegur, Yeltsin stressed the commitment of Moscow to developing cooperation between the two countries, in the interest of their people based on respect for their sovereignty, independence and national particularities. The two leaders discussed a solution to the Transnistrian conflict based on respect for the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova, as well as rigorous respect for human rights, including the rights of national minorities (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia 1993, 275).

Yet, concomitantly with these official narratives, a group of Russian politicians from the conservative opposition, more preoccupied with the humanitarian aspects, were

sending contradictory messages. Accusing Georgia of atrocities committed against the population in South Ossetia, Russian Vice-president Rutskoi threatened Tbilisi to "send a flying squadron and drop bombs on the Georgian cities" (*Nezavisimay Gazeta* 1992), thus disregarding the latter's sovereignty. In a press conference in 1993, he declared that "there are not only registered violations of human rights, but a real genocide is going on" in Abkhazia, and Russia "should not exclude the use of military force" (Rutskoi 1993). The argument of genocide would be invoked in the rest of the separatist conflicts and would be instrumentalised even more after 2008.

Besides the consideration of military intervention, Russian conservatives also suggested the possibility of recognising the independence of breakaway regions. In a declaration made on 15 June 1992, the speaker of the Russian parliament, Ruslan Khasbulatov (quoted in Bliev 2006, 454-5), harshly accused Tbilisi of "crowding Ossetians out of their historical lands", where "cities and villages are continuously bombarded", these actions having "to be qualified as genocide and massive expulsion of South-Ossetian ethnos from its historical homeland". Khasbulatov also suggested that the continuation of Georgian aggression could make the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation "consider immediately the will of the local people": in other words, recognising the self-declared independence of South Ossetia.

The humanitarian factor was also very present in Russian 1990s narratives, playing a determinant role in legitimising the warnings about recognition of breakaway regions and military intervention. Thus, a few days after the declaration of Khasbulatov about the possible recognition of South Ossetia's independence, Vice-president Rutskoi (quoted in Bliev 2006, 456) called the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), the United Nations (UN) and the international community "to condemn the acts of genocide in Moldova and Georgia against their own people and to take measures to end the crimes against humanity".

After a group of Russian MPs visited Abkhazia, MP Vladislav Tumanov addressed the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation, saying that the central authorities of Tbilisi "were conducting violence against women, old people and children [by] using weapons of mass destruction against civilians". Referring to the support of President Yeltsin for the authorities in Tbilisi, Tumanov remarked that "the policy pursued by the presidents of Russia and Georgia is aimed only at one thing – the elimination of national-state entities" (*Izvestia* 1992).

The argument of genocide was invoked by Russian militaries in Transnistria too. During a press conference on 4 July 1992, the Commander of the 14th Army, general major Alexander Lebed, declared that "there is not an ethnic conflict between the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic and the Republic of Moldova. Thirty-nine per cent of Transnistrian population are Moldovans, 26 per cent Ukrainians, 24 per cent Russians. What is happening here is a genocide against own people" (Shurygin *et al.* 2006, 61). Within this context, the illegitimacy of central authorities was also invoked. For Lebed, the regime in Moldova was "fascist" (*Kommersant* 1992b) – a rhetoric resonating with the memories of the Great Patriotic War, and he "cannot consider the legally elected president of Moldova, Mircea Snegur, as president [because] he was legally elected in the context of growth of euphoria, growth of national identity, of self-esteem, however, instead of sovereign leadership, [he] organised a fascist state and his clique is fascist" (Shurygin *et al.* 2006, 63). This declaration is very similar to the rhetoric Moscow used in the

aftermath of the 2013-2014 Maidan revolution towards the new political leaders in Ukraine to legitimise its actions in both Crimea and Donbas.

With the domestic political changes of 1993 and the westernised camp losing ground to the advantage of the conservative opposition, the humanitarian argument would soon enter the discourse of the Russian MFA too. In his 1993 address to the General Assembly of the UN, Minister Kozyrev (1993, 330-1) pointed out that the events in Yugoslavia, Abkhazia and Karabakh also showed the abyss of barbarism and the new main threat, that is, aggressive nationalism, arguing that Russia made peacekeeping and protection of human rights, in particular of national minorities, a priority of its foreign policy – first of all, in the former Soviet space.

The humanitarian argument was complemented by the responsibility of the Russian government to protect ethnic Russians. During his visit to Transnistria, on 5 April 1992, Vice-president Rutskoi declared that Russia, as a successor of the USSR, was obliged to protect Transnistrians even by force of arms, in the same manner as the US had defended its citizens in Grenada (*Kommersant* 1992a). Upon returning to Moscow, Rutskoi addressed the Russian Supreme Soviet, his position being that the Russian army had to protect Russians wherever they were (see Yeltsin 1994, 119). After the speech, the MPs almost unanimously passed a resolution where they expressed concern about the increasing violations of human rights in Moldova, noting that the MPs "understand the desire of the people of Transnistria to self-determination within Moldova" (*Kommersant* 1992a).

Nonetheless, the argument of self-determination, even if present in the Russian official discourse, was not extensively used in the 1990s. This can be explained by the domestic context. The growing unrest in the North Caucasus and the refusal of Chechnya and Tartastan to sign the Treaty of Federation in 1992 forced Russian politicians to restrain their use of the self-determination rhetoric.

Official narratives after 2008

Russia's narratives about the 2008 war in Georgia, the annexation of Crimea, the war in Donbas and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine show a series of common patterns too. Compared to the 1990s period, the legal arguments have been skilfully mingled with historical elements to convince both the external and domestic audiences of the rightfulness of Moscow's approach.

The humanitarian factor has played a central role from the beginning. In the case of the Georgian war, President Medvedev accused Tbilisi of having killed "thousands of citizens, which cannot be called in another way but genocide", and of conducting "ethnic cleansing in South Ossetia" (Medvedev 2008c). Within these circumstances, the recognition of the independence of the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was "the only possibility to save human lives", because what happened in South Ossetia "was planned in Abkhazia" too (Medvedev 2008a).

In Crimea and Donbas, Moscow got involved supposedly because the lives of ethnic Russian would be in danger. Since these latter opposed the "coup" in Kyiv, they "were immediately threatened with repression" and therefore "turned to Russia for help". Moscow "had no right to abandon [them] to the mercy of nationalist and radical militants" (Putin 2014c). The annexation of Crimea would have "prevented bloodshed

[…] which later erupted in the South-East" (Lavrov quoted in Vandenko 2014), while the recognition of the independence of the Donetsk and Lugansk regions and the 'special military operation' in Ukraine would have been necessary because there was a "humanitarian catastrophe" and "real genocide" (Putin 2022a; Matvienko 2022; Lavrov 2022) "against the millions of people living there who hope only for Russia" (Putin 2022c).

The humanitarian and genocide arguments were complemented with the narrative of responsibility to protect ethnic Russians. As "among the dead [in Georgia] were the Russian peacekeepers" (Medvedev 2008a), the Kremlin had to send its troops there because, according to the Constitution and the federal laws, it is the "duty [of the President] to protect the lives and dignity of Russian citizens wherever they may be" (Medvedev 2008c). In the cases of Crimea and Donbas, the Kremlin made it clear too that "it will always protect ethnic Russians in Ukraine, and [those who feel] part of the broad Russian world" (Putin quoted in *BBC News* 2014). In this context, the recognition of the independence of the Donetsk and Lugansk regions was supposedly needed because people were dying there, including Russian citizens (Volodin 2022), while the invasion of Ukraine would have been a necessary preventive action, because "nationalists and neo-Nazis will never forgive Crimeans for their independent choice. They will enter Crimea and Donbas with war, with the aim to kill" (Putin 2022c).

Despite international criticism, the invasion of Georgia, the annexation of Crimea, the war in Donbas, the recognition of the independence of the Lugansk and Donetsk regions and the invasion of Ukraine have been presented in the Russian narrative as being in accordance with international law. Because Tbilisi "unleashed an armed conflict victimizing innocent civilians" (Medvedev 2008c), Moscow had to "put into practice the principle of responsibility to protect […] in strict compliance with article 51 of the UN Charter" (Lavrov 2009). Then, based on the right to self-determination and the 'democratic' procedure that the local 'authorities' followed (referenda and decisions of self-declared national parliaments), guided by the provisions of the UN Charter, the 1970 Declaration on Principles of International Law Governing Friendly Relations between States, the CSCE Helsinki Final Act of 1975 and other fundamental international documents (Medvedev 2008a), Russia recognised the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In a similar vein, the annexation of Crimea allegedly came after a "fair and transparent" referendum held "in full compliance with democratic procedures and international norms," and the decisions of the Supreme Council of Crimea to join Russia would be based on the provisions of the UN Charter that "speaks of the right of nations to self-determination" (Putin 2014a). In Donbas, Putin denied any involvement until December 2015, but even then, the Russian President specified that there were "people dealing with certain tasks, including in the military sphere", but there were "not regular Russian forces", highlighting this difference (Putin quoted in *Telegraph* 2015), that would absolve Moscow from violating international law. Later on, the recognition of the Lugansk and Donetsk regions was presented as in accordance with the right to self-determination and the UN resolution on Kosovo (Matvienko 2022).

The invasion of Ukraine was not recognised as such. It was presented as a 'special military operation' which did not represent the beginning of a war but was meant to end a "bloody war with civilian casualties, which started eight years ago". Furthermore, the 'special military operation' would be needed "to prevent a global military confrontation" (Zakharova 2022) and to prevent Ukraine from acquiring nuclear weapons (*Reuters*

2022) – a narrative similar to the arguments used by US President George W. Bush twenty years earlier to justify the war in Iraq (Bush 2002).

In support of the legality argument, the Kosovo precedent as a model of implementation of the principle of self-determination has been invoked in the cases of the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the annexation of Crimea and the recognition of the independence of the Lugansk and Donetsk regions. Putin underlined that it was "a precedent our Western colleagues created with their own hands in a very similar situation" (Putin 2014a), criticising the Western states for applying double standards in international law.

In all these cases, Moscow reaffirmed its commitment to the principles of territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual respect, non-aggression, non-interference in the domestic affairs of other states and the indivisibility of security (Lavrov 2008a). In the case of Georgia, Foreign Minister Lavrov argued that the essence of the 1970 Declaration on the Principles of International Law Governing Friendly Relations between States was that "the state's right to territorial integrity is conditioned by its obligation to respect the right to self-determination and development of all peoples living on its territory." Thus, with the "aggression against South Ossetia […] and the preparation of a similar blitzkrieg against Abkhazia […] President Saakashvili himself destroyed the territorial integrity of his state" (Lavrov 2008b). In the case of Crimea, President Putin highlighted that "we have always respected the territorial integrity of the Ukrainian state" and that "the final decision to return Crimea to the Russian Federation was only based on the results of the referendum" (Putin 2014b). According to Putin, Russia respects the sovereignty of the former Soviet republics and "would like other countries to respect the sovereignty of other countries, including Ukraine [too], which would mean to prevent coups, anti-constitutional actions and illegal displacement of legitimate authorities" (Putin quoted in *Tass* 2015). Even while Moscow was bombarding Kyiv in 2022, the Russian President claimed that "we respect and will respect [Ukraine's] sovereignty. But Russia cannot feel safe, develop, exist with a constant threat emanating from the territory of modern Ukraine". The goal of the 'special military operation' would be to protect people "who have been subjected to bullying and genocide by the Kyiv regime for eight years. And for this, we will strive for the demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine […]. We do not plan to occupy Ukrainian territories" (Putin 2022c).

The argument of the illegitimacy of central authorities has been put forward in the case of both Georgia and Ukraine. Dmitry Medvedev (2013) named Georgian President Saakashvili "a war criminal" (Medvedev 2013) and a "hooligan" who "when smells blood is very difficult to stop" (Medvedev 2008c); the new political leaders in Kyiv that came to power after the flee of Yanukovich were labelled as "Nationalists, Neo-Nazis, Russophobes and anti-Semites", who did "not have any control in the country" (Putin 2014a). Similar references to Ukrainian authorities as "Neo-Nazis and Banderovtsy", "gang of drug addicts", "anti-popular junta" were used in the context of the recognition of the independence of the Lugansk and Donetsk regions and the invasion of Ukraine (Putin 2022c; 2022d; Lavrov 2022). This way, Moscow would allegedly have the obligation to protect the citizens of those countries from their illegitimate rulers, and any intervention would be justified.

Russian political elites also invoked a series of historical facts meant to justify their actions. In the case of Abkhazia, Moscow argued that, when Georgia started the

process of independence, many state documents of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, including those tying in a single state Abkhazia and Georgia, were abrogated. As such, at the beginning of 1990s, legally, there would have been two states not related to each other (Churkin 2008); thus, the independence of Abkhazia would be a historical reparation – a restoration of its 1990s independence. South Ossetia, instead, would have joined the Russian Empire as an independent state in 1774 (Putin quoted in *Civil Georgia* 2019), thus now having the right to 'recover' its historical independence. In the cases of Crimea and Donbas, those territories would have been 'granted' to the Ukrainian SSR by Soviet central authorities (Putin 2014a; 2022b).

Comparing official narratives from the 1990s and post-2008

Looking at the two sets of narratives, one can observe that all the legal elements used in the 1990s period are present in the post-2008 case studies too. Indeed, post-2008 narratives are more elaborated, with new supporting arguments (for example, the UN's principle of responsibility to protect, the Kosovo precedent and legality of annexation of a territory). However, for historical reasons, these arguments could not have been possible in the 1990s.

Two differences have to be noticed. The first is the presence of arguments of historical (in)justice in the Russian post-2008 discourse. In the 1990s, Russian policy-makers did not resort to similar elements, aware that the process of nation-building of the newly independent states had developed in opposition to Russia; in the post-2008 period, historical elements have been integrated into the narratives based on legal arguments. This has been done in particular when constructing the narrative legitimising the annexation of Crimea and the recognition of the independence of the Donetsk and Lugansk regions, targeting mostly the Russian domestic audience (Rotaru and Troncota 2017), more inclined to nostalgia for the past glory.

A second aspect is that the 1990s narratives are less coherent than the post-2008, with noticeable contradictions in Russia's official positioning in relations to the governments of new post-Soviet states or the secessionist regions. However, to better assess the impact of these aspects on our analysis, we should look at the two different domestic contexts, especially the differences in the foreign policymaking processes of the 1990s and the 2000s. The varying domestic political weight of the conservative elites (former members of the Soviet leadership, *siloviki*, etc.) explains the different cohesiveness of Russian narratives towards the secessionist conflicts. While in the aftermath of the

Table 1. Russian official narratives towards separatist conflicts in the 1990s and post-2008

1990s	Post-2008
Humanitarian factor	Humanitarian factor
Responsibility to protect ethnic Russian	Responsibility to protect ethnic Russian
	UN principle of responsibility to protect
Sovereignty and territorial integrity	Sovereignty and territorial integrity
Right to self-determination	Right to self-determination
	Kosovo precedent
	Legality of Russia's actions
Illegitimacy of central authority	Illegitimacy of central authority
	Historical (in)justice

dissolution of the USSR, they were marginalised or encountered serious opposition from new liberal elites, the 2000s decision-making process witnessed a verticalisation of power. In addition, the *siloviki* gained over 40 per cent of posts in the political and administrative apparatus, and a ruling elite made up of people trained during the 1980s and/or who had been in the backbench of 1990s politics no longer faced significant opposition. Moreover, in the post-2008 period, only a few policy-makers expressed their views on Russian foreign policy, which were always in accordance with Putin's – himself an exponent of the Cold War-educated *siloviki*.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis presented in this article shows a great similarity between the Russian official narratives towards the secessionist conflicts in the 1990s and post-2008 periods. All the arguments used in the 1990s can be found in the post-2008 Russian narratives as well. This continuity can be explained to an extent by the continued presence in power of many elite and second-tier policy-makers. At the beginning of the 1990s, when the USSR dissolved, there was not a complete change in the ruling elites and administrative apparatus of newly independent Russia. Part of the former members of the Soviet leadership and most second-tier policy-makers, educated during the Cold War era, maintained their posts. Even if their positions were weakened, they were able to make substantial opposition to the new liberal pro-Western elites, undermining the latter's positions towards the 'near abroad'. In addition, the *siloviki*, even if in smaller proportion, were present at all levels. Many elite and second-tier policy-makers of the 1990s remained in power through the entire post-Soviet period, thus ensuring a degree of continuity in Russian official narratives towards the secessionist conflicts.

Differences in the two sets of narratives, however, appear in their degree of cohesiveness and elaboration. Looking at the respective contexts in which the narratives were produced, the difference in their cohesiveness can be explained first of all by the changes in the Russian political system. While in the 1990s the policymaking process was diffuse, with multiple and contradictory voices, the post-2008 years have been characterised by the verticalisation of power and centralisation of public narratives. The different degree of elaboration of the narratives is suggested by several factors. In the 1990s, Russia was 'testing' the humanitarian arguments, those about the illegitimacy of central authorities in the former Soviet republics, the narratives of the responsibility to protect ethnic Russians abroad, correlated with the commitment to the international law principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity. At the same time, some arguments, such as that of self-determination, present in post-2008 conflicts, were not very visible or developed in the 1990s, given that Russia itself was confronted with secessionist claims in the North Caucasus. In the following years, changes in the international context provided Russian authorities with new elements: namely, the UN principle of responsibility to protect and the Kosovo precedent. Finally, Russian actions in the 'near abroad', like the invasions of Georgia and Ukraine, required stronger legitimisation narratives, in which historical elements played an important role for the domestic public.

Looking at the two sets of narratives in the contexts in which they emerged, we can conclude that the post-2008 narratives seek to present themselves as consistent with the past aiming at inducing the perception that Russia's strategy towards the secessionist

conflicts in the 'near abroad' has remained the same – that is, supporting the separatist regions militarily with the proclaimed aim of protecting the Russian minority living in those regions. Even the 2022 invasion of Ukraine was allegedly motivated by the need to protect the 'independent' republics of Donetsk and Lugansk (Putin 2022d). These narratives, however, are not consistent with empirical evidence.

This dissonance was most evident in 2008 and 2022. Even if the invasions of Georgia and Ukraine differed from the actions of the 1990s, the Kremlin's narrative continued to present the two wars as actions of separatist regimes, supported by the Russian military, for the defence of their territories. The inconsistency between actions and aimed projected perceptions required stronger justifications. Hence, the official narratives were more elaborated and reinforced with historical elements meant to convince the domestic public of the legitimacy of Russian military 'support'.

By using the arguments emerged already in the 1990s, the Kremlin suggests the continuity of its strategy towards separatist conflicts. However, as empirical evidence has shown, since 2008, Moscow has not simply intervened in secessionist territories to put pressure on central governments of other post-Soviet states, but has also not abstained from direct invasion to control the foreign policy of the countries in its neighbourhood. Hence, while Moscow's legitimisation arguments of post-2008 conflicts are framed in the logic of its 1990s strategy, empirical reality evokes rather the memory of the 1956 and 1968 Soviet invasions.

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