Shadows of Empire:
Post-Soviet Parastates in Russian Foreign Policy

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Abstract: The post-Soviet period has seen dramatic political upheaval across Eastern Europe and the Caucuses. The shadow cast by centuries of Russian influence on Eurasia still affects political tensions in the region. Previous studies have examined both Russian foreign policy in the twenty-first century and the implications of parastates on Russia's periphery. This study focuses on the intersection of these issues, identifying parastates as a political wedge used by Moscow to maintain buffer states between its borders and NATO. It presents a comparative analysis of three parastates that are supported by Russia: Transnistria in Moldova, Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, and Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan. The study finds that Russia supports post-Soviet parastates to perpetuate political stalemates that undermine stability in countries that act as buffers between Russian and NATO borders. This highlights opportunities for further research on a foreign policy tool that can be used to significantly influence regional security.

Keywords: Russia, foreign policy, parastates, post-Soviet states, buffer states, NATO

Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought about a period of hope and political turmoil. This resulted in a redefinition of political identities, leading to a series of territorial disputes that fundamentally changed the region. States formed, others were assimilated, while some dissolved. An interesting few, however, faced a different fate. Having failed to convince the international community of their adherence to certain criteria of statehood, their claims to independence remained unacknowledged. This resulted in a handful of politically ambiguous territories. Colloquially, they are referred to as parastates. Throughout the post-Soviet era, Russian foreign policy has been characterised first as withering

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and then as expansionist, sometimes aggressive (Rezvani 2020). Over the last decade, the Russian Federation has been increasingly pushing the boundaries of its neighbour's autonomy, often using a complex of political, economic, and military levers to dissuade for soviet states from straying from the fold. One of the tools it has utilised is supporting quasi or parastates within former soviet states that it uses as a buffer between former soviet countries and expanding NATO borders (Trenin 2016; Blank 1998).

Parastates are a peculiar issue in the international system. They come with a raft of common political and legal challenges that preoccupy the literature and the attention of the international community, such as recognition of sovereignty, political, legal and economic autonomy from their host states, and the risk of conflict along political, ethnic, and economic fault lines (King 2001; Caspersen et al. 2014). The inconsistent nature of the international community's response to these challenges demonstrates the depth of issues at play, in particular legal norms, political interests, and strategic considerations that define the contemporary international order (Pegg 1998). These regions also pose a strategic challenge for the countries that are directly affected by their presence. Interestingly, Russia's foreign policy signals that it has found a unique way to leverage those challenges to exert diplomatic and sometimes military pressure on its neighbours as part of its great power game with European states. This approach could be understood as part of Russia's broader strategy in its geopolitical contest with NATO, where the presence of parastates in buffer zones is leveraged to destabilise and influence neighbouring countries, thereby reinforcing Russia's position as a great power (Cohen and Hamilton 2011).

This study examines the dynamics of a key element of Russian foreign policy in Eastern Europe and the Caucuses that is aimed at counterbalancing NATO expansion. Although previous literature has dealt with aspects of these issues separately, no previous work identifies or examines Russia's foreign policy approach to supporting parastates in NATO buffer states. Three case studies, Transnistria, Abkhazia and Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh, illustrate how Russian foreign policy leverages parastates to further its foreign policy objectives against expanding NATO alliance into Eastern Europe (Franco 2021). These cases demonstrate that the Russian Federation has engaged in a series of deliberate attempts to exert both influence and control in para-state areas to gain geopolitical leverage. By supporting these territorially ambiguous regions, Russia has attempted to create a buffer zone that impedes NATO's eastern expansion (Khan 2008; Rojansky 1999; Duleba 1998, 15).

The remainder of the paper presents this argument in five sections. The first section examines Russian foreign policy interests in the post-Soviet periphery region. It begins with Russia's geostrategic interests in the region, then discusses the role of buffer states in Moscow's approach to balancing against NATO, and then focuses on the politics of post-Soviet parastates. The second section presents the research design of the study and explains the comparative case study methodology, the analytical framework, and the data used in the study. The third section presents the case studies, using four variables, rationale, enablers, mechanisms, and outcomes, to assess Russia's support to each of the parastates

examined in the study. The fourth section presents a comparative analysis of the variables used in each case study, finding that Russian support to parastates has largely been to its own benefit. The study then concludes that support to parastates has been a useful foreign policy tool and highlights opportunities for further research to understand how the same patron-client dynamics influence regional security in other circumstances.

Russian Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Periphery

The current Russian policy interest in former Soviet territories has occurred at the intersection of three key factors: the critical importance of geostrategic circumstances to Russian foreign policy, the important role of buffer states between Russia and NATO in maintaining the status quo, and the emergence of persistent parastates that destabilise the buffer states on Russia's periphery (Partem 1983; Gear 1941). Since its origins, in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation's geostrategic interests have been central to its foreign policy (Roberts 2017, 28; Bardos 2017). Concerns about maintaining a favourable Eurasian balance of power and offsetting of NATO expansionism have been central to Russia's interests (Tsygankov 2018, 101; Tsygankov 2013, 179; Nation and Trenin 2007). Meanwhile, old tensions began boiling over in the newly autonomous post-Soviet states that were useful in maintaining a physical buffer between the borders of the Russian Federation and NATO (Rumer and Sokolsky 2019). Numerous political stalemates emerged in this belt of buffer states, with several devolving into secessionist movements that led to the formation of quasi-autonomous parastates that lacked the stability and resources to form their own nation-states. This intersection presents a unique complex of policy challenges which have precipitated and enabled a series of protracted disputes to become a key, although often underappreciated, feature of Moscow's strategy in Eastern Europe and the Caucuses (Bakhturidze 2023; Nasirov et al. 2017, 47).

Russian Foreign Policy

Russia has always held a key role in the security and stability of the Eurasian continent. Despite being widely viewed as the successor to the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation is not the same political entity. Its geographic, economic, cultural, and security landscapes are substantially different and are, in many ways, historically distinct (Tishin 1995). Some facets of Russia's foreign policy stem from strategic interests that have changed little. In its various historical forms, Russia has always occupied a significant amount of the Eurasian landmass, at the intersection of Europe and Asia, which Mackinder referred to as the Heartland (Bassin and Aksenov 2006; Gray 2004), and exerted significant influence over its periphery, which Mackinder termed the Rimland (Knutsen 2014). Although Mackinder's theory has waxed and waned in international relations, the concept of a territorial core and the broad pursuit of influence over both the European and Asian continents continue to be a central feature of contemporary Eurasian geopolitics (Lewis 2022). Meanwhile, the rapidly changing military, political, and technological domains characteristic of

the early twenty-first century have created unique circumstances and challenges for the Russian Federation (Morozova 2009).

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the Russian Federation, Moscow's approach to foreign policy has consistently prioritised three strategic interests: to secure its post-Soviet states along its periphery, to generate economic prosperity, and to join prestigious international institutions (Sussex 2012). In the pursuit of these interests, Russian foreign policy has undergone several evolutions while adapting to global trends and local circumstances (Kuchins and Zevelev 2012; Liu 2022). One explanation for these changes is the civilisational ideas embodied by Russian leaders Yeltsin, Primakov, and Putin, which aligned with periods of openness towards the West, emphasis on Eurasianism, and a return to great power politics (Tsygankov 2007). The first direction that Russia's foreign policy took was towards embracing the openness of the West. In keeping with this, Moscow became much more active in communicating its foreign policy to external audiences through official documents and speeches (Light 2015). Meanwhile, its foreign policy began viewing the post-Soviet region, particularly the South Caucuses, as a source of instability that threatened the territorial integrity of the new Russian Federation (Morozova 2009). While all eyes were on the dynamism of the evolving regional order in Asia (Lushenko and Hardy 2016), Moscow was once again contemplating its role as a regional leader in a new a Eurasian regional order (Roberts and Ziemer 2024).

Facing the expanding territory and influence of NATO on one side and the surging economies of the East on the other, Moscow quickly found itself balancing between the great power games unfolding on its flanks, while also trying to secure and exert influence over the Caucuses and Central Asia (Kubicek 1999, 547; Kuchins and Zevelev 2012). The third pivot in Russian foreign policy embraced the challenges and opportunities of great power competition (Roberts 2017, 28). Putin brought a more pragmatic worldview to Russian foreign policy and sought to reconcile the competing interests of civilisation, security and prosperity under a common banner (Morozova 2009; Liu 2022). Consequently, Moscow's foreign policy rhetoric became more conservative and focused on great power competition (Frear and Mazepus 2021).

The Eurasian Balance

The overarching security architecture in Eurasia hinges on the balance between NATO and Russia (Lieven 1997; Godzimirski 2019). Russia's relationship with NATO began under strained conditions during the Cold War. The Soviet Union had been excluded from NATO after an unsuccessful bid to join the organisation in 1954 (Molotov 2024). Recognising the need for an alternative to NATO, Moscow founded its own regional security alliances. The Warsaw Pact, from 1955 to 1991, and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), from 1992 onwards, included the Soviet Union and later the Russian Federation and its aligned neighbours (Mastny 2005, 1; Rubin 1982, 648; Deletant 2007). These counterposed institutions put the Soviet Union and Western Europe on a colli-

sion course throughout the Cold War and left a legacy of competition and animosity that the Russian Federation inherited in 1991 (Tsygankov 2018, 101; Marten 2020). NATO expansion along the borders of the former Soviet Union and the current Russian Federation have created a longstanding security dilemma on Moscow's doorstep (Duleba 1998; Rojansky 1999; Solosky 2017).

Animosities between the NATO alliance and Russian have become more confrontational over the years, with the potential for direct confrontation being a real and present danger. This heightened hostility may stem from a sense of defensive inferiority, as seen with Iran and North Korea, in which the potential for miscalculation is high (Boulegue 2017; Vlad 2023). To destabilise adversaries without launching an all-out war, Russia uses a mix of conventional and unconventional methods ranging from hybrid warfare to psyops campaigns, aggressive military posturing, and even cyber-attacks (Galeotti 2016). It has used cyber-attacks to target countries undergoing internal instability, to sow confusion among its adversaries and generally weaken its opponents. Less subtle approaches have also included holding military exercise and weapons testing near NATO borders as a form of forceful posturing, intimidating border states in an attempt to send a message to the NATO alliance (Sauer 2024). These offensive tactics, balanced with more direct incentive deals, have enabled Russia to exert both direct and indirect influence in Europe (Karlsen 2019, 19; Anderson 2008).

Russia has also effectively used energy security as a wedge issue against the EU, Central Asia, and the Caucuses (Wiggell and Vihma 2016). Moscow has leveraged its oil and natural gas exports to exert significant economic and political pressure on the rest of Europe (Zachmann et al. 2022; Perdana et al. 2022). The Nord Stream pipelines are a prime example of this strategy, as Russia is able to directly provide western countries like Germany with gas without relying on other countries (Bachmann et al. 2022). Economic benefits to having an energy monopoly is advantageous, but it's not the only point of interest. This reliance on Russian energy leaves such countries vulnerable as Russia has been known to cut off supplies during disputes or conflicts (Zachmann et al. 2022). Favourable energy deals were used to leveraging energy dependencies, enabling Russia to broker indirect alliances with a number of EU member states, undermining the cohesion of the union, whilst ensuring the establishment of a strong buffer preventing NATO expansion into former Soviet territory (Colton and Charap 2017). The Nord Stream 2 pipeline is another clear example of these geostrategic machinations (Goldthau 2016). Energy security has been an important component of Russia's means to influence smaller states along its borders, in addition to managing its wider regional power rivalries. Moscow has frequently used access to energy to punish or reward its client states, particularly when doing so has had a larger scale impact on Europe or NATO expansion into the post-Soviet region.

Post-Soviet Parastates

From Moscow's perspective, the prevalent security landscape in Eurasia has placed a premium on maintaining buffer states that separate the borders between Russia and NATO. Buffers have historically been used to create political space between potentially hostile adversarial powers (Gear 1941; Partem 1983). Russia's approach to managing is external relations in the post-Soviet region began as an extension of the Soviet Union policy of only recognising sovereign states. However, after Kosovo's independence was readily recognised by Western states, Moscow's attitude towards parastates in its own backyard began to shift (Jeifets and Dobronravin 2019). Since the early twenty-first century, Russia has been playing much closer attention to the parastates of the post-Soviet region (Bakhturidze 2020; Rossi 2020; Rossi and Pinos 2020). Contentious territories like Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, have also played important roles in enabling Russia to maintain its geo-strategic stronghold in eastern Europe. By supporting these parastates economically, politically, militarily, and culturally, Russia has been able to use these regions to pressure NATO buffer states (Miarka 2020; Stanislawski 2008, 368; Cooley and Mitchell 2010). Over the years, Moscow has influenced the local governments of these parastates to ensure their continued support, positioning them as key areas from which to challenge the encroaching NATO alliance (O'Loughlin et al. 2014).

These parastates have provided Russia with a proxy alliance which has sought to challenge Western influence, presence, and advancement into eastern Europe (Allison 2008). Russia seems to view at least some of the parastates that it supports as its own territory. Putin famously defended the 2008 war in Georgia by referring to South Ossetia as Russian territory that needed to be defended against external aggression (Allison 2009). Russia's policy of grooming and maintaining influence over a number of parastates is strategic. The first reason is to maintain as much input and control over post-Soviet areas as possible, without sparking international conflict nor requiring Moscow to officially take responsibility over their management. Fostering and sustaining long-term conflicts in Transnistria in Moldova, South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia, and Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan is beneficial for Russia (Kazantzev et al. 2020). Conflicts in each of the regions have made them an open source of instability, incapacitated both politically and economically, being unable to develop or build strong relationships with the West. This is a favourable outcome as it limits the expansion of NATO and precludes the host countries from pursuing strong relationships with the West. This approach underscores the geopolitical divide between Russia and the West. To further cement power in the region, Russia has also established military bases in each of these parastates, and has deployed troops, strategically touted as peacekeeping forces, to deter adversaries from further encroaching in these areas (Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation 2023; Wolff 2011).

Research Design

This study employed a comparative case study research design. It identified three comparable cases of Russian support for parastates in countries which act as buffers between NATO and Russia's borders for analysis. The three case studies are: Transnistria in Moldova, Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, and Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan up to 2023. Transnistria is a small autonomous territory in Moldova that borders the Ukraine and enjoys broad Russian support for its independence (Beyer and Wolff 2016). Abkhazia and South Ossetia are separatist territories in Georgia that are only recognised as independent by a five UN member states, including Russia (Voronovici 2020; Kolossov and O'Loughlin 2011). Nagorno-Karabakh is a disputed territory in Azerbaijan whose population is comprised of an ethnically Armenian majority which has been consistently subjected to Russian political support. At the time of writing, the future status of Nagorno-Karabakh is unclear, so for the purposes of the case study, it is included up until September 2023 (Romashov and Rytövuori-Apunen 2016; Yemelianova 2023).

The study used four variables for cross-case comparison (see Table 1). Each of the variables were applied systematically to the case studies and used to examine the details of each case. They were then used to analyse the key similarities and differences between the cases to draw comparative conclusions. The first variable was Russia's *rationale* for supporting the parastate. This identified explicit motivations and justifications for Russia to support the parastate. The second variable was the intrinsic *enablers* that facilitate Russian support to the parastate. These included the historical, political, and sociocultural factors that enabled Russia to more easily support or exert influence over events in the parastate. The third variable was the *mechanisms* of Russian support to the parastate. These included the material instruments that Russia used to support the parastate, such as a military presence, economic support, and infrastructure development. The fourth variable was the policy *outcomes* of supporting the parastate. These were the positive and negative effects that supporting the parastate had for Russia's foreign policy interests.

Case Study Variables		
1	Rationale	Russia's rationale for supporting the para-state.
2	Enablers	Intrinsic enablers that facilitate Russian support to the parastate.
3	Mechanisms	Mechanisms of Russian support to the parastate.
4	Outcomes	Policy outcomes of supporting the parastate.

Table 1: *Case Study Variables*

These variables measure a range of endogenous and exogenous factors relating to Russian support to parastates. They are intended to provide a consistent framework for analysis to measure and assess different motivations from both the patron and client perspectives, different means used to provide support, and different outcomes made possible by support. Although they are not an exhaustive list of possibilities, these variables do provide

unique insight into the processes by which Russia has supported post-Soviet parastates in a patron-client relationship within three fragmented states along its geographic periphery (Kosienkowski and Dembińska 2024; Biermann 2024). Addressing these areas in isolation overlooks their interconnected nature, whereas examining them in combination emphasises the significant effect that they have on regional security (Frear et al. 2014).

The data used for each case study were drawn from a mix of primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected from publications, official figures, and reports from governments and intergovernmental organisations. Secondary data were collected from scholarly literature, research reports, and new media. Due to the politically charged nature of the content, all data were collected and cross-referenced for accuracy and rigour to eliminate biases as much as possible. Conflicting information was vetted with multiple sources and, where necessary, the accounts included in the study were selected based on their balance of probability.

Russian Support for Parastates

Russia's approach to supporting post-Soviet parastates is mixed. Of the four examples included in this study two are recognised by Moscow as independent states and two are not. Due to their lack of international recognition and their reliance on Russian support to survive, all remain parastates (O'Loughlin et al. 2014). For the purposes of this study, the parastates have been divided into three cases, organised by their host state. The first case is the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR), widely known in English language sources as Transnistria, which is a small autonomous territory that is internationally recognised as part of Moldova (Istomin and Bolgova 2016; Sanchez 2009). The second case combines Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which are both separatist territories that are internationally recognised as part of Georgia. Although Abkhazia and South Ossetia are separate parastates with their own identity and political circumstances, their relationships with Russia, Georgia, and each other are similar enough that, for the purposes of this study, they can be merged into a single case (Gerrits and Bader 2016). The third case is Nagorno-Karabakh, which is a disputed territory with a majority Armenian population that is internationally recognised as being part of Azerbaijan (Gafarli 2022; Mirzayev 2022; Babayev 2019).

Transnistria

In a period of transition, between the end of Soviet Union and the beginning of the Republic of Moldova, the PMR declared its independence from the emerging Moldovan state (Blakkisrud and Kolstø 2011; Pacher 2020). Despite its history of integration with Moldova, Transnistrians had a minority ethnic identity that was more closely aligned with Moscow than with Bucharest (Cojocaru 2006). Ethnic tensions reached a boiling point in 1989, when the Moldavian SSR changed its official language from Russian to Romanian.

To avoid further unnecessary disputes with the region, Chisinau chose to partially recognise the autonomy of the PMR, designating it the "Administrative-Territorial Units from the Left of the Dniester," (Cornea 2011) while still considering it under the jurisdiction of its government (Lutterjohann 2023; Potter 2022). As this situation remains unresolved, the dispute between Transnistria and Moldova is the longest ongoing such conflict in continental Europe. Although the international community views Transnistria as part of Moldova, Russia continues to support Tiraspol's claims of independence (Borsi 2008; Carter 2023; Necsutu 2022). The territory is now home to almost half a million people, many of whom prefer Russia to the West, and hold out hope for political independence from Moldova and eventual inclusion in an expanded Russian Federation.

Moscow's rationale for supporting Transnistria is underpinned by three international factors. The first factor is geostrategic. Transnistria is located on the border of the Ukraine, where the Russan Armed Forces are engaged in a protracted conflict. Tiraspol also provides Moscow with access to the Dniester River, which connects Transnistria to Russian-controlled Odessa on the western side of the Black Sea. In addition, although it is a small sliver of territory, Transnistria sits at the foot of the Carpathian Mountains, right on NATOs doorstep (Kaufman and Bowers 1998; Jović-Lazić and Kuvekalović-Stamatović 2020). The second factor is geoeconomic. Transnistria is along an important trade route for transporting Russian energy into Europe. Not only is the supply of LNG to Europe an important facet of the Russian economy, up until the Russian-Ukraine war beginning in 2022, it was a crucial source of energy for Moldova and, due to extensive Russian subsidies, it remains essential to the fledgling Transnistrian economy (Peña-Ramos and Sergeyevich Amirov 2018; Woehrel 2008; Fischer et al. 2016). The third factor is geopolitical. Moscow's level of support to Transnistria is sometimes used as a bargaining chip in negotiations with Moldova. Adjusting its support to Tiraspol has allowed Russia to extract concessions from Chisinau on occasion, while pushing back against Moldova has emboldened Transnistria on other occasions (Miarka 2020; Cazac 2021; Gorincioi 2020). This has helped Russia to destabilise Moldova and has been politically expedient for Moscow as it is one of the post-Soviet states on Russia's periphery that is courting deeper engagement with NATO.

Numerous enablers for continued Russian support are present in Transnistria. Historical sociocultural, ethnic, and linguistic ties form a strong foundation for the Transnistrian-Russian relationship. Transnistria is predominantly Russian-speaking and many of its residents strongly identify with Russian culture and political ideology (Berg and Vits 2022). Moscow has fostered further support by funding and facilitating the creation of cultural programs that promote Russian language, education, and media. These programs have effectively strengthened the sociocultural ties of Transnistrians to Russia over time (Hynek et al. 2023). During its three decades of existence, Transnistria adopted the Russian legal system as its own, declared Russian as its official language, and unveiled a territorial flag which proudly displays the hammer and sickle, which is an internationally recognised symbol of communism, and a prominent emblem of the former Soviet Union. This affinity

with Russia was confirmed by a 2006 referendum, which demonstrated that the majority of Transnistrians were in favour of greater ties with Russia (Baban 2015, 7).

The mechanisms of Moscow's support to Tiraspol have been primarily military and economic. Russian military personnel have been stationed in Transnistria since the early days of the separatist conflict (Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation 2020). Roughly 1,500 troops remain, ostensibly to secure the Cobasna munitions depot. Some of the troops are from the Peacekeeping Force (MC), remnants of a 1992 agreement with Moldova to police the zone between Transnistria and Moldova (OSCE 1992). The remaining personnel are part of the Operational Group of Russian Forces (OGRF), which has not received Moldovan consent to be in the region. The OGRF is tasked with securing Transnistria's borders, in addition to monitoring the Cobasna munitions depot (Goncharenko and Semenova 2016). The permanent Russian military presence in the region, under the guise of a peacekeeping mission, has also swayed these diplomatic discussions in Transnistria's favour. Beyond this political benefit, the Russian military has also provided training, weaponry, equipment, and support to the para-state to ensure their continued autonomy (Kosienkowski and Dembińska 2024; Skordas 2005, 33). Economic support has also been an integral element of Moscow's engagement with Tiraspol. Russia provides subsidised energy, which enables Transnistria to generate income from the sale of energy, as well as favourable trade deals and substantial financial aid. Consequently, the economic subsistence of the Transnistrian population hinges entirely on Russian resources and support (Dembińska and Mérand 2019; Munteanu and Munteanu 2007; Beyer and Wolff 2016).

Russian support to the Transnistrian parastate has proven to be beneficial for Moscow's foreign policy and strategic interests. The direct outcomes of this support include Russia's ongoing military presence in Transnistria, providing Moscow with access to the Dniester River from Odessa, which remains under Russian occupation, control over the Cobansa weapons depot, and an approach to the Ukrainian border from the south. The consistent deployment of Russian Armed Forces personnel in Transnistria has provided a security presence in an otherwise weakly governed space with minimal regulation or oversight (Goncharenko and Semenova 2016). It has also prevented Moldova from taking action to reintegrate Transnistria into its territory. This has put Chisinau in a difficult position, unable to consolidate its territories under its internationally recognised government, and compelled to involve Moscow, at least to some extent, in its political negotiations with Tiraspol. The resulting imbalance of power further serves Russian interests by creating a deterrent against Moldova engaging in closer relations with NATO (Ceban 2022; Calus 2014; Tudoroiu 2012).

Abkhazia and South Ossetia

Abkhazia and South Ossetia are both autonomous territories within the internationally recognised state of Georgia. During the Soviet period, the Abkhaz minority had held positions of political power in Georgia which was not seen favourably by the ethnic Geor-

gian majority or the growing nationalist movement in Tbilisi (Bakke et al. 2014, 594). The Abkhazians fought and won a conflict with Georgia in 1992–1993 to secure their status as an independent territory. South Ossetia had also been part of Georgia prior to 1991, although it had remained a separate minority with its own identity and language under the Soviet Union (Kolstø 2020a). In 1992, South Ossetia held a referendum on seceding from Georgia to join the Russian Federation. Although the Ossetians were not included in the new Russian state, they became an autonomous region within Georgia under the 1992 Sochi Agreement signed by Yeltsin and Shevardnadze (Kazantsev et al. 2020). In the aftermath of its brief conflict with Georgia in 2008 (Allison 2013), Moscow increased its political, economic, and military support to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and has resulted in significant Russian patronage over the parastates (Gerrits and Bader 2016).

The rationale for Russia's patronage over two parastates in Georgia is substantially based on two key factors. The first is the strategic location of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. They both intersect important logistical routes between the north and south Caucasus, connecting Russia by road and rail to its regional periphery. In addition, Abkhazia extends Russia's access to the Black Sea and South Ossetia allows Russian forces to be stationed in close proximity to Tbilisi (Sieniawski 2024). The second factor is exerting hegemonic influence over the Caucuses and clearly signalling to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) that Russia is willing to protect its interest and uphold the status quo with a range of political, economic, and social levers (Kazantsev et al. 2020). While there are numerous historical, cultural, and linguistic ties between Russia and Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Moscow's approach to managing the long-term unresolved conflicts in the Caucuses suggest that its favours pragmatism over sentimentalism. This is evidenced by its focus on securing Russian interests through asymmetric agreements and its reluctance to empower its client parastates to an extent that would assure greater autonomy vis-a-vis either Moscow or Tbilisi (Ambrosio and Lange 2016; German 2016; Voronovici 2020). Thus, the totality of Russia's patronage over Abkhazia and South Ossetia appears to be built on a complex of geostrategic interests and political necessity more than on any affection for its clients (Kolstø 2020a; Gerrits and Bader 2016; Bakke et al. 2014).

Russia's influence over Abkhazia and South Ossetia have been enabled by a range of historical and sociocultural factors, such as the presence of Russian minorities, the prevalence of Russian language proficiency, the volume of Russian tourism, and the popularity of Russian media and popular culture (Gerrits and Bader 2016, 300; O'Loughlin et al. 2011). The Abkhaz and Ossetian populations have an ethnic identity that is underpinned by a longstanding affiliation with Russia. The Russian language, legal framework, and education system are all deeply embedded in the societies of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (O'Loughlin et al. 2011; Clogg 2008). This is reinforced by familial ties and ethnic diasporas in Russia, which engender a widespread cultural affinity with Russia (Gerrits and Bader 2016). Moscow has often capitalised on these sentiments, sowing discord between Georgia and its parastates while simultaneously fostering good will towards Russia. For example, while Tbilisi views the residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as Georgian citizens, although they may be undocumented as such, Moscow's policy of offering passports

to the breakaway regions has supported their independence and garnered support from the local populations (Ganohariti 2023; Souleimanov et al. 2018).

The mechanisms of direct Russian support to Abkhazia and South Ossetia have included political, economic, military, and sociocultural levers (Sieniawski 2024). Moscow's political support for Abkhazia and South Ossetia includes diplomatic recognition and a series of bilateral agreements covering various issues, such as security cooperation, customs and border protection, healthcare and education (Ambrosio and Lange 2016). Economic support has extended beyond investment in the commercial sector, government subsidies, exploration in the resource extraction industry, and foreign aid to include substantial direct budgetary assistance to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, with a majority of each parastate's total budget originating from Russian sources (Sieniawski 2024; Kolstø 2020b, 147). The most obvious form of military assistance to Abkhazia and South Ossetia is Moscow's involvement in their conflicts with Georgia (Karagiannis 2014; Tuathail 2008), and aggressive responses to any Georgian engagement with NATO (Boulegue 2017; German 2016).[1] However, numerous other mechanisms of military support underpin the patron-client relationship. Russia has established a significant military presence in both parastates, including constructing military bases and naval facilities, integrating local forces into Russian commands, and stationing thousands of armed forces and federal security personnel (Sieniawski 2024). Sociocultural support has taken the form of education exchange, including scholarships and student quotas at Russian universities (Sieniawski 2024), and bilateral tourism agreements, with large numbers of Russian citizens traveling to Abkhazia and South Ossetia every year (Gerrits and Bader 2016).

The outcomes of Russia's role in supporting Georgia's parastates have been mixed. Moscow's actions have generally sought to advanced Russian strategic interests in the Caucuses and Eurasia. The resulting situation has often soured relations with Georgia and the CIS. It has also sent a clear message that Russia will defend its interests against what it sees as external interference, particularly from NATO (Marten 2020; Wolff 2015). Moscow's actions have enabled Abkhazia and South Ossetia to remain autonomous regions and maintains a defensive, albeit destabilising, presence along Georgia's borders. This has created two sets of patron-client relationships between Russia and each of Georgia's parastates (Gerrits and Bader 2016; Kolossov and O'Loughlin 2011; Cooley and Mitchell 2010). Both Abkhazia and South Ossetia are now functionally reliant on Russia for their security and prosperity, and are effectively subjugated politically, militarily, and economically by their patron (Sieniawski 2024). Neither Abkhazia nor South Ossetia have significant political or economic relations with other states except for Russia and are recognised by only a handful of small countries. Meanwhile, no other countries or parastates in the region have deeper ties to Moscow (Gerrits and Bader, 2016).

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1 For example, Russia's responses in 2008 to the NATO Bucharest Summit and in 2015 to the NATO-Georgian Joint Training and Evaluation Centre (JTEC), which included the 2008 conflict, and applying political pressure on Georgian borders and staging highly visible military exercises near Georgia's border in 2015. See: Boulegue 2017; German 2106.

Nagorno-Karabakh

Nagorno-Karabakh is a region that is internationally recognised as territorial within Azerbaijan with a majority Armenian population. Although the ongoing Armenian-Azerbaijan conflict over control of Nagorno-Karabakh has its origins in the Soviet Union, the issue has been hotly contested for over a century. The origins of the conflict date back to the collapse of the Russian empire and the creation of the Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous oblast between 1918 and 1921 (Saparov 2012). The contemporary Armenian-Azerbaijan military conflict is often divided into two stages: the first Karabakh war from 1988 to 1994 and the second Karabakh war in 2020. There have also been numerous armed clashes between these major escalations, including two key flashpoints in 2014 and 2016 (Davtyan 2024). Alongside these military confrontations, the political contest for control over the Nagorno-Karabakh parastate has persisted unabated throughout the post-Soviet period (Yemelianova 2023; Babayev 2019). The Armenian position supports normalising the status of Nagorno-Karabakh as a parastate with the aim of pursuing international recognition in the long-term. The Azerbaijani approach has been to isolate Nagorno-Karabakh and focus international attention on its sovereignty and territorial integrity (de Waal 2010; Saparov 2023). Despite numerous attempts to mediate the conflict, Yerevan and Baku have essentially become guarantors of an ongoing political contest (Ibrahimov and Oztarsu 2022). Russia has capitalised on the situation by increasing its military presence in the South Caucuses, including under the auspices of a peacekeeping operation in Nagorno-Karabakh, and ensuring the continuity of its presence as a stabilising force in the region (Gafarli 2022; Özkan 2008).

The importance of Nagorno-Karabakh to regional security is complex. The parastate sits at the junction of supply lines between Capsian Sea and international markets, it is at NATOs doorstep, and it is within Iran's sphere of influence. These factors culminate in a volatile mix of interests that favour stability and control over the conflict resolution process (Pokalova 2015; Companjen 2010; Kasim 2001). Despite playing an active role in mediating the conflict, Moscow's rationale for supporting Nagorno-Karabakh has been more limited than is the case with other post-Soviet parastates. Throughout the 1990s, the only role played by Nagorno-Karabakh in Russian foreign policy was as an instrument for Moscow to retain influence in the South Caucasus (Abushov 2019). The minimalist aims of the 1990s were supplemented in the 2000s by a pivot towards brokering a settlement between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh that would position Russia as the only regional actor with the power to resolve the issue (Çakmak and Özşahin 2023; Yemelianova 2023). Throughout the twenty-first century, leaders in both Yerevan and Baku have been tethered to an undesirable status quo by domestic political and economic constraints (Özkan 2008, 592). Meanwhile, Moscow has had little incentive to expedite a permanent solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh issue as the status quo is relatively favourable to Russia's interests, whereas a significant change to the situation risks upsetting the regional balance (Abushov 2019, 82; Çakmak and Özşahin 2023, 982).

The attitude of the public in Nagorno-Karabakh towards Russia is largely framed by pragmatic security concerns. The key enablers that facilitate Russian support to the parastate are identity-based. For the ethnic Armenian majority, Russia has historically been seen as a protector of Armenia and ethnic Armenians. This is partially due to a shared orthodox Christian religious identity, which underpins a lasting mutual affection, and partially based on a perception of Russia as a benefactor to the ethnic Armenian people (Abushov 2019, 85–86). In addition, there is a large Armenian diaspora that is well-integrated into Russian society (Abushov 2019, 87). Exposure to Russian culture through diasporas and tourism is supplemented by the availability of Russian language media. Most media outlets in Nagorno-Karabakh are government controlled. As such, they are subject to political censorship and pro-government bias, while Russian language media offers a significant proportion of the alternatives that are available to the public (Kopecek 2016). Unsurprisingly, most Armenians trust Russians at the micro-level as business partners and friends more than Armenian society trusts Russia as an ally at the macro-level (Atanesyan et al. 2024). In combination, these enabling factors facilitate significant Russian support to Nagorno-Karabakh.

The mechanisms of Russian support to Nagorno-Karabakh have largely been delivered via Armenia rather than directly to the parastate. Unlike Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, Russia does not recognise Nagorno-Karabakh and, although it enables its survival as a political entity, Moscow engages with it indirectly through Yerevan and Baku. Russia has woven a delicate balance to preserve the status quo, offering substantial military support to Armenia, while selling arms to Azerbaijan (Abushov 2019). Russia has armed Armenia to maintain an effective deterrent against external threats, while its arms sales to Azerbaijan have ensured that the balance between Yerevan and Baku has not tipped into either's favour. Perhaps most importantly, thousands of Russian military personnel have been stationed in Armenia, including the military base at Gyumri, which significantly increases the Russian Armed Forces' combat capability in the region and extends Moscow's influence over the South Caucasus (Romashov and Rytövuori-Apunen 2016). Russia has also invested significantly in economic support to Armenia, which is the main source of economic support for Nagorno-Karabakh (Pokalova 2015). However, the economic situation in Nagorno-Karabakh has been affected by economic challenges faced by both Russia and Azerbaijan in recent years (Romashov and Rytövuori-Apunen 2016).

The outcomes of Russian support to Nagorno-Karabakh have been largely favourable to Moscow. Despite the resurgence of conflict in 2020, Russia successfully tempered the violence and emerged as the only major power able to broker a peace agreement. This solidified its role in the south Caucuses and indebted both Yerevan and Baku to Moscow for at least the duration of the five-year ceasefire (Gafarli 2022). The conflict also showed that Russia's pursuit of its interests in Nagorno-Karabakh will not be swayed by international opinion, underscoring Turkey's relative inability to influence regional security outcomes in its neighbours (Kasim 2001). Russia's actions in mediating conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan while supporting the autonomy of Nagorno-Karabakh have influenced its relationships with Yerevan and Baku at least as much as it has solidified Russia's position

relative to other major powers. Some of Moscow's actions have appeared contradictory to Armenia and undermined the credibility of its security guarantees (Atanesyan et al. 2024, 277). At the same time, Russia's ties with Azerbaijan have deepened in the post-Soviet period, with increasing arms sales and affirmations of respect of independence and sovereignty (Ghahriyan 2024). The fragile security situation in the aftermath of the 2020 conflict ensures a continued Russian military presence in the South Caucuses at a time when Moscow's influence had been waning (Çakmak and Özşahin 2023).

Analysis

Russian support to the post-Soviet parastates of Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh has shown both continuity and change in Moscow's approach to managing its strategic interests in the Eurasian region. In the case of Moldova and Georgia, Russia leveraged the parastates of Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia to exert influence over Chisinau and Tbilisi and to dissuade them from further engagement with NATO (Blakkisrud and Kolstø 2012; Nasirov et al. 2017). In the case of Armenia and Azerbaijan, Moscow has created a role for itself as a mediator and peacekeeper in Nagorno-Karabakh in attempt to secure Russia's position as the dominant regional power and to maintain a stable balance of power between the parties to the dispute (Çakmak and Özşahin 2023). This demonstrates that Russia's support for parastates is nuanced and deliberate (Kolossov and Zotova 2021). Moscow uses them to effectively perpetuate political stalemates, undermine the political autonomy of host countries, and challenge the strength and cohesiveness of the NATO buffer states.

A comparative analysis of Moscow's rationale for supporting each parastate, the intrinsic enablers that have facilitated that support, the primary mechanisms of support, and the overall outcomes of support, shows that Russian strategic interest lie at the heart of its foreign policy actions (Kosienkowski and Dembińska 2024). Table 2 summarises the key findings from each case:

	TRANSNISTRIA	ABKHAZIA AND SOUTH OSSETIA	NAGORNO-KARABAKH
RATIONALE *Why does Russia support the parastate?*	• Secure access to the Dniester River from Odessa • Secure access to energy trade routes to Europe • Exercise influence over Moldovan politics	• Secure access to the Black Sea and a military base close to Tbilisi • Exercise hegemonic influence over the Caucuses • Signal the credibility of Russian policy to the CIS	• Secure energy supply lines between the Caspian Sea and international markets • Exercise hegemonic influence over the Caucuses • Maintain a balance of power between Yerevan and Baku
ENABLERS *What are the factors which facilitate Russian support of the parastate?*	• Designation of Russian as the official language • Adoption of the Russian legal and education systems • Pro-Russian ethnic identity • Prevalence of Russian media	• Presence of significant Russian Minorities • Prevalence of Russian language as Lingua Franca • Extensive Russian tourism • Russian language media • Ease of acquiring Russian citizenship	• Shared orthodox Christian identity between Russians and Armenians • Armenian diaspora in Russia • Russian language media
MECHANISMS *In what ways is Russia able to continue its support of the parastate?*	• Consistent military presence, especially at the Cobasna munitions depot • Military training, weaponry, equipment, and support • Subsidised energy and substantial financial aid	• Russian military bases • Border security personnel • International recognition • Substantial commercial activities and economic aid • Scholarships and places in Russian universities	• Substantial Russian military presence in Armenia • Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh • Russian arms sales to Baku to maintain the status quo • Substantial economic support to Yerevan
OUTCOMES *What are the policy benefits of support for the parastate?*	• Enabled parastate to remain politically autonomous • Control over the Cobasna munitions depot • Destabilised a NATO buffer state	• Enabled parastates to remain politically autonomous • Punished Georgian engagement with NATO • Signalled Russia's intent to use force to secure its interests in the region	• Enabled parastate to remain politically autonomous • Prevented external powers from mediating the conflict • Established long-lasting security dependency in NATO buffer states

Table 2: Comparative Analysis of Case Study Variables

In each case, Moscow's rationale for supporting parastates has been centred on Russian strategic interests in Eurasia. In the case of Transnistria, Moscow had a vested interest in securing access to the Black Sea and to the Cobasna weapons depot, in retaining a military presence along the Ukrainian border and close to the NATO border, and in deterring Chisinau from further engagement with NATO (Miarka 2020). In the case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Moscow's interests were in securing access to key logistics networks, including the Black Sea, maintaining a military presence close to Tbilisi, and exercising hegemonic influence over the Caucuses to signal the credibility of its deterrent to the CIS (Nasirov et al. 2017). In the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, Moscow's interests were to secure

energy supply lines between the Caspian Sea and international markets, maintain a balance of power between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and to ensure that Russia was the only power able to provide security and stability to the South Caucuses (Nasirov et al. 2017; Companjen 2010; Abushov 2019). In each case it is clear that the Russia strategic calculus favoured its own interests above those of the parastates it supported. Without exception, Moscow pursued policy outcomes that benefited Russia more, often disproportionately so, than any of its recognised or unrecognised neighbours.

The intrinsic enablers that benefited Russia in its support to parastates were broadly similar. To some extent, each of the parastates have a degree of shared experience in that they were once part of the Soviet Union and shared a language and culture. In some ways, they also differed from case to case. In all of the cases examined, Russian language and media were important. In Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, Russia is an official language or the Lingua Franca. In Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh there are significant Russian minorities and diasporas in Russia, fostering deep-seated social and culturing ties. In Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, Russian tourism and the ease of acquiring citizenship further embed Russian culture into the parastates' societies. These enablers were important contextual factors that help to explain why these parastates were willing to accept Russian patronage, even in the absence of formal recognition in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh.

For the most part, the mechanisms of Russian support to each parastate were similar. Through a network of patron-client relationships, Moscow has used its armed forces extensively in pursuing its strategic interests in Eurasia (Vits 2024; Biermann 2024). Although Russia has often referred to its military operations as peacekeeping, rather than wars, its rationale for providing military support to post-Soviet parastates has been aligned more with the use of force to achieve Moscow's strategic interests than with mediating conflict for the sake of peace (Allison 2009). Similarly, its military bases and standing personnel in Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Armenia all have strategic utility well beyond supporting its parastate clients. In all of the cases examined, Russia used its military presence to deter revisionism and maintain a favourable balance of power in the Caucuses, to secure access to strategic locations and lines of communication, and to signal the credibility of its deterrent against NATO expansion further into Eurasia. At the same time, Moscow has used economic support to prop up parastates that are largely or entirely reliant on Russian funding for their security and prosperity. Russia also utilised specific mechanisms of support in individual cases. In the case of Transnistria, Russia garnered preferential treatment from Moldovan politicians to ensure beneficial policy outcomes. In Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia used scholarships and student quotas in its higher education system to support the public, while it pressured Georgia to make territorial concessions along its borders (Sieniawski 2024). In Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia balanced an arms race between Yerevan and Baku in an attempt to avoid escalation and to cement Moscow's influence in mediating regional security issues the South Caucuses (Nasirov et al. 2017; Gafarli 2022).

The outcomes of the patron-client relationships that Moscow fostered with the post-Soviet parastates in each case study were almost entirely to Russia's benefit. While its support to some extent enabled the continued existence of each parastate as a semi-autonomous political entity, that support also entrenched Russia more deeply into the Eurasian security architecture and increased Moscow's military reach into the NATO buffer states on its regional periphery. Russia successfully supported parastates that are a destabilising force in its regional neighbours, both weakening and deterring them from deeper engagement with NATO. In Transnistria, it retained access to Dniester River from Odessa and control over the Cobansa weapons depot. In Abkhazia and South Ossetia, it secured access to the Black Sea and a military base within kilometres of Tbilisi. In Armenia, it maintains a military base that extends the reach of the Russian Armed Forces into the South Caucuses, up to the NATO border. These benefits have allowed Russia to extend the reach of its influence further towards the shadows of its former empire and become the primary arbiter of regional stability in the post-Soviet periphery (Kosienkowski and Dembińska 2024; Cornell 2002).

Conclusions

The post-Cold War period has seen a dramatic shift in the geopolitical structure of the Eurasian region. However, many of the same geostrategic and regional security challenges that major powers have faced over centuries endure today. The role of the Russian Federation in setting the security agenda in Eurasia is hotly contested by NATOs engagement with and expansion into the periphery that divides the former East and West with a beltway of post-Soviet states. Russian foreign policy has capitalised on available opportunities by utilising these states as a buffer against expanding NATO borders. That strategy has yielded significant gains and concessions for Moscow, by deterring and sometimes punishing closer engagement between post-Soviet states and NATO and solidifying Russia's position as the major power in Central Asia and the Caucuses (Kazantsev et al. 2020; Buyukmehmetoglu 2022; Kotkin 2016). Within that strategy, Moscow has also focused its attention on several parastates within the buffer zone it has established, and it has supported them politically, militarily, and economically to undermine the autonomy and freedom of action of its buffer states and leveraged them against growing NATO influence in the region (Marten 2020; Lieven 1997).

By maintaining a presence in select post-Soviet parastates, like Transnistria in Moldova, South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia, and Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan, Russia has exerted influence and control over regional security, extended the reach and deterrent effect of the Russian Armed Forces with forward bases, and balanced against a growing NATO presence in the region (Kazantsev et al. 2020; Franco 2021; Rojansky 1999). Moscow's rationale for supporting parastates in each case has been centred on enduring Russian strategic interests in Eurasia (Sussex 2012). In Transnistria, Moscow's interests lay in securing access to the Black Sea, controlling the Cobasna weapons depot, retaining a military presence along the Ukrainian border, and deterring Chisinau from closer

engagement with NATO (Miarka 2020). In Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Moscow's interests were in controlling logistics networks, hosting a military base close to Tbilisi, and signalling the credibility of its deterrent to the CIS (Gerrits and Bader 2016). In the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, Moscow's interests were to secure the supply of Russian energy to international markets, maintain the status quo between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and to ensure that only Russia provided security and stability to the South Caucuses (Nasirov et al. 2017). This suggests that parastates have more value to regional security than the immediate effects of their potential to divide or destabilise the state they intend to secede from. Political and economic support helps to legitimise parastates' claims to sovereignty or political autonomy, while also reducing the autonomy of host states. Military and economic support also enable Russia to use parastates as a means of applying pressure to states they want to influence.

Recognising the geostrategic value of parastates and supporting them has proven to be a value foreign policy tool for Russia. However, it is also clear that this foreign policy tool has limits. Although Moscow has been willing to empower and embolden its client parastates up to a point, it has shown reluctance to invest the political stakes that would be necessary to facilitate their independence or annexation. This indicates that either such investment would be too costly or that it would be less desirable than maintaining the status quo. In Russia's strategic calculus, it is more likely that the buffer zone it has created is more advantageous than other options. This would be consistent with other aspects of Moscow's foreign policy and would explain the delicate balance between altruistic and self-serving actions that Russia has taken in the post-Soviet parastates on its periphery. This highlights an opportunity for further research into the role of parastates in Russian foreign policy and also in the Eurasian regional security landscape more broadly. While there are many studies on parastates that focus largely on internal issues, international recognition, and political settlements with host states, there is a little explored further dimension to these kinds of conflicts which may have influence well beyond their borders.

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