INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

RUSSIA'S REGIONAL POLICY: UNLEARNED LESSONS OF LOCAL CONFLICTS

Olga Brusylovska[1] ID**, ScD in Political Science; Iuliia Maistrenko**[2] ID**, PhD in Political Science**
[1] *Odesa I. I. Mechnikov National University, Odesa, Ukraine*
[2] *Odesa I. I. Mechnikov National University, Odesa, Ukraine*
Corresponding author: Olga Brusylovska; Email: brusylovska@onu.edu.ua

Abstract
The goal of this article is to identify Russia's policy options during local conflicts in the post-Soviet space. Our research is empirical. The research question is how Russia chose its "involvement" options in post-Soviet local conflicts? The independent variable is Russian regional politics; the dependent variable is local conflict in a post-Soviet country (cases of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Chechnya). The hypothesis is that Russian politics played a significant role in post-Soviet local conflicts. Research triangulation was achieved through the use of several qualitative methods (documentary investigation, collecting data from media and secondary sources, Internet research, and discourse analysis). The first option of Russia's actions in the post-Soviet space is to fuel a local conflict and play the role of a "Peacemaker" to solidify its influence in the region. Russia employed such tactics in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia in the initial stage. The second option is "Invasion and the Creation of Quasi-States," which was applied in Chechnya, as well as in Abkhazia and South Ossetia after the Five-Day War against Georgia. A similar attempt was made in Ukraine under the project "Novorossiya," but it ended with limited success. Instead of a quasi-state stretching upon the entire southeastern part of Ukraine (Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, Mykolaiv, Odesa, Kharkiv, Kherson regions, and Crimea), the Kremlin managed to create only "the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics" (DPR and LPR), while Crimea, due to its special military-strategic value, was annexed by the Russian Federation through a rigged referendum. By using local conflicts, Russia seeks to regain its status as a great power. To achieve this, Russia plays out the same scenario in the post-Soviet space: igniting ethnic tensions, deploying a limited contingent, and endorsing territorial changes in favor of allies. The same instruments were applied again in Ukraine, but the international community failed to learn the lessons from previous conflicts and was unable to stop Putin before the onset of large-scale aggression.
Keywords: Russia, regional politics, local conflicts, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Chechnya, quasi-states.

Introduction
Between 2003 and 2005, the Kremlin identified the Russian Federation as an independent great power, "insisting that the United States of America and the European Union had to treat Russia as an equal partner" (Piontkovsky, 2012). Russian foreign policy became more assertive again. Having strengthened his position

during the first years, Putin has invoked both traditional Russian patriotism and post-imperial nationalism. Russian nationalism expressed itself in such twin concepts as "Sovereign Democracy"[1] and "Energy Superpower"[2] which came to the fore in 2005.

By this time, there were many supporters of the Eurasian ideology claiming the existence of a separate Russian civilization on the territory of the former Russian Empire. They assign a cultural meaning to the Russian-speaking community (the so-called Russian World). The idea of nation is expanded to include any regions where Russian language and culture are dominant. Those ideological schemes, in particular, have been added to Putin's so-called "Conservative Values"[3], when the president declared the existence of a multi-ethnic civilization with a Russian core and the trinity of the Russian nation (the Great Russians, the Small Russians, and the Belarussians). This ideology has become a tool to manage the conflicts in the post-Soviet space (Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Crimea, and so-called Novorossiya).

The collapse of the Soviet Union, like the collapse of former empires, is more of a process than an event. And this process continues today; it did not end with the resignation of M. Gorbachev in 1991, and its victims are not limited to the thousands who died in the Chechen wars. Apparently "frozen conflicts"[4] in Ukraine, Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh (NKR), and Chechnya have a persistent tendency to return to a hot phase at any moment, constituting one of the main threats to the modern system of international relations.

A particular feature of the presented research is the use of a wide range of publications not only in Western but also in Russian political science. This allows for identifying the difference in scholars' approaches but also seeing critical voices that had been still heard in the Russian Federation before the start of full-scale aggression against Ukraine. G. S. K. Gadimova argued that "the prolonged conflict strengthened Russia's influence both in the South Caucasus and internationally" (Gadimova, 2018). R. Ortunng and K. Walker claimed that Putin's regime is implementing a massive destabilization scheme in the post-Soviet space, within which "frozen conflicts are used as Trojan horses hindering reforms" (Lukyanov, 2016). By undermining the territorial integrity of Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine, Russia seeks to distract the governments of these countries from improving their own governance and involvement in Western structures. Instead, these states should deal with territorial issues, corruption against the backdrop of the strengthening of nationalist sentiments and tangled political debates. Unlike Western scholars, Russian expert circles consider the strategy of frozen conflicts successful, even so-called liberal political scientists. Therefore, D. Trenin expressed concern that "the war in the Caucasus could put an end to the successful strategy of using smoldering conflicts in the post-Soviet space as an instrument of foreign policy" (Trenin, 2016). S. Markedonov (2018) noted that the main motive of the Kremlin in resolving conflicts in the Caucasus in the 21st century was a reaction to changing circumstances (a change in the status quo not in favor of Russia, the penetration of new players into the region, and the fear of losing its influence), rather than concealing an ideological program or a complex geopolitical strategy. Thus, "Moscow does not seek to change the status quo; instead, it merely responds to such attempts, as was the case with Georgia in the period from 2004 to 2008" (Markedonov, 2018).

In our opinion, one of the main prerequisites for conflicts in the post-Soviet space lies in the totalitarian and centralist nature of the Soviet state. Ethnic, national, and religious diversity was perceived by the ruling elite as a threat to the regime's existence and the creation of the identity of the "Soviet Person"[5].

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[1] According to V. Surkov, the term Sovereign Democracy implies that Russia is a democratic country, which must never be questioned; otherwise, Kremlin will view such an action as an unsolicited intervention into Russia's domestic affairs. It became the official policy doctrine of the Putin administration. Its implementation was justified as Russia's ideological opposition to the Western democracy promotion agenda.

[2] Concept originally coined by V. Putin to articulate its vision to leverage energy resources, mainly oil and gas, to restore Russia's greatness in global politics.

[3] Firstly V. Putin in 70-minute state-of-the nation address 2013 cast Russia as a defender of conservative values against the "genderless and infertile" Western tolerance that he said equates good and evil. It was effort to burnish Russia's image that has been dented by Western criticism of an anti-gay law.

[4] A frozen conflict is a situation in which active armed conflict has been brought to an end, but no peace treaty or other political framework resolves the conflict to the satisfaction of the combatants.

[5] The New Soviet Person or New Soviet Man, as postulated by the ideologists of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, was an archetype of a person with specific qualities that were said to be emerging as dominant among all citizens of the Soviet Union, regardless of their cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity, creating a single unified Soviet people and Soviet nation.

With the collapse of the USSR, those problems and contradictions that were previously suppressed by force came to the surface. At the same time, with the erosion of the Soviet system, ethnic and civil contradictions flared up in many territories, which Moscow used to preserve its influence on the new post-Soviet states. The conservative political elites of Russia repeated the same scenario each time, but as it seems to us, the lessons of the past have still not been learned. Therefore, the goal of this article is to identify the options of Russia's policy during local conflicts in the post-Soviet space.

Methodology

Our research is empirical. Empiricist research methods provide the means to do so as they unlock tools that allow for causal claims and explanations of developments and practices of international politics. There are 3 core characteristics of IR empiricism: (1) that international politics can be studied as an objective reality that is a world 'out there' and distinct from the researcher; (2) theories are held to the standard of predictive validity; and (3) hypotheses tested in IR research should be falsifiable (Lamont, 2015, p. 19). In qualitative research, access to the research site is an important concern for the researcher. The view of what is being studied is at the center of the researcher's attention to understand its "truth," inserted in a given context (Takahashi & Araujo, 2019).

The research question is how Russia chose its "involvement" options in post-Soviet local conflicts? The independent variable is Russian regional politics; the dependent variable is local conflicts in post-Soviet countries (cases of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Chechnya). The hypothesis is that Russian politics played a significant role in post-Soviet local conflicts.

Triangulation of research was achieved through using several qualitative methods (case study, documentary investigation, collecting data from media and secondary sources, Internet research, and discourse analysis). The main method is a case study. In this research, we adopt Coombs's understanding of case study: "A case study is a methodological research approach used to generate an in-depth understanding of a contemporary issue or phenomenon in a bounded system… to gain detailed and nuanced understanding of the case subject" (Coombs, 2022, p. 1). Bounded system means that a case must be bounded by time and place.

The most prominent case study scholar is R. K. Yin. To answer the questions in adopting an effective research strategy Yin identified five types of strategies: experiment, survey, archival analysis, history, and case study. According to him the case study design is preferred as a research strategy when "how," "why," and "what" questions are the interest of the researcher (Yin, 2018). There are three types of case studies: (single) instrumental case study, collective (multiple) case study, and intrinsic case study. We chose the second option because it allows for a more extensive comparison. A multiple case study approach is used for a cross-site comparison. In a multiple case study the researcher selects multiple cases to illustrate the one issue or concern (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The goal of a multiple case study is to compare cases to identify common patterns, relationships, or similarities (Coombs, 2022, p. 2). Discourse analysis was used for analysis and interpretation of the data, to enhance the reliability, reproducibility, and validity of the research presented.

Related to qualitative research methods, a variety of approaches have been set forth in the literature using the terms conceptual framework, theoretical framework, paradigm, and epistemology. For ex., for E. Gonzalez-Ocantos (2020) "attention to theoretical priors from the very beginning is crucial and has implications for data collection, the identification of alternative explanations, and case selection". But according to A. Chowdhury and N. Chandra Shil, "the theory as a framework for viewing the social world is too general, too broad, and too all-encompassing to be confirmed or refuted by empirical research". So, adopting a predetermined theory as a lens through which to interpret a case could well be gained at the expense of ignoring organizational dynamics and tensions which do not readily fit the chosen theory (Chowdhury, & Chandra Shil, 2021, p. 199). So, a theory should emerge only after gathering detailed information. Therefore we should start from research methods, gather and interpret data, and the last step might be the understanding of our conclusions as a part of certain theoretical framework. In a case study theoretical generalization is possible, but optional.

In qualitative case studies, the researcher is intimately involved with the subject under study. The choice of a particular research strategy depends on the researcher's value assumptions underlying the research questions and goals. In this study we justified the choice of case study as a research strategy; then the methods of analysis were described. Special attention was paid to the selection of the research site and the field area. Having multiple data sources was the strength of this study; and not only the research phenomena were examined, but also their context.

"Peacemaking" Scenario

The declaration of independence by the Georgian SSR in 1989 and the recognition of the Georgian language as the state language caused outrage in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which enjoyed autonomous status. In 1990, the first clashes began after the Georgian leadership decided to deprive South Ossetia of its autonomous status in response to its attempts to create its own parliament. President Z. Gamsakhurdia resorted to solving the ethnic problem with the Ossetians through military intervention in South Ossetia. As a result of such actions, 70,000 refugees appeared. On August 14, 1992, the Supreme Council of the Abkhaz ASSR declared the independence of the republic from Georgia. The Georgian State Council annulled this resolution and decided to send National Guard troops to Abkhazia. Active fighting lasted just over a year – until the end of September 1993. As a result of the civil war of 1992-1993, 8,000 people were killed, and about 240,000 (mostly Georgians) were forced to leave their homes (Perepelytsia, 2003, p. 181).

At this point, Russia intervened in the conflict, which seemed logical since Abkhazia had historical ties to Russia and the ethnic territory of the Ossetians was divided into North and South Ossetia, included in different republics, now different states. The Ossetians considered this situation a historical injustice, so the goal of the conflict was not so much to gain greater autonomy or even to leave Georgia, but to reunite with their other part – North Ossetia. To confirm these intentions, a referendum was held (January 1992), in which 99% of the Ossetian population voted for reunification with North Ossetia as part of the Russian Federation (Perepelytsia, 2003, p. 182).

However, pragmatic party officials and national democrats led by Boris Yeltsin at that time still supported Tbilisi. Manipulating South Ossetia and Abkhazia gave Russia the opportunity to keep Georgia in line with its own geopolitical interests and to obstruct both the spread of Turkish influence in the Caucasus and Western countries.

Since Russia had practically lost economic leverage in the Caucasus, its primary instrument of control was its military presence in Abkhazia and Georgia, for which the Russian military had to provide assistance to the Abkhaz leadership. Soviet, and then Russian, military personnel were directly involved in both conflicts on the side of the separatists. After the ceasefire in South Ossetia in 1992 and in Abkhazia in 1994, Russian troops remained in the regions as peacekeepers, de facto solidifying their independence (Trenin, 2012, p. 137).

Similar events unfolded in Nagorno-Karabakh, an autonomous region of the Azerbaijan SSR, mainly inhabited by Armenians. The ethnic conflict erupted in the late 1980s and early 1990s, escalating into a civil war between separatists, supported by independent Armenia, on one side, and independent Azerbaijan on the other (Iskandarjan, 2008). Soviet and then Russian forces were involved in the conflict from both sides, but the growth of nationalist sentiments in the Azerbaijani leadership in 1992 forced Moscow to draw closer to Armenia, ultimately resulting in the victory of the separatists. In 1994, after the conflict had claimed about 30,000 lives, a ceasefire was reached, and Nagorno-Karabakh remained in the hands of Armenian separatists, who managed to build a small but functional state, technically located on Azerbaijani territory but under the protection of Armenia, meaning essentially Russia.

Overall, the situation of neither war nor peace in Nagorno-Karabakh and the seven regions of Azerbaijan had a negative impact on both Azerbaijan and Armenia from geopolitical, economic, and humanitarian perspectives. The idea that Azerbaijan lost the war not to Armenia but effectively to Russia was extremely popular in Azerbaijan. In Armenia, there was also a view that Moscow manipulated Armenia while selling weapons to Azerbaijan at the same time (De Waal, 2017). Indeed, for decades Russia had been selling weapons to both sides. Azerbaijan purchased military equipment from Russia for at least $4 billion. Similarly, Armenia also bought weapons from Russia, and overall the Armenian-Russian strategic alliance developed due to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. This was also related to the fact that Russia was interested in creating joint military air forces in Armenia within the CSTO framework (Kucera, 2013). Russian companies have significant economic assets in Armenia. There is a large Russian military base in the Gyumri region of Armenia, located near the border with Azerbaijan. An agreement on the rapid military deployment was signed between the countries, and it stated that "Russia, on legal grounds, would be able to use its army to defend Armenia" (Tamkin, 2016). Meanwhile, Russian businesses also invested in Azerbaijan's oil industry.

During the escalation of the conflict in 2020, Russia participated in negotiations and was the first to achieve ceasefire agreements for humanitarian purposes, but these agreements were practically not implemented. The statement on the ceasefire from November 10, 2020, signed with the mediation of Russia, documented Azerbaijan's new positions (Peace Agreements Database, 2021). What was new was Russia's direct intervention in the conflict with the initiative to deploy a peacekeeping contingent. This somehow helped to slow down further escalation and created a new area of Russian military presence in the Caucasus.

This forced both countries to pay more attention to Moscow's position and gave Russia new potential levers of influence over both countries.

Swiss diplomat Günter Behler, former OSCE special representative, believes that the Armenian-Azerbaijani military conflict marked a loss for international law, multilateralism, and diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict in the South Caucasus. Behler stated that the Russian leadership fantastically used the opportunity to strengthen its positions in the region, leading to both sides of the conflict receiving what they least wanted: Russian peacekeeping forces. He believes that the EU may again lose the South Caucasus. In Armenia, after the defeat in the war for Karabakh, the democratic experiment suffered. However, neither the EU nor the US is ready to play a more significant role in the region, unlike Russia (Esipov, 2020). Scholars' opinions on this matter are divided. However, Russia has strengthened its influence in the South Caucasus, as now Russian troops are present not only in Armenia but also in Karabakh (Baev, 2023).

What undoubtedly played into Russia's hands in the ceasefire agreement of November 10, 2020, was the deployment of a Russian peacekeeping contingent along the line of contact in Nagorno-Karabakh and the Lachin corridor. The term of stay of the Russian peacekeeping contingent was set at 5 years with automatic renewal for subsequent 5-year periods if none of the parties to the agreement declares its intention to terminate the application of this provision 6 months before the expiration of the term. The Kremlin will certainly use all leverage on Baku to continue the existence of this base in 2025. Azerbaijan, despite close cooperation with Turkey, has never indicated refusal to relations with Russia. In turn, Armenia has become even more strongly tied to Moscow's need to build up military force than it had been before the 2020 war. In addition, in 2020, Russia's military resources in Armenia increased: providing for the activities of peacekeepers in Karabakh required strengthening the Russian grouping on the other side of the Karabakh border. Ensuring the security corridor in Nakhichevan (Azerbaijan) also required an increase in the number of Russian border guards (i.e., the FSB) in Armenia.

Therefore, in 2020, global diplomacy suffered a defeat in its attempts to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict through political and diplomatic efforts. Importantly, as a result of the Karabakh war, a third Russian peacekeeping mission emerged. The term of its stay was limited to five years but with the right of extension.

However, the intervention of the 201st RF division in the civil war in Tajikistan led to the defeat of the Islamists in the war; the fierce first Chechen war was fought under the slogans of fighting for territorial integrity within the Russian Federation itself. Sadly, in all cases, except Chechnya, Russia was recognized by the United States and its allies as a mediator.

At the beginning of 2022, the situation in the region worsened for Russia. On March 24, new clashes took place near Parukh. Both sides again expressed claims regarding shelling each other. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan held a series of negotiations with Russia regarding the inaction of Russian peacekeepers. He emphasized that the peacekeeping contingent should increase its numbers and activity. However, despite formal negotiations and promises, no progress was made in resolving these issues. By that time, Russia had already been involved in the invasion of Ukraine. Azerbaijan decided to capitalize on this and began to raise the stakes. The clashes continued, and in the summer – early autumn of 2022, they escalated significantly. Pashinyan once again expressed dissatisfaction with the inaction of Russian troops and even began to talk about the need to seek an alternative to peacekeepers if they did not ensure order. Azerbaijan continued actively working on the return of the Lachin corridor, the only important communication link between Armenia and NKR. Russian peacekeepers, who began dismantling their checkpoints and leaving the region on August 25, contributed to Baku's aspirations. The next day, the Azerbaijani army entered the city of Lachin. On September 13, the most significant clashes occurred already around the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan. According to the sides, Armenia lost 207 people, and Azerbaijan lost 71 soldiers. Importantly, as a result of the fighting, the territory of Armenia was shelled, and therefore, such actions should have been a significant argument for the application of the mechanism of collective defense of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), to which Armenia is a member. Despite Yerevan's immediate appeal for help, there was no response. The CSTO, following the meeting results, sent the organization's Secretary-General to the conflict zone to assess the situation and develop decisions. The Russian NATO analog stated that the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan should be resolved by political and diplomatic means rather than by the use of military force and refused to send a full-fledged military contingent. On September 19, 2023, Azerbaijan launched an attack on Armenian armed forces in NKR. As a result, an ultimatum was presented, to which NKR and Armenia agreed.

In early September 2023, an interview with Nikol Pashinyan was published in the Italian newspaper La Repubblica, in which he referred to Armenia's strategic mistake of relying on Russia for security.

Armenia's security architecture was 99.999% tied to Russia, especially in the realm of arms procurement and ammunition. However, today, when Russia needs weapons and ammunition, it's clear that even if it wanted to, it couldn't meet Armenia's security needs. This example should show us that dependence or attachment solely to one security center is a strategic mistake, he said (Prime Minister, 2023).

For Russia, issues arose with joint American-Armenian exercises and Pashinyan's wife's visit to Kyiv with humanitarian aid. Yerevan ceased its participation in CSTO joint exercises and considered the possibility of withdrawing from this military bloc.

The inability of peacekeeping forces to resist constant attempts to restrict Armenia's access to the region undermined trust in Russia as an effective security guarantor. Firstly, because Azerbaijan annulled the status quo by force, the guarantor of which Moscow had been de jure and de facto. According to the agreement between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia of November 10, 2020, the uninterrupted operation of the Lachin corridor was to be ensured by Russian peacekeepers. Azerbaijan, in accordance with the agreement reached through the Kremlin's mediation, was to ensure "the security of movement along the Lachin corridor of citizens, vehicles, and cargo in both directions" (Commonspace.eu, 2020). Despite this agreement, Azerbaijan blocked the Lachin corridor and conducted a military operation. Secondly, all countries of the world saw that the Kremlin could not prevent Armenia – its ally from the CSTO military bloc – from suffering defeat.

Russia has never resorted to military intervention to protect ethnic minorities, including Russian-speaking populations, in former Soviet republics, although they often suffered much more there than in other republics of the former USSR. Thus, the role of peacemaker and promises to protect the Russian population or other minorities worked more for domestic consumption, while in reality Moscow was compelled to intervene by the desire of Azerbaijan or Georgia's governments to leave the Russian geopolitical orbit, rather than actual or perceived persecution of minorities.

"Invasion and the Creation of Quasi-States" Scenario

The Chechen conflict stands out from other conflicts in the post-Soviet space; it vividly demonstrates the duality of Kremlin policy: while suppressing internal separatist movements, Moscow acts as a patron of similar movements in neighboring states.

At the heart of the conflict lies an ethnic factor – the desire of the Chechens, to separate from the Russian Federation and form a national state. From a historical retrospective, the union of Chechnya and Russia is not considered voluntary. For a long time (1817-1864), Chechnya and Dagestan, driven by a spirit of freedom, waged a liberation struggle against the Russian Empire. From an economic point of view, the oil and gas capacities would have allowed Chechnya to build an independent state. However, the key factor that unites the Chechen ethnicity and distinguishes it from the population of Russia is Islam. Under the influence of previous factors and the laws of *"ghazavat"*[1], a process of awareness of national needs began, which rallied the Chechen people around the national leader Dzhokhar Dudayev (Trenin, 2012, p. 132). In 1991, the de facto independent Chechen Republic (later the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria) was proclaimed under the leadership of President Dudayev (assassinated in 1996).

The first Chechen campaign took place from 1994 to 1996 and ended in defeat for the federal center. In 1997, The Khasavyurt Accords were signed between the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria and the Russian Federation, under which Moscow de facto recognized the independence of Chechnya and withdrew Russian troops from its territory. This vividly demonstrated the weakness and disorganization of Russia. During the second campaign from 1999 to 2001, the rebels were defeated due to their internal quarrels. According to the new version of the Kremlin, the chaos of the Yeltsin era was replaced by the establishment of order under Putin. Ultimately, Chechnya was pacified; federal forces regained control over most of Chechnya's territory, and the pro-Russian administration was established, headed by Akhmat Kadyrov. Therefore, President Putin was forced to entrust the republic to a former adversary with whom he had reached a personal agreement. After the murder of Kadyrov in 2005, the Kremlin allowed his clan, led by his son Ramzan Kadyrov, to practically establish dynastic rule in Chechnya (Trenin, 2012, p. 134). Today, Chechnya represents a semi-independent khanate where clan laws often prevail, and the situation is characterized as stable instability. Chechnya maintains an informal special status because it is difficult for Kadyrov and Putin to do without each other, if at all possible. The general opinion is that as long as there is Putin, there will be Kadyrov. Moreover, it is difficult to predict what may happen in Chechnya after Kadyrov. By establishing authoritarian rule in the republic, Kadyrov

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[1] Holy war against non-Muslim peoples and states.

violated the principles of the consensus-based Chechen political culture, eliminated his competitors, and it is not excluded that those whom he wronged will demand compensation.

As for Russia's contradictions with Georgia, they intensified in 2004 when M. Saakashvili, a young pro-Western politician who sought to integrate Georgia into NATO and bring rebellious regions under Georgian control, was elected president of Georgia. Moscow incited South Ossetia to various provocations. A war of nerves began: skirmishes and bombardments in the conflict zone, flights of drones, arrests of spies, and trials. The Russian side provoked Georgian leaders into reckless decisions to prove that Georgian leaders would blindly resort to weapons and, hence, had to be denied NATO membership. In turn, in Tbilisi, they hoped that Moscow's actions would demonstrate: Russia is just a new edition of the USSR, equally aggressive and ruthless. From this, they believed, the opposite conclusion would be drawn, directly opposite to what Moscow expected: Russia poses a direct threat, and Georgia is a frontline state like Germany during the Cold War, and its defense is equivalent to the defense of the free world (Markedonov, 2008).

Such maneuvers led to the military operation in Georgia, which began in 2008 in Tskhinvali was used by Russia as a reason to invade Georgia. The Five-Day War claimed hundreds of lives and left thousands homeless. After the end of the armed phase of the Russo-Georgian conflict, the situation was frozen again. The Parliament of Georgia adopted a resolution On the Occupation of Georgian Territories by the Russian Federation; the government adopted a long-term strategy for the peaceful return of the occupied territories.

Georgia justified the use of its armed forces against South Ossetia as restoring constitutional order and the need to launch a preemptive strike against Russian troops. Moscow explained its actions by the necessity to protect the population of South Ossetia from genocide by Georgia (Minasjan, 2008, p. 111). Additionally, Moscow's objectives in the Caucasus were related to threats such as religious extremism, terrorism, and separatism. During the Chechen war, part of Georgian territory – the Pankisi Gorge – was used by militants as a hideout. Therefore, in the situation with Georgia, the Kremlin drew an analogy with Al-Qaeda and the Taliban (Trenin, 2009, p. 165). However, the real motive behind the Kremlin's actions was an attempt to prevent the signing of the Membership Action Plans by the governments of Kyiv and Tbilisi. Moscow ambiguously hinted to the West about the possibility of internal turmoil in Ukraine and the prospect of thawing ethnic conflicts in Georgia if the collective West did not abandon plans to expand NATO to the East.

In August 2008, Ukrainian political scientist O. Sushko (2017) wrote about a possible scenario of Russian strategy.

If the West forgives the Russo-Georgian war, a "peacekeeping" invasion on the territory of Ukraine will become a matter of time. From the moment when Russia began its massive invasion by its regular army into Georgian territory, the conflict turned into a geopolitical war aimed at the destruction of the current world order. Eventually, this revanchist strategy could lead to the destruction of Russian statehood, but before it happens there will be a lot of local conflicts that will eliminate the vestiges of independence of the neighboring countries… The Russians are deliberately preparing themselves for war with Ukraine. In Russia, the absence of war caused anxiety, instability, and a decline in the sense of national pride. Periods of national enthusiasm were almost entirely related to wars. Putin started the war with Chechnya; Medvedev started the war with Georgia. The motto "Our citizens live there" helps to create a sense of quasi-legitimacy which is enough for Russian citizens. At best they would say: "Americans are doing the same". If military actions begin against Ukraine ordinary Russian citizens will support their political leadership. They would be told that it was not a war against a brotherly nation, but a war against "its criminal government (Sushko, 2017).

The increase in danger from Russia after the war with Georgia was realized by all the neighbors of the Russian Federation. One of the consequences of The Five-Day War was the fact that none of the countries in the post-Soviet space supported Russia's actions. Besides Russia, only Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Nauru recognized the decisions of Sukhumi and Tskhinvali on independence. Other countries consider these territories as occupied regions of Georgia. The obvious reason why the post-Soviet countries did not support Moscow's decision to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was the same: no one wanted to be Moscow's puppet. The issue of recognition became a test of independence, and none of the CIS countries considered it possible to fail it (Trenin, 2009, p. 144). At that moment, it became apparent to Russia that there was a problem with the absence of reliable partners willing to sacrifice their interests for the sake of their strategic ally.

Therefore, conducting a retrospective analysis, it became clear that Russian tactics constantly led to negative consequences for all parties involved in the conflicts. First of all, Moscow harms its own economy and becomes the target of international sanctions. Power diplomacy and support for separatist movements reduce Russia's influence. It is hardly a coincidence that, apart from the Baltic countries, which joined NATO

and the EU, those who have most actively sought to reduce their dependence on Russia over the past 20 years are Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova. The drift of these states towards the West is a direct consequence of Russia's actions. In the 1990s, Azerbaijan reacted to Russia's intervention in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by seeking access to new markets to sell its oil and gas resources to Western countries. As a result, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline was built, which began operating in 2005. A parallel gas pipeline was launched in the South Caucasus a year later. Both projects freed the economies of Azerbaijan and Georgia from dependence. Since 2010, Azerbaijan has also received regional security guarantees from Turkey, making any attempt at Russian intervention more complicated. Georgia continues to move towards NATO, and even if it has not yet succeeded in gaining membership in the organization, Tbilisi can count on some support from the US and other Western partners in case of a threat.

However, since 2008, Russia has demonstrated its ability to openly use force beyond its territory. The outcome of the Five-Day War was Russian revisionism regarding post-Soviet borders. Russia, for the first time in its post-Soviet history, acted as a country ready to revise both interstate borders and its relations with non-regional players (the USA, EU). To this day, Russian troops and bases remain in both regions. Dependent on Russian patronage, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Crimea serve as outposts projecting Russia's political and economic influence. Abkhazia, South Ossetia, as well as Armenia, allow Russia to deploy military units on their territory. Approximately 3,500 Russian servicemen, along with 1,500 FSB personnel, were stationed in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and about 5,000 in Armenia (Gonchar, 2016). Similarly, one of the main reasons for the strategic importance of Crimea to Moscow was the presence of the Russian Black Sea Fleet based on the peninsula.

Nevertheless, the reaction of the international community was rather tepid. The collective West reproached Russia for violations of international law and obligations it undertook by signing the August 12, 2008 agreement mediated by the EU. Ten years later, on the anniversary of the war in Georgia, a group of countries known as the Friends of Georgia in the OSCE called on Russia to revoke its recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and withdraw its troops. A separate demand was made to Moscow by the US State Department and NATO leadership. However, today we understand that the silence regarding the issue of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and keeping relations with the Kremlin almost unchanged were perceived by Putin as a sign of weakness on the part of the West, and therefore an opportunity to act on a larger scale. Thus, The Five-Day War against Georgia served as a prelude to Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

During the Crimea annexation, Putin and his administration again asserted the need to protect "Russian citizens"[1] and the "Russian-speaking population"[2], rather than directly referring to ethnic Russians. Moscow also used the term *compatriots* – a flexible term that, in Russian legislation, denotes people who share a common homeland (i.e. the USSR) and gives Putin full freedom in defining it. However, in announcing the annexation of Crimea to the Federal Assembly, Putin noted that "millions of Russian people, Russian-speaking citizens live and will live in Ukraine, and Russia will always defend their interests through political, diplomatic, and legal means" (Putin, 2011). It seems that the Kremlin is unable to reconsider its strategy and devise any other course of action beyond the options mentioned.

Conclusions

Conflicts in the post-Soviet space have been a direct consequence of the prolonged process of the USSR's collapse. Today they serve as instruments of Russia's foreign policy, one manifestation of a broader strategy aimed at reshaping the international order. Through the use of local conflicts, Russia has sought to achieve its overarching goal of reclaiming its status as a major power, on par with the USA and remaining the most influential actor across the former USSR.

Throughout the entire post-Soviet period, Russia has followed a familiar script: first igniting ethnic tensions and deploying a limited contingent during political instability, and then endorsing territorial changes that allow it to maintain influence in the region.

During the 1990s, under Boris Yeltsin's regime, Russia managed to establish a system of military presence that encompassed almost all former Soviet republics, except the Baltic states. Additionally, the concept of the "near abroad" was officially established, designating zones of Russia's influence, which took responsibility for stopping bloodshed, and later used to justify its unlawful actions. Russian troops intervened in conflicts in Transnistria, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia, undermining the territorial integrity

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[1] Any person with a Russian passport
[2] Meaning the majority of Ukrainian citizens

of the newly formed Georgia and Moldova and giving rise to a chain of unrecognized states essentially under Moscow's protectorate. With Russian mediation, Azerbaijan was forced to de facto recognize Armenia's military successes and acknowledge the existence of NKR, which incorporated a significant part of Azerbaijani territories.

After coming to power, Putin gradually developed a strategy of using frozen conflicts as a tool to pursue Russia's interests in the region. Perceiving the Kosovo precedent as an opportunity to act at its discretion without conscience before the global community and international law, the Kremlin breathed new life into the tangle of conflicts in the post-Soviet space. The Five-Days War in Georgia, the annexation of Crimea, and the armed confrontation in eastern Ukraine demonstrated the grave danger of Putin's policy. Moscow violated the sanctity of territorial integrity, clearly delineating red lines that it would not retreat from and asserting its readiness to defend its right to a great power orbit with arms in hand. Russian leadership views frozen conflicts as Trojan horses hindering progress, preventing necessary reforms, which could help the newly independent states to withdraw from Moscow's orbit. In Russia's contemporary geopolitical strategy, the post-Soviet space is assigned the role of a battleground for geopolitical confrontation with the West; the state sovereignty of post-Soviet states is barely considered in these political games.

In each of the cases considered, Russia intervened when it felt its influence was under threat. Moscow consistently played the card of ethnic Russians, claiming it was compelled to act to fulfill obligations to protect ethnic minorities, but this was usually a secondary concern. Russia's actions were largely driven by the desire to gain strategic advantages rather than humanitarian or ethnonational reasons.

Despite the uniqueness of Russia's war against Ukraine, several features link this case with those in the Caucasus. Studying the situation from 2014 to 2024, it's hard not to notice that the same Kremlin narratives and instruments were used once again. Initially, Moscow aimed to bring Ukraine back into its sphere of influence by establishing control over the Ukrainian ruling elite, similar to what happened in Armenia. However, the regime of Viktor Yanukovych failed to survive the Maidan protests. Russia then resorted to a second option – the creation of quasi-states. In Ukraine, this was attempted through the "Novorossiya" project, aiming to separate the southeastern part, including Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, Mykolaiv, Odesa, Kharkiv, Kherson regions, and Crimea, from Ukraine and bring these territories under Russia's de facto control. The main Russian narrative was that "Novorossiya" was not Ukrainian territory but a gift from the Soviet government. While Russia lost some of these territories, the Russian population remained, and protecting them from "bandits who seized power in Kyiv" narrated in Kremlin as its direct duty, akin to the protection of Abkhazians and Ossetians in the past. However, this attempt was not entirely successful, as only Crimea and parts of Donbas temporary ended up in the Russian zone. It was clear from the end of 2020 that Russia had been preparing for a transition to full-scale aggression. Moscow conducted a review of the readiness of its formations in Donbas, and in March 2021, it began moving its troops to the border with Ukraine and Crimea. One of the largest military field camps, in the Voronezh region, had offensive, not defensive goals, and these units could have been moved to the Ukrainian border within a day. All of this was accompanied by the demonstrative end of the so-called ceasefire in Donbas, massive Russian propaganda about Ukraine's alleged preparations to attack the so-called People's republics, deadlock in negotiations, diplomatic confrontation between Russia and the West, and overt threats from Russian officials to intervene and protect Russian citizens in Donbas. The Ukrainian elites faced the task of determining whether these maneuvers pursued military or political goals. The outcome depended on Ukraine's position and the collective stance of the West. It's worth noting that while domestically, the leadership attempted to suppress discussions of the possibility of war to avoid panic, internationally, Ukrainian diplomacy repeatedly warned our allies, but in vain.

Thus, expanding the number of cases where Russia intervened in local conflicts in the post-Soviet space to test the results obtained by comparing Caucasian cases seems to be an obvious field for further research. Such a task also requires a change in the methodological toolkit: quantitative methods need to be applied, and creating mathematical models could be useful as well.

Conflict of Interest. None.

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