

Buffer zones are an indispensable component of geopolitics, but they lack a thorough theoretical investigation, and their characteristics, formations, and functionings remain largely lack systematic research.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, in scattered pieces these aspects have been tackled by several scholars, and case studies are abundant. This brief essay seeks to merge the theoretical fragments into a generalized framework, and explore why and how Russia, through its imperial, Soviet and contemporary periods, has built and maintained its own buffer states and spaces.

The most straightforward purpose of buffers is to prevent conflicts between rival powers by reducing the possibility of them coming into direct contact with each other.<sup>2</sup> They can also act as cushioning against a neighboring conflict zone, thus ensuring that the violence and turmoil would not “spill over” into one’s own territories.<sup>3</sup> The former is more common during periods of stalemate and cold confrontation, while the latter presumes a state of “hot” belligerence, which can be either military or ideological (George Kennan’s containment policy was an example). Some scholars have identified in history a series of buffers dating back to the 18th century, including Scandinavia and Switzerland from the Concert of Europe (1814), Rhineland from the Treaty of Versailles (1919), and the two Vietnams from the Geneva Conference (1954),<sup>4</sup> but this list is solely based on negotiated treaties, which indicates that a prominently legal argument that buffers are carefully drawn out entities aimed at specific, long-term ends. In fact, many buffers were not *built*, but simply *left alone*, which entails another geopolitical approach.

This paper proposes that the distinction between calculatedly developed buffers and left-alone ones derives mostly from variations in a *buffered* party’s long-term territorial expectations. If the party has reached its envisioned maximum expanse, and faces a hostile power across the borders,

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see Mohammad Reza Hafeznia, Syrus Ahmandi and Bernard Hourcad, “Explanation of the Structural and Functional Characteristics of Geopolitical Buffer Spaces,” *Geopolitics Quarterly*, vol. 8, no. 4 (Winter 2013), 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*; Eian Katz, “Between Here and There: Buffer Zones in International Law,” *The University of Chicago Law Review*, vol. 84 (2017), 1380.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Lionel Beehner and Gustav Meibauer, “The Futility of Buffer Zones in International Politics,” *Orbis* (Spring 2016), 1-19.

<sup>4</sup> Katz, 1380.

it will most likely build buffers actively in that direction. It is because, without any immediate drive or reason to further expand, more resources could be invested in buffer maintenance. On the other hand, if a fully expanded state has a friendly or allied neighbor, there will be little planning of inserting between them a buffer, and whatever *de facto* cushioning there is would likely be left unaltered. A similarly dual strategy exists for countries that are still in an expansive phase, which perceive any existing boundaries to be merely temporary. In that case, if the party perceives in its immediate threats (or targets) equal or superior strength, it would proactively insulate itself from them in an attempt to reach stalemate, thus buying time for future confrontations. However, if the party finds the power imbalance to be in its favor, it would not focus on buffering, and may even dismantle whatever buffers that are already present.

	Expansive Expectations?	
	YES	NO
Hostile neighbors	/	Careful, active buffering
Friendly neighbors	/	Passive, left-alone buffering
Favorable power imbalance	Passive or negative buffering	/
Unfavorable power imbalance	Careful, active buffering	/

Therefore, from these comparisons we note that the decision whether to buffer up or not depends primarily on three factors: security, necessity and capacity. Security regards the presence of proximate hostile players (or a lack thereof). Necessity concerns whether a state should expect to suffer significant damages *without* buffering, and capacity simply refers to whether the party has the adequate resources to construct, rein in and support its buffers. As observers have noticed, “buffer space cannot protect or vaccinate itself,”<sup>5</sup> and calls for constant external inputs, which are often diplomatically and economically taxing. We could expect that when a state has little security, a high necessity and ample resources, it would seek every opportunity to insulate itself. Russia, unfortunately, is one of those countries. Situated on the verge of Europe and Asia, its membership of either is disputed. In 18th century it assumed a pan-Slavic and Eurasian identity,<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Hafeznia et al., 2.

<sup>6</sup> For example, see Mark Bassin, “Russia between Europe and Asia: The Ideological Construction of Geographical Space,” *Slavic Review*, vol. 50, no. 1 (Spring 1991), 12.

which attests to the deep mutual distrust between the Empire and its Western neighbors. Furthermore, geography is at odds with Russia's desired invulnerability. Climate dictates that Russia's agricultural land is disproportionately small and peripheral, mostly clustered in Ukraine, North Caucasus, and the Eastern European plains.<sup>7</sup> Since its population and economy boomed in the 16th century, agrarian necessity has driven a majority of its populations to its fertile outskirts, where cities and towns prospered.<sup>8</sup> Into the 1860s, statisticians have observed that the central provinces not only were "the richest" in agriculture, but also have formed "the centre of the manufacturing industries of the Empire."<sup>9</sup> This wave of industrialization only strengthened the periphery-hinterland imbalance after Emancipation of the serfs in 1861, which prompted farmworkers in the countryside to migrate to Russia's urbanized west.<sup>10</sup> The only part that was even more developed was Congress Poland, briefly incorporated into the Russian Empire in the 19th century, which was situated further west and thus closer to the imperial borders. Such geographical vulnerability proved fatal during the Napoleonic campaign (1812). In mere five months the *Grande Armée* forced the Russians to resort to scorched earth tactics, and most Russian cities in its European half were devastated. The invasion left 80% of Moscow's housing destroyed,<sup>11</sup> and devastated a majority of its commercial and industrial middle class.<sup>12</sup> The swift movements of the French, as well as the inability of the Russians to organize effective defense, could partially be attributed to the fact that Napoleon launched his operation from the Duchy of Warsaw, immediate to the west of Russia's Volhynian Governorate. The First World War, the economic tolls of which was no less crippling,<sup>13</sup> also caught Russia without any buffering to Central Europe. Conclusively, Russia had historically been aware of the necessity of shielding

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<sup>7</sup> For example, see "Russian Federation - Crop Production Maps," Foreign Agricultural Service, United States Department of Agriculture (2015), [https://ipad.fas.usda.gov/rssiws/al/rs\\_cropprod.aspx](https://ipad.fas.usda.gov/rssiws/al/rs_cropprod.aspx).

<sup>8</sup> I. O. Alyabina, A. A. Golubinsky, and D. A. Khitrov, "Soil Resources and Agriculture in the Center of European Russia at the End of the 18th Century," *Eurasian Soil Science*, vol. 48, no. 11 (2015), 1182.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Michell, "Summary of Statistics of the Russian Empire," *Journal of the Statistical Society of London*, vol. 35, no. 3 (September 1872), 346-347.

<sup>10</sup> Manabu Suhara, "Russian Agricultural Statistics," *RRC Working Paper Series No. 67* (Russian Research Center, Hitotsubashi University, March 2017), 1-48.

<sup>11</sup> See Robert Lyall, *The Character of the Russians and a Detailed History of Moscow* (London: T. Cadell; Edinburgh: W. Blackwood; 1823), 500-501.

<sup>12</sup> See Alexander M. Martin, "Moscow Society in the Napoleonic Era: Cultural Tradition and Political Stability," *The National Council for Eurasian and East European Research* (2004), 1-28.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Stephen Broadberry and Mark Harrison, "The Economics of World War I: An Overview," in *The Economics of World War I* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 3-40.

itself from east-bound intruders, and buffering has always been one of its decision makers chief concerns. It also has been a major geopolitical power, which places in its arsenal sufficient resources to be utilized. Hence, for Russia buffering was urgent, advantageous, and feasible.

### IMPERIAL RUSSIA

Peter I understood this principle well. When he ascended to the throne in 1682, the czardom was largely landlocked, bordering the Crimean Khanate in the south, Sweden along the Baltic coasts and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to the west. In this light, we may interpret the many Petrine wars as his endeavor to build buffers in all three directions.

The first major campaign he undertook was against the Ottoman Empire and its Crimean protectorate, which history remembers as the conquest of Azov (1695-1697). This fortress, situated at the mouth of Don River, controls the commercial and naval access to the Sea of Azov, and subsequently the Black Sea. Moreover, it is the only major settlement along the empty prairie land between the Russian and Turkish spheres of influence, thus an ideal buffer against Turkish incursions.<sup>14</sup> The intent of building buffers instead of expanding territories was clear when the stronghold was converted into a colony instead of a new administrative unit. The Russian Azov was envisioned as “a network of fortified strategic points”, easily accessible by water and defensible against land forces, and therefore to halt and deter Tartar and Turkish attacks.<sup>15</sup> As military buffers Azov and the nearby ports were inhabited almost exclusively by troops and their families, minimizing any potential disruptions to the economic and commercial activities of inland provinces.<sup>16</sup> After initial success Peter carefully suspended further encroachment and focused on local development, which reflected the equilibrium of power between his Empire and the Ottomans. The Turks responded by blockading the Kerch strait to the south of Azov from 1697 to 1705,<sup>17</sup> essentially turning the entire Sea of Azov into a naval vacuum that reduced to minimal military friction until 1711.

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<sup>14</sup> Some scholars have pointed out that buffers, instead of preventing conflicts, actually produce them. See Sungtae Park, “Securing Strategic Buffer Space: Case Studies and Implications for U.S. Global Strategy,” Center for the National Interest (October 2016), 2; Beehner and Meibauer, 1-19.

<sup>15</sup> Brian J. Boeck, “When Peter I Was Forced to Settle for Less: Coerced Labor and Resistance in a Failed Russian Colony,” *The Journal of Modern History*, vol. 80, no. 3 (September 2008), 490.

<sup>16</sup> See Major John Dorrough, “Historic Battle Analysis: Azov 1695-1696,” Air Command and Staff College (1984), especially the attached timeline, 50.

<sup>17</sup> Boeck, 494.

Just like the Black Sea would be a natural barrier between Russia and the Ottomans, so would the Baltic be between Petrine frontiers and Sweden. However, since the Treaty of Cardis in 1661, the Swedish Empire has possessed vast strips of land on the eastern Baltic coast, from where raids of western Russia and Poland could be easily conducted.<sup>18</sup> In order to realize the Baltic buffer, Peter started his famous Great Northern War (1699-1721). Like in the south, Russian leaders envisioned a lasting outcome, an effort exemplarily showcased by the construction and designation as capital of St. Petersburg in 1703.<sup>19</sup> In the same year its Baltic Fleet went into operation, signaling the beginning of Russia's Imperial Navy.<sup>20</sup> This preeminence was in itself proof of the flotilla's crucial role as a buffer for its most valuable port urban areas, and its effects were telling. The redrawing of borders resulting from these campaigns proved solid, as Russia's Baltic interests persisted into the 21st century, and no more territorial confrontation with Sweden and Denmark has taken place since then.

At the same time, the Commonwealth called for a more complex strategy. While the Baltic Sea, the mountainous Carpathia and the Black Sea were natural barriers against invaders from Scandinavia or Turkey, against the Central European or German states there was no geographical obstacles, so alternative manmade buffer states were installed. As early as the mid-17th century, Muscovy has realized that a disintegrating Commonwealth would be ideal for client and buffer states to emerge. In fact, in the early 1650s the prominent Radziwill family of Lithuania had the vision of creating, along with Moldavia, the Cossacks (Ukrainian Hetmanate), the Swedish and Courland a "small states' coalition" against Polish hegemony in Eastern Europe.<sup>21</sup> Alexis I of Russia certainly found this proposal appealing, and joined the Hetmanate in its rebellion against the Commonwealth (1654-1667), which resulted in Russia seizing the important fortress of Smolensk. Like at Azov, the territories surrounding the stronghold were distributed among the tsar's "men of service", establishing a militarized "colony" between Russia and Poland proper.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See Lennart Andersson Palm, "Sweden's 17th century - a period of expansion or stagnation?" Institutionen för historiska studier, Göteborg (2016).

<sup>19</sup> James Hassell, "The Planning of St. Petersburg," *The Historian*, vol. 36, issue 2 (1974), 248-263.

<sup>20</sup> *The Russian Navy: A Historic Transition* (Office of Naval Intelligence, December 2015), xiv.

<sup>21</sup> Andrej Kotljarchuk, *In the Shadows of Poland and Russia: The Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Sweden in the European Crisis of the mid-17th Century* (Södertörns högskola, 2006), 83.

<sup>22</sup> L. R. Lewitter, "The Russo-Polish Treaty of 1686 and Its Antecedents," *The Polish Review*, vol. 9, no. 3 (Summer 1964), 6.

This area at the time was not incorporated into the administrative structure of the czardom, and its populations were allowed to preserve their own way of life, imitating a semi-autonomous region whose economic potentials gave way to geopolitical priorities. Compared to Alexis, Peter was more diplomatic in his dealings with the Commonwealth, fully contemplating the possibility of a Polish-Swedish alliance. Therefore, he resorted to what some called a “policy of influence,” taking advantage of the inertia that plagued its political landscape, convinced that a divided Poland would be ideal to reduce future conflicts with Prussia and Austria.<sup>23</sup> Some sources would indicate that by 1726, a planning of the three-party partition had already been negotiated,<sup>24</sup> and Peter skillfully played King Augustus II against his *Sejm* by promising to him Livonia as crown land, essentially destabilizing the power balance within the Commonwealth.

The first material step of Polish dismemberment was set in motion in 1763, when a formal agreement between Russia’s Catherine II and Prussia’s Frederick II was reached to install the weak Stanislaus Poniatowski as the Polish king. Their agents also actively advocated to defend the aristocratic privileges of challenging monarchic decisions, ensuring the persistence of internal anarchy.<sup>25</sup> Until 1768 when a Catholic insurrection broke out, the Russian buffering policies remained largely indirect and diplomatic. The revolt, however, prompted it to resort to military actions, quench the insurgency, and seizing the city of Polotsk on the river of Daugava, which would become a defensible natural barrier. Although this seizure was based on ancient titles,<sup>26</sup> there was no actual territorial desire behind it. Count Panin, the influential Russian politician, even explicitly told Frederick that “as for Russia she cared for no further conquests... her territories were sufficient,”<sup>27</sup> further attesting to the partition’s purely strategic (and hence buffering) considerations. Further partitions were initiated in 1793 and 1795,<sup>28</sup> and two factors set those attempts distinctively apart from the other buffering experiments of Russia.

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<sup>23</sup> Louise B. Roberts, “Peter the Great in Poland,” *The Slavonic Review*, vol. 5, no. 15 (1927), 537-551.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 537, “The alliance of the three eagles which first came about in 1726 already saw Poland isolated... along lines of partition.” Some sources suggest an earlier date, see J. B. Perkins, “The Partition of Poland,” *The American Historical Review*, vol. 2, no. 1 (October 1896), 80.

<sup>25</sup> Perkins, 83-84.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, a letter of Catherine II, in *A Source Book for Russian History*, G. Vernadsky, trans. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), Vol. 2, pp. 409-410.

<sup>27</sup> Solms to Frederick, March 3, 1769. See Perkins, 87.

<sup>28</sup> For a brief history see *Poland: The Land and Its People* (Center for Russian and East European Studies, University of Pittsburgh, June 2004), 14-16.

First, the acquired territories were *annexed*, in that they were assigned to places in the regular administrative structure instead of being separate colonial or military units. New governorates were created, equal to their counterparts in Russia proper. Furthermore, a policy of harsh Russification was proclaimed. In former Lithuanian Belorussia, the native language was banned, and the use of Russian enforced, so was the religious norm changed from Uniate to Orthodox.<sup>29</sup> Polish was also erased from administrative works, and the Commonwealth nobles were appeased by the promise of Western-styled modernization in the Russian partition zone. More importantly, Catherine II entrusted a new Commission of National Education to the loyal Jesuits in her court, whose Latin curriculum could hopefully replace Polish as the *lingua franca* among the old Commonwealth elites.<sup>30</sup> This more hands-on approach could be attributed partially to the escalating international tension in Europe at the time. The French Revolution, which broke out in 1789, aroused among Russian monarchists fear of instability and violence, and created a perceived sense of impending continental turmoil.<sup>31</sup> Paul I, for example, conducted a general purge of his officer cadets between 1797 and 1799 in order to cleanse it of pro-French sentiments, a sign of war preparation.<sup>32</sup> With that backdrop, the decision to fully annex the heavily populated and vast Eastern Poland became reasonable as a prelude to build up reserves and intimidate separatist nationalists, who were rapidly gaining favor in revolutionary France. The necessity became more pressing after Napoleon incorporated the exile Polish Legion of the *Agencja* into his auxiliary forces around 1798, and began to entertain the idea of an autonomous, friendly Polish state.<sup>33</sup>

In 1812, the decades-long Russian buffering of Poland paid off. Marching from the town of Kowno, Napoleon's armies were forced to travel across the vast expanses Russia gained through its three Polish partitions, the strategic depth of which caused great casualties to his troops. Although Russified Poland suffered heavy economic losses in this Franco-Russian War, its mere

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<sup>29</sup> Helen Fedor, *Belarus and Moldova: Country Studies* (Federal Research Division, 1995), 15.

<sup>30</sup> See Tomasz Kamusella, "Germanization, Polonization and Russification in the Partitioned Lands of Poland-Lithuania: Myths and Reality," 15.

<sup>31</sup> Dmitry Shlapentokh, "The French Revolution in Russian political life: the case of interaction between history and politics," *Revue des Études Slaves*, vol. 61 (1989), 131-142.

<sup>32</sup> John L. H. Keep, "The Russian Army's Response to the French Revolution," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* Neue Folge, Bd. 28, H. 4 (1980), 500-523.

<sup>33</sup> Radosław Żurawski vel Grajewski, "Poland in the Period of Partitions, 1795-1914," 95-96.

presence has prevented Russia's total defeat. In this sense, the buffering policies of Peter, Catherine and Paul were successful. Afterwards, Poland again achieved partial autonomy as the Constitutional Kingdom of Poland (1815-1867) until being incorporated by Russia again after a failed November Uprising, and no external threat ever challenged Russian dominance over this buffer zone until World War I (1914-1918).<sup>34</sup>

As the western and northern (Baltic) borders stabilized, the southern frontier remained a menace for Imperial Russia. Sea of Azov was deemed a suitable buffer for Peter the Great, because at the time Russia had little naval presence in the Black Sea, and its commercial interests in the Mediterranean were meager. However, after the Treaty of Kutchuk-Kainardji (1774) granted to Russian merchants shipping rights in Ottoman waters, commercial activities boomed, and by 1802 Russia's Black Sea ports had achieved a net export surplus of 0.9 million rubles.<sup>35</sup> As trade prospered, the Russian South gradually became more important economically,<sup>36</sup> and conflicts with the more established East Mediterranean powers soon arose. Both called for a more lasting and secure buffer space in the Balkans. Up to 1812, in a series of Russo-Turkish wars the Empire gained the entirety of the Crimean Peninsula and Eastern Moldavia, and gave Russia the benefits of being guarded by the Carpathian Mountains and the Black Sea, so little need there was for manmade buffers against the Turks. Nevertheless, Russian leaders felt a more and more acute from the West Mediterranean powers, both geopolitically and ideologically, both of which centered primarily on the Balkan Peninsula.

First, around the same time German nationalism had created among the Russian intellectuals a feeling of linguistic unity, later termed Pan-Slavism.<sup>37</sup> The first wave of this movement in the 1800s was essentially an embodiment of Russian supremacy in Eastern and Southern Europe, as the Empire sought to keep the French and the Italians away from the Peninsula. The first testament to this scheme was the joint Russo-Ottoman invasion of Corfu (1800) which ended the

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<sup>34</sup> For the "domestic administration" of this buffer, see Piotr Koryś and Maciej Tymiński, "occupational Structure in the Polish Territories at the Turn of the 20th (1895-1900) Century," *Working Papers*, no. 9 (University of Warsaw, 2015), 1-40.

<sup>35</sup> Artur Attman, "The Russian market in world trade, 1500-1860," *Scandinavian Economic History Review*, vol. 29, no. 3 (1981), 177-202. See table on pg. 192.

<sup>36</sup> Theophilus C. Prousis, "Risky Business: Russian Trade in the Ottoman Empire in the Early Nineteenth Century," *Mediterranean Historical Review*, vol. 20, no. 2 (December 2005), 201-226.

<sup>37</sup> See Rok Stergar, "Panslavism," *International Encyclopedia of the First World War* (July 2017).



local rule of Revolutionary France. The Septinsular (Ionian) Republic that was the child of this brief union submitted to Russia for protection, and served as a major bridgehead in the Adriatic Sea.<sup>38</sup> This commercial and military presence soon transformed into fully fledged operations ranging from charity works to political plotting.<sup>39</sup> Into the 1820s, Russian consular officers there began to actively support local Orthodox and Slavic independence movements, partially to undermine the Ottoman authorities while also hoping to create friendly buffer states, such as an autonomous Greece.<sup>40</sup> Nonetheless, those programs failed to fulfill their eventual ambition of securing the strait of Bosphorus, which would permanently secure Russia's trade routes.<sup>41</sup> In that light, all subsequent Russo-Turkish conflicts could be seen as its ordeals to finally realize this buffer. As late as in 1915, it was still trying to take Constantinople as the spoils of World War I, a plan prematurely cut short by the Revolution (1917).<sup>42</sup>

#### THE SOVIET UNION

Geopolitically, the newborn Soviet regime was even more eager to have its buffer spaces, as it inherited a more unfavorable international situation (Allied intervention) and suffered territory losses in the Brest-Litovsk Treaty (1918), exposing the important industrial hinterlands once again to a resurrected, hostile Poland. Russia also lost its fortified Aaland Islands and almost all Baltic shorelines to Finland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.<sup>43</sup> In other words, Soviet Russia lost almost all its western and northern buffers acquired since the time of Peter the Great, and must enter a new cycle of buffer building. Yet as this paper theorizes, a buffer-maintaining state must possess sufficient *capacity*, which the new regime was lacking in every respect. Therefore, from 1918 to 1939 it made no attempt to disrupt the status quo along the western frontier, and diverted most of its resources to Central Asia and the Caucasus. There were two reasons behind this

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<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Sakis Gekas, *Xenocracy: State, Class, and Colonialism in the Ionian Islands, 1815-1864* (Berghahn Books, 2016). Other than that information on this Republic is scarce.

<sup>39</sup> Asli Yigit Gülseven, "Rethinking Russian pan-Slavism in the Ottoman Balkans: N.P. Ignatiev and the Slavic Benevolent Committee (1856-77)," *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 53, issue 3 (2017), 332-348.

<sup>40</sup> Lucien J. Farry, "Russian consuls and the Greek war of independence (1821-31)," *Mediterranean Historical Review*, vol. 28, issue 1 (2013), 46-65.

<sup>41</sup> Eugenio Bregolat, "Russia in the Mediterranean and in Europe," *Presence of Non-Euro-Mediterranean Actors in the Mediterranean*, 37.

<sup>42</sup> Samuel Kucherov, "The Problem of Constantinople and the Straits," *The Russian Review*, vol. 8, no. 3 (July 1949), 205-220; Robert J. Kerner, "Russia, the Straits, and Constantinople, 1914-15," *The Journal of Modern History*, vol. 1, no. 3 (September 1929), 400-415.

<sup>43</sup> *The Peace Treaty of Brest-Litovsk*, March 3, 1918.

sudden shift of attention. First, the expected resistance was weaker, and thus more easily handled by the Soviets. Moreover, it was only during the Great War did the ailing Ottoman Empire begin to pursue an expansive foreign policy in this region. From 1914 to 1917, it repeatedly attempted to cross the Caucasus, and continued its offensives even after the Imperial government was toppled.<sup>44</sup> Although these operations ended in failure, the evacuation of Imperial Russian forces from Eastern Anatolia after the February Revolution led to the disintegration of its Caucasus Viceroyalty, and whatever troops that stayed behind suffered greatly from lack of supplies and diseases. The provisional Transcaucasian Commissariat was inefficient and plagued by ethnic disharmony, which gave the Ottomans an opportunity to advertise their pan-Turkish ideals and construct an Islamic sphere of influence in the Caucasus for the first time.<sup>45</sup> Eager to capture the oil-rich Caspian Sea and overwhelm the British presence in Caucasus-Persia, the Ottoman War Minister, Enver Pasha, dispatched 30,000 men into the mountains in April 1918 to claim the territories ceded by Russia at Brest-Litovsk.<sup>46</sup> By July, it was already on the march to Baku together with local Tartar Islamic forces bearing the telling title of “Army of Islam”. The city fell on September 14, and for the next two years remained in *de facto* Turkish control acting through the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic.<sup>47</sup> This new republic, together with the similarly short-lived republics of Georgia and Armenia, formed a narrow buffer belt between the recovering Soviet Russia and the declining Ottoman Empire until 1920.

That year, however, witnessed the full breakout of Turkish Independent Movement (1919-1923), which was perceived as an opportunity for the Soviet Russia to expand into Anatolia and Persia. By November 1920, Azerbaijan and Armenia had been incorporated into the Soviet Union, followed soon by Georgia in 1921.<sup>48</sup> Meanwhile, Mustafa Kemal’s new republic was in control

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<sup>44</sup> Tigran Martirosyan, “Caucasus Front,” *International Encyclopedia of the First World War* (2019).

<sup>45</sup> Yalçın Murgul, “Baku Expedition of 1917-1918: A Study of the Ottoman Policy Towards the Caucasus,” *Bilkent University*, Ankara (September 2007), iii-iv, 11-21.

<sup>46</sup> Murgul, 32.

<sup>47</sup> Major Roland P. Minez, *At the Limit of Complexity: British Military Operations in North Persia and the Caucasus 1918* (US Army Command and General Staff College Press, December 2018); Bulent Gokay, “The battle for Baku (May-September 1918): A peculiar episode in the history of the caucasus,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 31, issue 1 (1998), 30-50.

<sup>48</sup> See Glenn E. Curtis, *Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia: country studies* (Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, March 1994).

of Western Armenia, and concluded that Turkey should align with Europe geopolitically,<sup>49</sup> while championing a pan-Turkish national identity set to compete with Soviet communist ideology in Transcaucasus and Central Asia.<sup>50</sup> This prompted the Soviets to respond accordingly, turning its Central Asian Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs) into a buffer. This was achieved using a combination of two measures. The first was the introduction of “nationalities” into SSRs’ daily administration, which assigned to different republics, and populations within them, each a unique ethnic distinction. On one hand, this eased the assimilation process and weakened concerted opposition, while on the other it also prevented the emergence of a pan-Islamic or Turkish power base.<sup>51</sup> The second was increasing centralization, which delegated military and economic affairs to Moscow. The SSR of Bashkiria lost its autonomy in 1920, and the Khwarazm Soviet People’s Republic at its inception was nothing more than a transitional regime under the aegis of the Red Army.<sup>52</sup> This “divide and rule” strategy alongside heavy-handed domestic policies successfully preserved the integrity of Soviet Central Asia into the 1990s.<sup>53</sup>

The relative calm of Soviet steppes stood in sharp contrast with its East European frontlines in the 1930s. After more than a decade’s industrial and economic development, the Soviet Union felt secured enough to pursue further buffering once again in Poland and the Baltic countries. The Second Five-Year Plan (1933-1937) saw a boom in Russian military industry that can be readily deployed should hostilities erupt,<sup>54</sup> and the construction of new industrial centers at the more secured Ural Mountains, away from threatened Belarusian borders, was under way.<sup>55</sup> However, this process was hindered by bureaucratic inefficiency, a weak economic and labor

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<sup>49</sup> Halil Aslantas, “Strategic Vision of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk,” Strategy Research Project (1997).

<sup>50</sup> For example, see Ralph W. Feneis, “Pan-Turkism, Turkey, and the Muslim Peoples of the Former Soviet Union: A Modern Problem in Historical Context,” U.S. Army War College (1992); Ozgur Tufekci, “Turkish Eurasianism: Roots and Discourses,” in *Eurasian Politics and Society* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 1-35

<sup>51</sup> See Galym Zhussipbek, “History of Central Asia - 1700 to 1991,” in *Legacies of Division: Discrimination on the Basis of Religion and Ethnicity in Central Asia* (Equal Rights Trust, 2017), 25-26.

<sup>52</sup> Selim Öztürk, “The Bukharan Emirate and Turkestan Under Russian Rule in the Revolutionary Era: 1917-1924,” Ihsan Dogramaci Bilkent University (May 2012), 69-70.

<sup>53</sup> See Paulo Duarte, “Central Asia: The Bends of History and Geography,” *Revista de Relaciones Internacionales, Estrategia y Seguridad*, vol. 9, no. 1 (2014).

<sup>54</sup> Mark Harrison and Robert William Davies, “The Soviet military-economic effort during the second five-year plan (1933-1937),” *Europe Asia Studies*, vol. 49, no. 3 (May 1997).

<sup>55</sup> David R. Stone, “The First Five-Year Plan and the Geography of Soviet Defence Industry,” *Europe Asia Studies*, vol. 57, no. 7. (November 2005), 1047-1063.

base, as well as a genuine lack of time, which forced Stalin and the Soviet leadership to appease Nazi Germany not only to buy time, but also to gain more buffers should violence ensue.

Just as this paper predicts, with a desire to reclaim lost Imperial territories and facing a dangerous enemy against which little chance of victory could be found, the Soviet Union engaged in careful yet rapid buffer building activities, championed by the notorious Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (1939). This clandestine treaty divided Poland and the Baltic states into two spheres of influence, one German and the other Soviet.<sup>56</sup> The USSR would have Estonia, Latvia, and Eastern Poland as its puppet states, returning to its territorial extent in 1795 after the Third Partition of Poland (although Lithuania would be a German client). During negotiations the Soviet delegation also expressed the wish to control Bessarabia, which occupies the slopes of Northern Carpathia and borders the Danube delta. The Soviet Foreign Secretary Vyacheslav Molotov personally saw this agreement as a pragmatic triumph of the USSR, which now controlled an important commercial hub,<sup>57</sup> as well as Northern Dobruja, which was the only major artery of transportation into Moldavia from the Balkans. This buffer state was granted the status of the Moldavian SSR, and underwent thorough Sovietization. The Latin alphabets were replaced by Russian Cyrillic scripts, Russian immigrants were encouraged to move to Moldova, and historic links with its Romanian roots were denied.<sup>58</sup> Until the 21st century, this region was still firmly under Russian influences.

The Second World War (1939-1945), however, brought Russia's buffer building to a halt. Before the Battle of Stalingrad (1942-1943), the Soviet Union was in constant retreat, ceding some of its most valuable industrial and population centers to the advancing Axis troops. Nevertheless, the buffering paid off: The long march from Brest, on the border between German and Soviet-occupied Poland, to Moscow proved infeasible to the Germans.<sup>59</sup> In order to this invasion to

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<sup>56</sup> *Secret Supplementary Protocols of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Non-Aggression Pact, 1939* (Wilson Center Digital Archive), [digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org](http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org).

<sup>57</sup> See Charles E. King, "Soviet Policy in the Annexed East European Borderlands: Language, Politics and Ethnicity in Moldova," in *The Soviet Union in Eastern Europe, 1945-89* (1994), 63-93.

<sup>58</sup> V. G. Baleanu, "In The Shadow Of Russia: Romania's Relations With Moldova And Ukraine," Conflict Studies Research Centre (August 2000), 8-9.

<sup>59</sup> See, for example, Colonel Austin C. Wedemeyer, "The Strategy of Barbarossa," Air War College (1983); Vicent J. Castano, "The Failure of Operation Barbarossa: Truth versus Fiction," University of North Carolina at Pembroke (April 1997).

succeed, many observers conclude, the attacker must possess both speed, and the resources that are necessary to sustain it. There was little doubt that the efficient Wehrmacht forces, well versed in the techniques of Blitzkrieg, would fail at the former, but the German High Command did not take into consideration the rate of Soviet mobilization, and hoped that they could gain vital energy supplies *after* their capture of the Transcaucasian and Caspian oil fields.<sup>60</sup> How the war could have proceeded, had the Soviet Union failed to build the Estonia-Latvia-Eastern Poland buffer space, could hardly be fathomed, but the German momentum at Moscow and Stalingrad would likely have been more powerful, and the Baku oil fields could easily have been taken. Regardless, distance was exchanged for time, which was used to mobilize more troops that eventually stopped and turned back the tide of war. At the end of World War II the Soviet Union emerged as one of the two superpowers, and was more determined than ever to maintain an insulation belt between itself and the hostile West. If we apply the proposed model to post-war USSR, we would find it caught between two sets of assumptions. Some sources seem to indicate that the Soviet Union had little actual territorial expansion, but was more keen on enlarging its indirect sphere of influence.<sup>61</sup> For instance, Stalin told the British ambassador in 1944, concerning postwar boundaries, that “[w]e want to get back what was taken from us by force” and nothing beyond pre-Barbarossa frontiers.<sup>62</sup> Other researchers, on the other hand, perceive in Soviet military actions an overt desire for expansion, both ideologically and territorially.<sup>63</sup> The historical fact of course is more nuanced,<sup>64</sup> but given the proximity of hostile powers *and* a comparatively weak economic base, an active and calculated buffering scheme was expected. Contemporary observers noticed four mechanism the Soviet Union made use of in its Eastern European dominance: united-front governments, coordination of policy, military presence and

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<sup>60</sup> Department of the Army, *The German Campaign in Russia Planning and Operations (1940-1942)* (1955); Andrei A. Kokoshin, “The German Blitzkrieg Against the USSR, 1941,” *Belfer Center Paper* (Harvard Kennedy School, June 2016), 11-17.

<sup>61</sup> See, for example, excerpts from David Wolff, “Stalin’s postwar border-making tactics: East and West,” *The Soviet Union and the International Context Between 1939 and 1945* (2011), 273-291; Norman M. Naimark, *Stalin and the Fate of Europe: The Post War Struggle for Sovereignty* (2019).

<sup>62</sup> I.V. Stalina, “Osobaia Papka,” (1994), 29.

<sup>63</sup> Jeff Mankoff, “The Legacy of the Soviet Offensives of August 1945,” Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (August 2015); “The Cold War (1945-1989),” CVCE, University of Luxembourg (2016).

<sup>64</sup> W. Gordon East, “The New Frontiers of the Soviet Union,” *Foreign Affairs* (July 1951).

economic ties, the first two of which were closely linked.<sup>65</sup> Between 1947 and April 1956, the coordination among its satellite states was carried out by the Communist Information Bureau, or the Cominform.<sup>66</sup> Unlike the Cominterns that represented genuinely independent interests of different Soviet organizations, the Cominform was widely regarded as a Russian puppet apparatus, the main goal of which was to ensure the USSR's hegemony within the world Soviet, or "anti-imperialist and democratic", camp, and to rein in the potentially rebellious party leaders of East European and Balkan states.<sup>67</sup> This bureaucracy was portrayed and hailed as the arbiter of Marxism-Leninism, thus guarding the Soviet Union's legitimacy high ground. The ideology campaign was reinforced also by attempts to monopolize buffer regimes' foreign relations, a prerequisite to prevent a West-led encirclement. This fear was exacerbated by the proposition of the Marshall Plan, which Molotov called nothing more than a masterplan "standing over and above the countries of Europe and *interfering in their internal affairs*" down to the most meticulous details.<sup>68</sup> In response, a distinctively competitive stance was proclaimed in the Zhdanov doctrine, theorizing the concrete existence of a communist bloc for the first time. Cominform also accelerated its operations in Eastern Europe, especially in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, where party delegates reported strong "reactionary forces" and "other types of [i.e. elective or parliamentary] democracy".<sup>69</sup>

The intelligence works of Cominform was supplemented by its impressive (or oppressive) military might that constantly watched over its buffers. By 1981, half of Soviet tank, motorized and airborne divisions (98 out of 199) were stationed either on or next to Eastern European soil, as well as a majority of its air forces. The Western theatre of military operations, encompassing Poland, Czechoslovakia and East Germany, was also the best equipped and the best trained.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> C. E. Black, "Soviet Policy in Eastern Europe," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 263, The Soviet Union Since World War II (May, 1949), 152-164.

<sup>66</sup> See "Cominform," *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Cominform>.

<sup>67</sup> Denis Healey, "The Cominform and World Communism," *International Affairs*, vol. 24, issue 3 (July 1948), 339-349; "The Zhdanov Doctrine and the Cominform," CVCE (July 2016), 1-2.

<sup>68</sup> *Statement by Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov at the Final Meeting of the Three Power Conference, July 2, 1947*, from Department of State (Ed.), *A Decade of American Foreign Policy, Basic Documents 1941-1949* (1985), 969, emphasis added.

<sup>69</sup> Scott D. Parrish and Mikhail M. Narinsky, "New Evidence on the Soviet Rejection of the Marshall Plan, 1947: Two Reports," *Working Paper No. 9* (Wilson Center, March 1994), 31-39.

<sup>70</sup> Black, 156; *Soviet Military Power 1985* (U.S. Government, 1985).

The armed presence was essential for Soviet interventions in Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968), both of which strengthened the status quo within the Soviet buffer space. The Western powers showed strong unwillingness to interfere in this region, while the other Soviet bloc members saw in USSR's swift actions a promise of collective security, boosting its recognition as the sole leader of the communist world.<sup>71</sup> Romania, East Germany and China immediately endorsed the Soviet Union's criticism of "foreign agents and agitators," while the more reluctant Poland eventually gave in by 1958.<sup>72</sup>

After this crisis, the importance of Warsaw Pact, signed a year earlier, was fully realized. In order to more effectively arrest the perceived "centrifugal tendencies" in its buffers, the Soviet Union exploited the collective security treaty both to increase cooperation among armed forces, which would apply as a check on local party figures, and to implement common interests, which would be most pronounced when the illusion of imminent military confrontations was maintained.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, the threat of "coalition warfare" also reduced the possibility of inter-buffer alliance or secret cooperation, as satellite states would see each other as potential accomplices of the Soviet Union instead of trustworthy companions<sup>74</sup>. The invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 was a more telling example, as among the 30 divisions spearheading the operation at least five were Polish, three East German, and several other Hungarian and Bulgarian ones.<sup>75</sup> At the same time, these countries also conducted large-scale military drills and preparations that served as intimidation against both the Czechoslovakian leadership and the NATO observers. Before mid-1980s, the military press USSR exerted on its buffers was almost hegemonic and absolute.

Finally, the economic arena was also essential for the Soviet Union to keep its buffers in place. The proposition of having Eastern Europe join the Marshall Plan was swiftly rejected, and an

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<sup>71</sup> Csaba Békés, "Cold War, Détente and the 1956 Hungarian Revolution," International Center for Advanced Studies, New York University (September 2002).

<sup>72</sup> See, for example, Michael McCabe, "Soviet Security and the Hungarian Revolution of 1956," *The Histories*, vol. 10, issue 2 (2019), 27-52; Alexander Mesarovich, "Hungarian Kaleidoscope: The 1956 Hungarian Revolution in the Dense Network of International Connections" (May 2017).

<sup>73</sup> *Eastern Europe and the Warsaw Pact* (National Intelligence Estimate, August 1965).

<sup>74</sup> A. Ross Johnson, "The Warsaw Pact: Soviet Military Policy In Eastern Europe," The Rand Corporation (July 1981).

<sup>75</sup> "The CIA and Strategic Warning: The 1968 Soviet-Led Invasion of Czechoslovakia: An Overview," Central Intelligence Agency, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/2009-09-01.pdf>.

alternative program, sometimes referred to as the Molotov Plan, was developed in 1947.<sup>76</sup> In January 1949 the blueprints formally became a reality under the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon), an economic counterpart of the Cominform.<sup>77</sup> Within its framework the Soviet Union began to industrialize its communist neighbors, and heralded a quasi-barter system, in which each country traded with others its major export commodities, and in turn received those that they were lacking. After the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, Comecon increased the integration of regional economies, suggesting that each state specialize in certain productive sectors, thus promoting efficiency and mutual dependence, further reducing their economic and industrial independence. Full reorganization of buffer states' internal production systems began in May 1958 under Soviet regulation, until partial decentralization was approved in 1968.<sup>78</sup> Bilateral trade also prospered, thanks to central planning to settle contradictions among diverse national agendas.<sup>79</sup> Between 1958 and 1968, every Comecon member state depended on the organization for at least 50% of their imports and exports, sometimes reaching as high as 70% (Romania and Bulgaria).<sup>80</sup> To move away from the Soviet center would mean economic chaos, and Moscow's control of its buffers was hence strengthened.

However, into the late 1970s and early 1980s, although the security outlook and necessity for buffering remained largely unchanged for the Soviet Union, its *capacity* for buffer maintenance began a downward spiral. Economic growth was at its lowest (0.8%) in 1979, while a global recession between 1980 and 1982, caused by sudden contractions in food and energy production, significantly hindered its foreign trade potential.<sup>81</sup> It was further burdened by the tiresome arms race with the United States, which forced the Soviet Union to devote on average 14% of its GDP

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<sup>76</sup> Geoffrey Roberts, "Moscow and the Marshall Plan: Politics, Ideology and the Onset of the Cold War, 1947," *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 46, no. 8 (1994), 1371-1386; Sheldon Anderson, "Poland and the Marshall Plan, 1947-1949," *Diplomatic History*, vol. 15, issue 4 (October 1991), 473-494.

<sup>77</sup> Cristian Bente, "The Marshall Plan and the Beginnings of Comecon," *Society and Politics*, vol. 9, no. 2 (November 2015), 5-10.

<sup>78</sup> "Comecon," *European Studies*, vol. 8 (1970), 1-4.

<sup>79</sup> Aleksei Popov, "Trade Expansion within the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance after the Polish and Hungarian Crises," *Вестник СПбГУ. История* (2018), 1303-1316.

<sup>80</sup> "Comecon," 4.

<sup>81</sup> John P. Hardt, "Highlights: Problems and Prospects," *Soviet Economy in the 1980's: Problems and Prospects, Part I* (Joint Economic Committee, Congress of the United States, 1982), vii-xv; Glenn H. Miller, Jr., "Inflation and Recession, 1979-82: Supply Shocks and Economic Policy," *Economic Review*, Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City (June 1983), 8-21.



to military spending between 1966 and 1985. The multifaceted pressure drove talents and resources away from the civilian economy, halting technological research that could improve social welfare but lacked military appeal.<sup>82</sup> Meanwhile, the USSR also became more dependent upon its buffers to supply troops along the Iron Curtain, a decision that brought economic benefits (fewer Soviet soldiers and equipments to maintain) but produced negative political repercussions. Withdrawal of Soviet armed units reduced the pressure and prestige it could wield over Eastern Europe, and more autonomous buffer zones are by nature unstable or disloyal. After the ascension of Mikhail Gorbachev, whose liberal tendencies were well known, in 1985, the credibility of Soviet military threats suffered even greater setbacks, and more buffer states span out of Moscow's centralized control.<sup>83</sup> Eventually, in 1989 the fall of Berlin Wall brought an end to Soviet dominance in Eastern and Central Europe, ending not only the existence of Soviet Union as a political entity in 1991 but also the buffer policies it had developed over the past four and a half decades.

#### RUSSIAN FEDERATION

Indeed, even before the formal dissolution of the Union, the leaders of Russia, its most important and powerful member republic, were already planning to ease the transitional pain and piece together a new, if different, sphere of influence that would continue as buffers and allies. Unfortunately for them, as new states were created in Central Asia, and old ones "resurrected" in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, suddenly there were more grounds to be covered. In general, three difficulties have been clouding the buffer policies of post-1991 Russian Federation.

The first was the rapid development of nationalist sentiments in the former Soviet republics, as their populace and political elite similarly were eager to "cast of the Soviet yoke" and create new identities for the purpose of state-building,<sup>84</sup> or simply to reclaim their past cultures and languages suppressed by the de-nationalization campaigns under the USSR.<sup>85</sup> These modern nation states, with developed bureaucracies, independent political systems and nationality-aware

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<sup>82</sup> See, for example, Robert C. Allen, "The rise and decline of the Soviet economy," *Canadian Journal of Economics*, vol. 34, no. 4 (November 2001), 859-881.

<sup>83</sup> Glenn E. Curtis (Ed.), *Poland: A Country Study* (Federal Research Division, October 1992), 49.

<sup>84</sup> Such as in Armenia and Azerbaijan, see Glenn E. Curtis (Ed.), *Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia: Country Studies* (Federal Research Division, March 1994), 17-25, 93-99.

<sup>85</sup> Such as in Kazakstan, see Glenn E. Curtis (Ed.), *Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan: Country Studies* (Federal Research Division, March 1996), 18-20.

populations, were more prepared to pursue interests of their own, sometimes at odds with Russian national security goals. A second challenge was the Federation's economic plight, the unintended consequence of shock therapy and the chaotic transition from nationalized to private ownership.<sup>86</sup> Its GDP fell by a total of 40% between 1989 and 1999, and widespread corruption diminished whatever little resources still retained by the government.<sup>87</sup> This loss of national revenue was aggrandized more by the excessive granting of foreign trade rights, which permitted Russian companies to sell domestic goods and natural resources to foreign markets at higher global market prices. The imbalance of trade also eliminated the economic ties between Russia and other former Soviet republics, since the influx of Western and Chinese commercial interests rendered the maintenance of Comecon monopoly expensive, if not impossible.<sup>88</sup> Finally, the international environment has become unipolar and institutional. Unipolarity means that a global superpower, the United States, was constantly wary of ceding its hegemony, and thus closely watching its potential challengers, including Russia. Simultaneously, the presence of legal and political norms, codified in treaties, international bodies and non-governmental organizations, made outright aggression and annexation more difficult than ever, taking away one of the most efficient buffering tools in the Russian arsenal.<sup>89</sup> Taken together, these factors dictated that Russia must adopt an accordingly more institutional method of buffer-building, which indeed has characterized its foreign policy before 2008.

The crown of this renewed effort was the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which was first envisioned as a modern institutional substitute of the Soviet Union.<sup>90</sup> At its very

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<sup>86</sup> Peter Murrell, "What is Shock Therapy? What Did it Do in Poland and Russia?" *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 9, issue 2. (1993), 111-140; also see David M. Kotz, "Lessons from Economic Transition in Russia and China," in *Political Economy and Contemporary Capitalism: Radical Perspectives on Economic Theory and Policy* (Armonk: M. E. Shape, 2000), 210-217.

<sup>87</sup> See, for example, Anders Åslund, "Why Has Russia's Economic Transformation Been So Arduous?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. (April 1999), 3-5.

<sup>88</sup> See Keith Crane, "The Soviet Economic Dilemma of Eastern Europe," the Rand Corporation (1986); Carl B. Hamilton and L. Alan Winters, "Opening up international trade with Eastern Europe," *Economic Policy*, vol. 7, issue 14 (April 1992), 77-116.

<sup>89</sup> See, for example, Michael J. Glennon, "The Blank-Prose Crime of Aggression," *Yale Journal of International Law*, vol. 35, issue 1 (2010), 71-114; M. Cheirf Bassiouni, "The History of Aggression in International Law, Its Culmination in the Kampala Amendments, and Its Future Legal Characterization," *Harvard International Law Journal*, vol. 58 (Spring 2017), 87-88.

<sup>90</sup> Sergei A. Voitovich, "The Commonwealth of Independent States: An Emerging Institutional Model," *European Journal of International Law*, vol. 4 (1993), 403-417.

inception, the CIS was designed to include every former Soviet member states, implying the plan of Russia reclaiming its hegemony within the former Soviet sphere. It also divided contemporary Russian buffer policies into two conceptual zones. Those states that lie within the CIS framework, most of which immediately border the Russian Federation, and those that lie beyond. Under Boris Yeltsin (1991-1999), Russian buffering experiments were almost nonexistent, and the few that were attempted were limited by the scope of the CIS, mostly concerning Ukraine and Belarus. This focus was logical given that they were the most significant and powerful of the Soviet member states, the political and economic integration of which would almost certainly return Russia to the status of a great power. In order to fulfill this ordeal, Yeltsin-era Russian elites resorted to different ways in their two neighbors.

To turn Ukraine into a buffer was very difficult. Its precious sovereignty and independence were very sensitive issues to its people and leaders, who well recognized Russia as an unwelcome and threatening overlord,<sup>91</sup> an attitude exacerbated by the more open discussion of past Soviet tragedies (such as the 1932-1933 famine) in the 1990s.<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, the Crimea question, the basing right of Russia's Black Sea Fleet and the citizenry of Ukrainian Russians all created a sense of mutual distrust between the two states' leadership, rendering political resolutions and collaboration unlikely.<sup>93</sup> Therefore, Russia's only feasible option was to exploit their economic interdependence, a result of the one-state Soviet planning regime. Ukrainian manufacturing and industrial sectors were almost entirely powered by Russian gas, and the Federation constituted 28% of Ukraine's foreign trade shares.<sup>94</sup> This leverage, however, was never fully exploited for two reasons. On the Ukrainian side, its political hierarchy was plagued by strong regionalism, with steadfastly pro-EU and Russia-suspicious Western provinces, hindered most integrative policies proposed by Russia, while the Russians' inward-looking mindset prevented greater

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<sup>91</sup> Rilka Dragneva and Kataryna Wolczuk, "Between Dependence and Integration: Ukraine's Relations With Russia," *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 68, issue 4 (2016), 678-698.

<sup>92</sup> For example, see Anne Applebaum, *Red Famine: Stalin's War on Ukraine* (Random House, 2017).

<sup>93</sup> Andreas Kappeler, "Ukraine and Russia: Legacies of the imperial past and competing memories," *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, vol. 5 (2014), 107-115; Steven Pifer, "How Ukraine views Russia and the West," The Brookings Institute (October 18, 2017).

<sup>94</sup> See, for example, D'Anieri, P., *Economic Interdependence in Ukrainian-Russian Relations* (SUNY Press: Albany, NY, 1999); Tadeusz Andrzej Olszański, "Ukraine and Russia mutual relations and the conditions that determine them," *CES Studies* (2001), 33-50.

investment in the Ukrainian-Russian relation. On the contrary, Yeltsin and his advisors were keen on proving Russia's Westernness, to be recognized as a member of "the community of civilized states", which entailed a multilateral approach to the international community, instead of a preoccupation of Eastern Europe.<sup>95</sup> This lack of clarity in policies has led many observers to see failure in Yeltsin's foreign affairs management, especially in Ukraine.<sup>96</sup>

Belarus, nevertheless, was more receptive to the ideal of a rejuvenated Union with Russia, and the latter's policies towards it were more overtly diplomatic and political, with not nearly as much focus on economic cooperation as it did in the Ukrainian case. Unlike Ukraine, Belarus did not possess a distinctive national identity, had little previous experience of popular democracy, and suffered greater social-criminal turmoil after the Soviet dissolution.<sup>97</sup> Therefore, the nostalgically populist wish was to rebuild stability and morality under a new quasi-USSR aegis, which necessitated closer bonds with Russia and distancing from the West. This was especially true after Alexander Lukashenko's electoral victory in 1994, which brought his Russo-centric policies to the Belarusian stage.<sup>98</sup> However, due to the political inertia within Russia and the Yeltsin administration, a formal Union treaty failed to gain momentum until 1999.

Although he remained president of Russia until December 1999, Yeltsin's personal impact on foreign affairs diminished quickly after 1996, when Yevgeny Primakov was appointed foreign minister. In 1998 he was promoted to the position of Prime Minister, and championed a route of policies very different from that of his predecessors. The so-called Primakov Doctrine, named after him, outlines his concept of a post-communist world order. Three faucets of it were paramount: the construction of a multipolar world, Russian opposition against NATO expansion, and most important, an insistence of Russian supremacy and integration within the post-Soviet space, which Yeltsin failed to register.<sup>99</sup> The first entailed a great rebuilding of Russian prestige

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<sup>95</sup> See, for example, Heinz Timmermann, "Russian foreign policy under Yeltsin: Priority for integration into the 'community of civilized states'," *Journal of Communist Studies*, vol. 8, issue 4 (1992), 163-185.

<sup>96</sup> Paul Marantz, "Russian Foreign Policy During Yeltsin's Second Term," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, vol. 30, no. 4 (1997), 345-351.

<sup>97</sup> Artyom Shraibman, "The House That Lukashenko Built: The Foundation, Evolution, and Future of the Belarusian Regime," The Carnegie Endowment, Moscow Center (2018), 4-5.

<sup>98</sup> Chloë Bruce, "Friction or Fiction? The Gas Factor in Russian-Belarusian Relations," Russia and Eurasian Programme, Chatham House (May 2005), 3.

<sup>99</sup> Eugene Rumer, "The Primakov (Not Gerasimov) Doctrine in Action," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (June 2019), 1.

and material *capacity*; the second a NATO-free zone between Russia and “the West”, while the third cannot be mistaken for anything other than an attempt to turn the former socialist republics , not only Ukraine and Belarus, into exclusive buffers. Taken together, the Primakov era witnessed greater Russian interests in Central Asia, as well as more attempts to prepare for the confrontation against NATO in Poland and Central European states. Like other contemporary Russian leaders, Primakov well understood that despite Russia’s military and geopolitical strength, their role as one of the world’s “poles” cannot be sustained in the long run given its economic decline.<sup>100</sup> Conceivably only two avenues were open: to adopt a defensive posture and exploit the resources of its buffer states and allies, or to display aggressiveness and hope for quick “medicinal” gains. Primakov opted for the former approach. Domestically he supported financial sovereignty that crystallized into a distrust of IMF operations,<sup>101</sup> and his appointment of two Soviet-era economic planners as deputy prime minister and president of Central Bank (Yuri Maslyukov and Viktor Gerashchenko, respectively) immediately following the perilous devaluation of the ruble in September 1998 showcased an urgency to rebuild Russian market and production capacities by detailed and methodological calculations.<sup>102</sup> The specific steps of price control, raising workers’s salaries and prioritizing heavy industry were also tightly connected to his geopolitical concerns. Such measures quickly revitalized Russia’s military production, which in the last years of the 1990s proliferated to China and Iran, bringing in 80% of industrial export revenues and arming these pro-Russian states against American presence in the Pacific and the Middle East.<sup>103</sup>

In Eastern Europe, more specifically Belarus, economic and geopolitical issues were similarly intertwined. On one hand, Russian energy pipelines must pass through its small neighbor on its way to Europe, which gave Belarus considerable leverage on its mighty friend, while on the other, Belarus itself is heavily dependent on Russian energy, and Gazprom’s influence within Belarus was immense. By targeting Gazprom at home and demanding it to pay its taxes, the

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<sup>100</sup> Vadim Kononenko, “From Yugoslavia to Iraq: Russia’s Foreign Policy and the Effects of Multipolarity,” *UPI Working Papers* 42 (The Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2003), 6.

<sup>101</sup> John Odling-Smee, “The IMF and Russia in the 1990s,” IMF Working Paper (August 2004), 8.

<sup>102</sup> Daniel Williams, “Russian Duma Approves Primakov,” *Washington Post* (September 12, 1998).

<sup>103</sup> For example, see Henry Sokolski, “Behind Primakov’s Proliferation Policies: Russia’s Militarized Economy,” presented before a Hearing of the Course Committee On International Relations “*Russian Foreign Policy: Proliferation to Rogue Regimes*” (March 25, 1999).

Primakov regime successfully pressured the enterprise to cut oil supplies to Belarus by 50% in fall 1996. This forceful operation reinforced the appeal of a Russo-Belarusian union, and negotiations proved successful throughout 1997-1998; Russian domination of Belarus went unchallenged.<sup>104</sup> Beyond Belarus, nonetheless, buffer building in Europe was unsuccessful, and Poland joining NATO in 1999 provoked waves of condemnation among the Russian elite and populace, invoking in them a sense of imminent danger.<sup>105</sup> For the first time, the perceived West was able to march across the Iron Curtain, and station its troops on the Soviet Union's former satellite states (along with Poland joined the Czech Republic and Hungary), and directly violate its sphere of interest. Russia and Primakov responded with what some scholars call a "fortress Russia" mentality, that it stood alone at the face of NATO intrusion, and it must hold on to what is left and focus on regions close to its heart.<sup>106</sup> Nine months later in December, a renewed Union State treaty with Belarus was signed by Yeltsin,<sup>107</sup> and Russia entered the new century with Vladimir Putin as its new leader, who has a very different buffer-building approach.

Many observers note that Putin's regime is characterized by outward military operations, such as the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 and the Russo-Ukrainian War of 2014. However, it would be grossly oversimplification if we attribute these actions to expansive desires. On the contrary, Russian foreign policy under Putin has been seen as either balanced, or at least pragmatic, driven not by mindless territorial ambitions but rather tactful plannings to strengthen its border security and the regime's domestic legitimacy.<sup>108</sup> In carrying out those calculated endeavors, we also witness a slow but steady buffering of Russia's most vulnerable fronts. In other words, Putin's presidency complemented the minor cracks and "loopholes" left open by his predecessors.

As mentioned above, the Primakov Doctrine focused on the "bigger picture" by coercing and appeasing Belarus to remain a Russian buffer, essentially securing approximately half of its

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<sup>104</sup> Chloë Bruce, "Friction or Fiction? The Gas Factor in Russian-Belarusian Relations," Chatham House (May 2005), 6.

<sup>105</sup> Maciej Celewicz and Monika Nizioł-Celewicz, "Relations Between Poland and Its Eastern Neighbors After The 1999 NATO Enlargement," *UNISCI Discussion Papers* (January 2006), 224-227.

<sup>106</sup> Robert Legvold, "Russian Foreign Policy Ten Years After the Fall," 6. *Search for a complete citation.*

<sup>107</sup> Amelia Gentleman, "Yeltsin signs union treaty with Belarus," *The Guardian* (December 8, 1999).

<sup>108</sup> For example, see Tatiana Zakaurtseva, "The Current Foreign Policy of Russia," 87-112; Kari Roberts, "Understanding Putin: The politics of identity and geopolitics in Russian foreign policy discourse," *International Journal: Canada's Journal of Global Policy Analysis* (Feb 16, 2017).

western heartland. At the same time, his less known Central Asian policies were also taking place, aiming at the creation of a Eurasian alliance. For example, it supported Emomali Rahmon in the Tajikistani Civil War (1992-1997), and actively advertised the Collective Security Treaty among its Central Asian neighbors.<sup>109</sup> Although the ideal of economic integration was never achieved, and bilateral trade dwindled in the late 1990s, Central Asia remained geopolitically stable during the Primakov years. Some observers even comment that by the time of Putin's ascension, Central Asia had become one of Russia's most secured buffers,<sup>110</sup> being too weak to challenge Russian hegemony and too remote to fall under Western aegis.

With those two frontlines secured, Putin could invest more resources into forging the missing links between Belarus and Central Asia, namely Ukraine and the Caucasian states. In the early 2000s, the latter presented a more pressing issue. On one hand, Caucasus is strategically vital to Russia's energy security, being the site of major oil/gas pipelines and a launchpad of further exploitation of the Caspian Sea.<sup>111</sup> On the other hand, southern Caucasian states share cultural and historical affinity with Europe, and the energy corridor also serves Turkish interests, which render their regimes prone to Western influences. This closeness crystallized into the prospect of Georgia receiving NATO membership, and Armenia joining the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council.<sup>112</sup> These two factors prompted increasing Russian efforts to build buffering zones in the region. After the Second Chechen War that ended in 2009, Russia effectively resumed its control of northern Caucasus, and schedules for integrating the breakaway Georgian provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia were proposed.

Other than direct military occupation and political annexation, Russian buffering in the Caucasus also took economic and humanitarian pretenses. For instance, by 2004 Moscow provided more than 90% of Chechnya's revenues in the form of subsidies, while republics of Dagestan,

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<sup>109</sup> See Vladimir Paramonov and Aleksey Stokov, "The Evolution of Russia's Central Asia Policy," Defense Academy of the United Kingdom (June 2008); Alexey Malashenko, *The Fight for Influence: Russia in Central Asia* (Brookings Institution Press, 2013).

<sup>110</sup> Maximilian Hess, "Russia and Central Asia: Putin's Most Stable Region?" *Orbis*, vol. 64, issue 3 (2020), 421-433.

<sup>111</sup> Tracey C. German, "Corridor of Power: The Caucasus and Energy Security," *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, vol. 2, no.2 (Spring 2008), 64-72.

<sup>112</sup> Colby Galliher, "It's time to invite Georgia to join NATO," Atlantic Council (April 9, 2019); "Relations with Armenia," North Atlantic Treaty Organization (October 21, 2020).

Ingushetia and North Ossetia also received more than 60% of their annual incomes from the federal government, which helped local economy and thus prevented further turmoil.<sup>113</sup> This network of financial patronage also extended across the border: In 2009, Russia provided Abkhazia virtually all its foreign direct investment, and 64% of its imports in 2011, consisting mostly of essential foodstuffs and fuel, came from Russia at a discounted “patronage” price. The same pattern prevailed in South Ossetia as well.<sup>114</sup> The Russian military was also charged the responsibility to train select units of the South Ossetian army, further improving their joint combat capabilities and expanding its power base within the local militia.<sup>115</sup>

With those breakaway provinces secured, Russia’s long-term goal of turning Georgia into a buffer could proceed with greater feasibility. In fact, the real objective of the five-day war was to reduce the military potential of Georgia and to prevent it from becoming a NATO outpost, insulating Russia’s underbelly from Turkey.<sup>116</sup> Russia also denied EU peacekeepers access into the breakaway republics, augmenting their autonomous status and avoiding to come into direct contact with NATO troops.<sup>117</sup> Recent events seem to shed more light onto Russian ambition of a Caucasian buffer zone that would encompass not only Georgia but also Armenia and Azerbaijan, both former Soviet republics. Russia hosted and brokered the ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan in their conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (2020), symbolically signifying its status as the arbiter in this region.<sup>118</sup> The negotiated product permitted Russia peacekeepers be stationed on the frontline, bringing Russian military presence back to Armenia-Azerbaijan for the first time since 1991.<sup>119</sup> The strategic location of these garrisons would allow for Russia’s power projection into the Middle East, where its foreign policy has been paying particular attention to since the inception of Syrian Civil War (2011- ). Comparatively, the buffering of its European

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<sup>113</sup> Olga I. Vendina, Vitaly S. Belozarov, and Andrew Gustafson, “The Wars in Chechnya and Their Effects on Neighboring Regions,” *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, vol. 48, no. 2 (2007), 178-201.

<sup>114</sup> For example, see Andre W. M. Gerrits and Max Bader, “Russian patronage over Abkhazia and South Ossetia: implications for conflict resolution,” *East European Politics*, vol. 32, issue 3 (2016).

<sup>115</sup> “Putin approves army deal with Georgia’s South Ossetia,” *Al Jazeera* (March 14, 2017).

<sup>116</sup> See Malashenko (2013).

<sup>117</sup> See “Russia Says EU Force Cannot Enter Georgia Buffer Zone,” Reuters (September 30, 2008); Luke Harding, “Russia begins final pull-out from Georgia buffer zone,” *The Guardian* (October 8, 2008).

<sup>118</sup> Jack Los and Andrew Roth, “Nagorno-Karabakh peace deal brokered by Moscow prompts anger in Armenia,” *The Guardian* (November 10, 2020).

<sup>119</sup> “Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia sign Nagorno-Karabakh peace deal,” BBC (November 10, 2020).



frontiers has seen little progress after the Crimean annexation which, given the pandemic and the generally unfavorable international environment, would be very difficult to reproduce in another case.