

# Russia's Neighborhood Policy and Its Eurasian Client States: No Autocracy Export

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## **Abstract**

Do authoritarian regimes engage in active export of their political systems? Or are they primarily concerned about their geopolitical interests? This article explores these questions by examining Russia's policy towards

Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria. In all three de facto states, Moscow is fully able to dictate election outcomes should it desire to, but, we argue, has increasingly refrained from doing so. These client states are unlikely to attempt to escape from Russia's tutelage; and with its geopolitical interests fully ensured, Russia appears willing to grant them latitude. We then ask whether these findings can be extrapolated to serve as a template for understanding Russia's policy towards its client states more generally, discussing Moscow's reactions to attempted regime change in Armenia and Belarus.

**Keywords:** de facto states, Russia, "black knights," autocracy promotion, geopolitics, Abkhazia, Transnistria, South Ossetia.

Since the fall of communism in 1991, Russia has had three presidents—but no regime change. The incumbent president handpicked the incoming president, or, as in 2012, allowed the former president to return, perpetuating the established regime. With the constitutional changes introduced in 2020, Vladimir Putin has a legal mandate to continue his rule until 2036. Russia's system of power is often referred to as "consolidated autocracy" (Libman and Vinokurova, 2018; Melnykovska et al., 2012).

Some scholars hold that the Putin regime, having sidelined all challengers and established itself in control at home, also wants to export its political model to other countries. This is presented as an activity typical of the foreign policy of autocratic states, which want to see their preferred political regime model replicated elsewhere, not least among neighbors and clients. Autocracies that meddle in the domestic policies of other states so as to engineer an anti-democratic regime change are labeled "black knights" in contrast to "white knights"—Western regimes engaged in promoting good governance and civil society across the globe (Tolstrup, 2015; Chou, 2017). Implicit in the term 'white knight' is the assertion that such states promote democracy for unselfish reasons: liberal democracy is simply a better system for everyone. By contrast, autocracy promotion

is a more nefarious business, driven by self-serving motives of power projection.

Many scholars have analyzed Russia's foreign policy through the interpretative lenses of "black knight" or "autocracy promotion" (see, for instance: Ambrosio, 2009; Lankina et al., 2016; Obydenkova and Libman, 2015; Tolstrup, 2014; Vanderhill, 2013; von Soest, 2015; Yakouchyk, 2016). They find evidence for this interpretation in the Kremlin's stance on virtually all post-Soviet countries, with its heavy-handed support for Viktor Yanukovych in the 2003 Ukrainian presidential election as perhaps the most egregious example.

An alternative explanation is that autocratic states seek to ensure that they are surrounded by friendly regimes—the guiding principles of other state leaders are of secondary importance (Way, 2015a; Way, 2015b). According to such a realist—or geopolitical—paradigm, autocratic regimes pursue interests, not abstract ideas: they are pragmatists, not ideologues. This approach has been used to explain why the Kremlin has sometimes failed to back autocratic rulers in neighboring states (Obydenkova and Libman, 2014; Shapovalova and Zarembo, 2010).

Russia's policy towards its neighbors is influenced by a range of factors: the size of a country and its importance for the Russian economy; its geographical distance from Russia (and from Europe or other potential alternative patrons); the personal chemistry between the Russian president and the other state's leader; etc. Here, we will limit ourselves to the more modest task of adjudicating between the "black knight" and the national interest perspectives.

### **"BLACK KNIGHTS" VS GEOPOLITICAL INTEREST?**

There may be situations where Russia does not, or cannot, choose between an ideological and a pragmatic policy, when the only way to maintain good relationship with a neighboring state is to support an authoritarian leader against more democratic opponents. In such cases it would be almost impossible to untangle these two policy objectives from each other. Moreover, proponents of both schools sometimes use auxiliary arguments taken from the other school. For instance, Thomas

Ambrosio, who leans towards the “black knight” interpretation, writes: “[f]or authoritarian regimes to feel secure, they cannot abide vibrant democracies within close proximity... [They] are deeply concerned with the political systems of their neighbors: a successful democratic transition within close proximity represents an ever-present symbolic threat of the possibility of regime change” (Ambrosio, 2009, pp. xii, 23). Here, autocracy promotion is understood not as a goal in itself, but as a means to achieve greater security; a concern about the possible “contagion effect” from democratic revolutions in neighboring countries.

If autocracy promotion and security concerns always followed each other, it would be not only impossible, but indeed pointless to try to determine which of the two interests is the “real” driving motive; we would always expect the same outcome in any case. But reality is different: Russia's policy vis-a-vis its clients has differed over time and between cases, as can be witnessed from Moscow's dealings with, for example, Armenia, Belarus, and Kyrgyzstan. Thus, the “black knight” debate is not merely philosophical, it may have direct ramifications for our understanding of the foreign policy of autocratic regimes.

Lucan Way has employed an interesting thought experiment: discussing Russian attitudes towards the post-Shevardnadze regime in Georgia and the post-Maidan regime in Ukraine after 2004, he writes: “Russian hostility would not have been less severe had [Mikheil Saakashvili and Viktor Yushchenko] engaged in more electoral fraud or arrested more journalists” (Way, 2016, p. 69). In Way's view, authoritarian post-Soviet leaders with Western rather than pro-Russian leanings would be equally anathema to Moscow as pro-Western democratic presidents in Tbilisi and Kyiv would be. This argument seems reasonable but cannot, of course, be tested by re-running history with another version of a suddenly-autocratic Yushchenko.

To get around this problem and move beyond counterfactual reasoning, we might identify a group of countries or clients bent on retaining their friendship with Russia, no matter what. If, in such a context, Russia tries to impose an autocratic system of government, that would strengthen the “black knight” interpretation. Conversely, if Russia displays a *laissez-faire* attitude towards the type of political

regime in states whose friendship can be guaranteed, this would indicate that replicating the Kremlin's political model is not high on the Moscow agenda.

One way to test this is to look at Russia's relations with the separatist statelets of the former Soviet Union that have unilaterally seceded from Georgia and Moldova, and now have Russia as their sole protector and supporter.<sup>1</sup> Like all other politico-territorial entities that are denied international recognition, these three Eurasian de facto states—Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria—lead a highly precarious existence, and would probably disappear without a powerful patron to back them up (Kolstø, 2006). If Russia decided to ditch them, they would have no-one else to turn to; there are no alternative patrons willing to take them under their wing. Hence, for them, friendly relations with Russia are a matter not of choice but of necessity. This context provides quasi-laboratory conditions for testing the “black knight hypothesis,” as we can keep one parameter—the need to secure friendship—out of the equation.

Below, we chronicle Russia's relations with the three de facto states one by one, with a special focus on presidential elections and Russia's involvement. Next, to see if the findings can be extrapolated to serve as a template for understanding Russia's attitude towards its client states more generally, we briefly discuss Moscow's reactions to attempted regime change in two internationally recognized states which also have Russia as patron—Armenia in 2018 and Belarus in 2020—before we draw some tentative conclusions.

## **RUSSIA'S DE FACTO STATE CLIENTS**

The objective conditions for Russia's relations with the three statelets differ.

*South Ossetia* is a tiny, resource-strapped, landlocked entity in the southern foothills of the Caucasus Mountains, engulfed by enemy

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<sup>1</sup> Also, the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and the Lugansk People's Republic (LNR) in Eastern Ukraine could have been included here. However, since we focus on elections to the executive, and these two entities only have held one round of presidential elections since the first, tumultuous post-secessionist elections in 2014, we have chosen to leave these out.

territory on all sides except Russia in the north, and with one mountain tunnel serving as a lifeline to the outside world. As a result of war and economic dislocation, today South Ossetia has only an estimated 35,000–40,000 inhabitants. The preconditions for a sustainable economy are practically nil; according to estimates, Russia covers roughly 90 percent of the state budget (Sobkor, 2020). Since the 2008 war, between 4,000 and 5,000 Russian soldiers have been stationed in the statelet.

*Abkhazia* has slightly better chances of surviving without Russia's support. Its population is some five to six times greater than South Ossetia's. Furthermore, it has a long coastline to the Black Sea, so it is not geographically locked in between its parent state and patron. In the Soviet period, Abkhazia was a favorite vacation destination, including for the elite. During the 1993 war of secession, the resorts were ravaged, but the Abkhazians have since tried to rebuild the tourist industry (Kolstø, 2020; Blakkisrud et al., 2020). They are, however, still dependent on Russia's support: currently, Russian transfers cover an estimated 50 percent of the state budget (Sobkor, 2020). After official recognition of Abkhazia in 2008, Russia was granted the right to set up a military base on Abkhazian territory, and Russian border guards also patrol the de facto state's border (officially the "administrative boundary line," ABL) with Georgia.

*Transnistria* is the largest of the three Russian de facto client states, with a population of around 450,000. It has no common border with Russia, and also in other respects its links to the patron are weaker. Whereas Russia extended diplomatic recognition to Abkhazia and South Ossetia after the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, Transnistria does not enjoy such diplomatic ties. In 2006, the Transnistrians voted in a referendum to have their de facto state accepted into the Russian Federation but did not receive any official response from Moscow.

Transnistria could arguably survive economically on its own. Whereas the South Ossetian–Georgian de facto border is for all practical purposes sealed, and Abkhazian–Georgian trade is heavily circumscribed (Blakkisrud et al., 2020), there is a vibrant traffic of people and goods across the Transnistrian–Moldovan de facto border. An agreement with Chisinau gives Transnistrian businesses access

to Moldovan export stamps on their products, so they can sell these not only to Russia but also to European customers. Transnistria is also included in Moldova's Deep and Comprehensive Free-Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the EU. However, while Transnistrian economic links westwards are strong, its security, cultural and identity links are directed almost exclusively towards Russia. The 1992 "war of independence" against Moldova was won thanks to the intervention of the Soviet 14th Army; despite the lack of formal recognition of the de facto state, some 1,500 Russian military personnel remain in Transnistria to this day.

While different in many respects, all three de facto states have one important thing in common: all are totally dependent on Russian support for their security and sustenance, indeed, for their very existence. They are Moscow's clients. How does Moscow wield the power it holds over these statelets? Does the Kremlin micromanage their internal affairs and insist that they adopt a Russian-style political model? Or does it grant them leeway to manage their own affairs as long as they toe the Kremlin line on vital foreign policy issues?

The breadth of Russia's policies towards its de facto state clients is analyzed within the framework of a four-year international research project led by the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs 2020–2024, which examines patron–client relations in all extant de facto states in the world.<sup>2</sup> In this article, we focus on Russian reactions to presidential elections in the three client states, because these statelets, just like Russia and most other post-Soviet countries, have adopted a presidential system of government. The office of the president in all three states is the fulcrum around which political life revolves. Whoever wants to influence local politics will naturally try to control the outcome of the presidential elections.

Politics in these Eurasian de facto states have evolved very differently from the case of Russia. While there has been no transfer of power to an opposition in post-Soviet Russia, there have been frequent changes in all these three de facto states. In only one instance—

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<sup>2</sup> See <<https://www.nupi.no/en/About-NUPI/Projects-centers/Dynamics-of-de-facto-state-patron-client-relations>> [Accessed 5 April 2021].

Abkhazia 2011—was the new president the anointed successor of his predecessor, and even then, he was unceremoniously hounded from office before his term was up.

This does not mean that the de facto states are exemplary democracies. They exhibit certain features that must be regarded as deviations from standard democratic rules (on Abkhazia, see: Kolstø and Blakkisrud, 2013), but their political systems are clearly not consolidated autocracies in the sense that one group or clan has managed to monopolize power. Access to the “administrative resources,” which allowed powerholders in many post-Soviet states to perpetuate their grip on power, did not guarantee the continued dominance of one party or political faction. Election outcomes were often unpredictable. In some cases, the loser cried foul and refused to recognize the results—but just as often, the outcome was accepted by all parties.

What has been Moscow's role in all this? Conceivably, these changes in de facto state domestic power constellations could be the result of Russian machinations: the leadership in a de facto state acted in such a way that it incurred the Kremlin's wrath, and thereby sealed its fate. That was indeed what happened in Transnistria in 2011, when the country's first and seemingly perpetual president, Igor Smirnov, suffered a resounding election defeat after having been abandoned by Moscow. But that is an exception. In other instances, the Kremlin signaled support for a particular candidate, but voters in the de facto state ignored this “advice” and chose another candidate—something Russia has occasionally refused to accept, but at other times has acquiesced. Finally, a third alternative is that Russia refrains from backing any specific candidate and let the de facto state politicians fight it out among themselves, secure in the knowledge that the winner would remain loyal. As we will show below, the third option seems to be getting increasingly common.

### **Abkhazia**

In the first decade after gaining the de facto independence, politics in none of the three de facto states examined here was truly competitive. The territories just fought a war of secession against the parent state and

probably felt that political pluralism was an impossible luxury. In all three cases, the incumbent presidents were reelected. Only after the turn of the millennium did factional politics come to the fore, with several candidates vying for power. Abkhazia was the frontrunner in this respect.

Vladislav Ardzinba was first elected president by the parliament in 1994, and then by popular vote in 1999, running unopposed. Ardzinba was a scholar—a philologist and expert on extinct languages—who had reinvented himself as a freedom fighter, becoming immensely popular as the national leader in the 1993 war.

**Table 1: Presidential Elections in Abkhazia, 1994–2020**

	<b>Winner</b>	<b>Russia signals support for another candidate</b>	<b>Russia acquiesces</b>
1994	Vladislav Ardzinba	No	
1999	Vladislav Ardzinba	No	
2004	Sergei Bagapsh	Raul Khadzhimba	No
2005 repeat elections	Sergei Bagapsh president, Raul Khadzhimba vice-president	No	
2009	Sergei Bagapsh	No	
2011	Alexander Ankvab	No	
2014	Raul Khadzhimba	Supports neither candidate	
2019	Raul Khadzhimba,	No	
2020	Aslan Bzhanias	No	

Towards the end of his second term in office, Ardzinba became seriously ill and had to step down. As his rule had become marred by increasing corruption and nepotism, the Abkhazian population was not immediately ready to accept his preferred replacement, Prime Minister Raul Khadzhimba, as the next president, even if he clearly enjoyed Moscow’s patronage (Smolnik, 2016, p. 176). During the pre-election campaign, a host of Russian politicians and entertainers descended on Sukhumi, the de facto state capital, some uttering dire threats about what might happen if Khadzhimba were not elected. Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, for instance, claimed that if another candidate were elected, the border

with Russia might be closed, and Moscow might stop paying pensions to Abkhazian pensioners (Vasilyeva, 2004). However, the voters paid no heed to these warnings; in an extremely close race, Sergei Bagapsh, a former prime minister, came out on top, with 50.8 percent of the vote. Khadzhimba, however, did not relent, confident that Moscow's support would secure him victory after all. A month-long standoff ensued, with thousands of rowdy demonstrators in the streets of Sukhumi, threatening to throw the statelet into civil war (Platonova, 2013, p. 11). Then a compromise formula was found: Bagapsh and Khadzhimba would run on a joint ticket, as presidential and vice-presidential candidates, respectively. This tandem was elected, but soon fell apart; Khadzhimba stepped down and joined the opposition.

Bagapsh proved to be a capable leader and was re-elected in 2009 in a resounding victory over Khadzhimba, this time without any Russian interference. Like his predecessor, however, Bagapsh became terminally ill, and died in office two years later. His new vice president, Alexander Ankvab, took over, and gained a popular mandate in the August 2011 elections. Khadzhimba's bid for the presidency was rebuffed again, but as dissatisfaction with Ankvab's allegedly authoritarian rule increased, Khadzhimba again drummed large crowds of his supporters into the streets. In 2014, after five days of demonstrations, Ankvab gave up, and sought refuge in Russia.

In new elections held in August 2014, Khadzhimba finally won the presidency on his fourth attempt. Russia's role seemed to have changed markedly. Rather than boasting of the Kremlin's backing, Khadzhimba made a point of emphasizing that "after 2004, Moscow drew the appropriate conclusion to keep equal distance to all public figures in Abkhazia and will work with the winners of elections" (quoted in *Caucasus Times*, 2014). That was probably true. Russia's blatant interference in the elections ten years earlier had been a spectacular PR disaster which the Kremlin clearly did not want to be repeated. Moreover, for presidential hopefuls in Abkhazia it was no longer regarded as an asset to be seen as "Moscow's man," which could easily be construed as "Moscow's puppet." There was no disagreement about the necessity of keeping Russia as a friend and protector, but it was also

incumbent upon all parties and politicians in the country to convince the public that they were not in the Kremlin's pockets, and could stand up to Russian pressure (Kolstø, 2020).

The tumultuous character of Abkhazian politics did not fade with Khadzhimba's 2014 election, as his tactics of mobilizing street mobs were copied by his opponents. Initially, he weathered the storm and even managed to be re-elected in 2019, but the opposition did not accept this. The constitution requires the future president to win with more than 50 percent of the vote, but as some ballots had been cast "against all," Khadzhimba had received slightly less, 47 percent—and street turmoil erupted once again. Four months later, in January 2020, demonstrators broke into the building of the presidential administration, smashing windows (RFE/RL, 2020), and Khadzhimba suffered the same undignified exit as his predecessor Ankvab.

New elections in March 2020 were won by Aslan Bzhania, former head of the State Security Services. Bzhania had been poisoned shortly before the previous elections and had to withdraw from the 2019 race; whether this was the doing of his political opponents is not clear. Putin's aide Vladislav Surkov arrived on the scene ahead of the elections, but the Kremlin did not indicate any preferred outcome. As noted by Alexander Skakov, a keen observer of Abkhazian politics, "the Kremlin does not care who is in charge in Abkhazia, Khadzhimba or Bzhania, what is important is that the Abkhazian leadership is in control of the situation, fulfils its promises, and can be held accountable for how the financial means emanating from Moscow are spent . . . . If Bzhania [can do that], he can become 'Moscow's man' even more than Khadzhimba was" (Skakov, 2020).

### **South Ossetia**

Like Abkhazia, South Ossetia chose a scholar as its first leader. Lyudvig Chibirov, a professor of ethnography, served first as head of state in the capacity of Chairman of the Parliament 1993–1996, then as popularly elected president until 2001. However, in the December 2001 elections he was challenged by a very different kind of politician—Eduard Kokoity, a physics teacher and former wrestling champion. Kokoity

won, was re-elected five years later, and made overtures about running for a third term in 2011, although the South Ossetian Constitution limits the president's time in office to two periods. When the Kremlin sent clear signals of not supporting his bid to have the constitution amended, Kokoity relented (Skakov, 2012, p. 82).

**Table 2: Presidential Elections in South Ossetia, 1993–2017**

	<b>Winner</b>	<b>Russia signals support for another candidate</b>	<b>Russia acquiesces</b>
1993	Lyudvig Chibirov	No	
1996	Lyudvig Chibirov	No	
2001	Eduard Kokoity	No	
2006	Eduard Kokoity	No	
2011	Alla Dzhioyeva	Anatoly Bibilov	No
2012, repeat elections	Leonid Tibilov	No	
2017	Anatoly Bibilov	Leonid Tibilov	Yes

With Kokoity out of the way, the field was open to a broad array of candidates, with two in the lead. Alla Dzhioyeva had been a minister in Kokoity's government but had fallen out with him and was running as an opposition candidate. Running neck and neck with her was Lieutenant-General Anatoly Bibilov from the intelligence services. Bibilov had Moscow's official endorsement: prior to the election, a delegation from United Russia led by the head of the State Duma Committee for International Affairs, Konstantin Kosachev, arrived in South Ossetia, presenting Bibilov with greetings from Vladimir Putin (Savina, 2011). In the first round of the election Bibilov received only 14 votes more than Dzhioyeva—a mere a 0.07 percent lead—but in the second round, Dzhioyeva scored a convincing victory, with 56.7 percent as against Bibilov's 40 percent.

Like in Abkhazia in 2004, the loser, with Moscow's prompting, did not accept defeat, and the Central Election Committee was coerced into annulling the results. It was finally decided to hold new elections in which neither Dzhioyeva nor Bibilov would be allowed to run—a

decision which Dzhioyeva, as the lawful winner of the first elections, did not accept. Her supporters poured into the streets of the de facto state capital Tskhinvali and “the republic, brimming with weapons, came dangerously close to an armed confrontation” (Skakov 2012, p. 84). Dzhioyeva’s team went ahead with preparations for her inauguration, but on the eve of the ceremony, OMON stormed her campaign headquarters and Dzhioyeva was hospitalized. It is not entirely clear why she failed to gain the Kremlin’s trust, but apparently the Russian leaders had concluded that she would not be sufficiently pliant to do their bidding (*ibid.*). In her election program there had been no mention of Russia, whereas strengthening relations with the northern neighbor had been a major plank in Bibilov’s platform (Savina, 2011).

The repeat elections in April 2012 were won by a compromise candidate, General Leonid Tibilov. Next time around, however, in 2017, Bibilov resurfaced to challenge the incumbent. Their electoral platforms did not differ greatly: both candidates were strong proponents of integrating South Ossetia into Russian political structures. Bibilov, however, carried the integration message even further, proposing a referendum on the country’s immediate inclusion into the Russian Federation (Fuller, 2017). That went against Russia’s interests; after the Crimean annexation and the ensuing Western sanctions, the Kremlin had no appetite for further territorial enlargements. The Putin team therefore indicated Tibilov as its favored candidate (Dergachev, 2016), but, rather than giving the incumbent a second term, the South Ossetian electorate, fully aware of Russia’s priorities, voted Bibilov into office. This time, the Kremlin did not protest the outcome—it had apparently learned that there was little to gain by arms-twisting in such situations.

### **Transnistria**

The first president of the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic, when it proclaimed independence from Moldova in 1990, was Igor Smirnov, a factory director from the de facto capital city of Tiraspol. Never a favorite of the Yeltsin administration, he was actively opposed also by the commander of the 14th Army, General Alexander Lebed. Even so, he proved a formidable survivor, and gradually turned Transnistria into his

own fiefdom. He won the presidential elections three consecutive times—in 1996, 2001, and 2006—with strongman methods. The opposition was permitted to field candidates, but the outcome was controlled.

**Table 3: Presidential Elections in Transnistria, 1996–2016**

	<b>Winner</b>	<b>Russia signals support for another candidate</b>	<b>Russia acquiesces</b>
1996	Igor Smirnov	No	
2001	Igor Smirnov	No	
2006	Igor Smirnov	No	
2011	Yevgeny Shevchuk	Anatoly Kaminsky	Yes
2016	Vadim Krasnoselsky	Supports no-one	

Although the graft of the Smirnov clan was pervasive, it did not monopolize the Transnistrian economy. Two former police officers who had created an impressive business conglomerate, Sherif, eventually also launched a political party, *Obnovlenie* (Renewal). By 2005, Smirnov's grip on Transnistrian politics had loosened sufficiently to enable this party to gain a majority in the Transnistrian Supreme Soviet. By then, the Kremlin clearly had enough of Smirnov's greed and arrogance, as well as his intransigence in ongoing negotiations for resolution of the conflict with Moldova (*NTV*, 2011). Prior to the 2011 presidential election, the head of the Presidential Administration in Moscow, Sergei Naryshkin, "recommended" that Smirnov should clear the way for fresh faces in the Transnistrian leadership, and criminal investigations were initiated in Moscow against Smirnov's son Oleg (*BBC*, 2011). Nevertheless, Smirnov senior went ahead and registered his candidacy for the 2011 presidential election.

Emboldened by the new signals from Moscow, *Obnovlenie* launched its own candidate: parliamentary speaker Anatoly Kaminsky. Also, a third candidate, Yevgeny Shevchuk, joined the fray: he was a former *Obnovlenie* leader who had fallen out with his own party and now ran as an independent. Moscow made it clear that it preferred the sober, more experienced Kaminsky, but the voters chose the younger, fresh-looking

Shevchuk, with 77 percent against Kaminsky's pitiful 19 percent in the second round. This was indeed remarkable: the elections were held only a month after the debacle in South Ossetia, where the challenger candidate Alla Dzhioyeva had been denied victory, and the Transnistrian voters knew well how those election had been derailed. Even so, although they needed to remain in Moscow's good graces no less than the South Ossetians did, they simply ignored Russia's wishes—and this time the Kremlin made no attempt to have the election results overturned.

In 2016, Shevchuk was up for re-election in what became a particularly nasty campaign. Shevchuk fought tooth and nail to retain the presidency, vilifying his main opponent, Vadim Krasnoselsky from *Obnovlenie*, via the state media, which Shevchuk turned into a personal propaganda tool. He also indicated, Trump-style, that if he lost, that would be the result of election fraud and he might have to declare a state of emergency (Pervy pridnestrovsky, 2016a). Particularly absurd were the extreme efforts which both Krasnoselsky and Shevchuk made to present themselves as Moscow's favorite (Kolstø and Blakkisrud, 2017).

Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova pointedly declared: "We do not take the side of any of the candidates. We do not get involved in the campaigns for the election of heads of states or parliament in other countries. We regard that as unlawful" (Pervy pridnestrovsky, 2016b). While, as noted above, Russia has a rather dubious track record when it comes to electoral interference in its client states, in this case it seems to have been a correct description. Russia *did* get involved—but only after the results showed Krasnoselsky to be the clear winner. At that point, Shevchuk was summoned to Moscow and cajoled into stepping down voluntarily. He was apparently promised that he would not be prosecuted for any wrongdoings or corruption while in office—a promise on which the Krasnoselsky team later reneged (Kolstø and Blakkisrud, 2017).

## **RELEVANCE FOR UNDERSTANDING**

### **RUSSIA'S NEIGHBORHOOD POLICY IN GENERAL**

These three Eurasian *de facto* states represent a critical case, as they are utterly dependent on Russia for their security and well-being. In

this situation, Russia can ignore the risk that they might attempt to defect. However, there are other post-Soviet states which rely heavily on Russia, albeit not in the same measure. To what degree can we generalize from the finding above that unquestioned loyalty appears more important than how the authorities choose to organize domestic politics? Does this hold for Russia's neighborhood policy in general? To explore this, we will briefly examine how Moscow responded to cases of attempted regime change in two internationally recognized post-Soviet states in recent years—a successful one in Armenia in 2018 and an unsuccessful one in Belarus in 2020.

In April 2018, the Armenian strongman Serzh Sargsyan was ousted after weeks of mass mobilization in the streets, fronted by journalist-turned-opposition leader Nikol Pashinyan. Sargsyan, a Putin loyalist, had “inherited” the presidency from his mentor Robert Kocharyan, who, like himself, hailed from Nagorno-Karabakh. The Karabakh clan had been in power in Yerevan for 20 years (Kocharyan served as president from 1998 to 2008, when he passed the baton to Sargsyan) and was in the process of building up what appeared to be a consolidated autocratic regime akin to that of Vladimir Putin in Russia. Many commentators expected the Kremlin to intervene to save Sargsyan's government and were baffled when the Russians reacted with uncharacteristic equanimity (see, for example, Baev, 2018).

Based on the insights from Russia's changing policy towards its de facto state-clients, however, we may explain the lack of interference with Moscow's expectation of Armenia remaining within the fold, regardless of who came out on the top in the bitter power struggle: the powerholders in Yerevan realized that Armenia would have to rely on Russia for trade and security also in the future (Weir, 2018). Indeed, Pashinyan immediately flew to Sochi to assure Putin that “in Armenia there is a consensus, and nobody has ever doubted the importance of the strategic nature of Armenian-Russian relations” (Osborn, 2018). Moscow's acceptance of the Pashinyan team seemed to confirm the thesis that for Russia it is enough to be surrounded by states that are friendly—their democratic or authoritarian quality is of secondary importance.

When renewed hostilities broke out in Nagorno-Karabakh in the fall of 2020, Russia's reaction appeared to undermine such a conclusion. While Russia is not the patron of Nagorno-Karabakh, it is a patron of this de facto state's patron, Armenia, and the Armenians probably hoped that Russia would intervene to repulse Azerbaijan's attempt to recapture control over this disputed territory (Tumakova, 2020). However, in sharp contrast to the vociferous and materially substantive support offered to Azerbaijan by *its* patron, Turkey, Russian reactions were subdued. There may be several explanations for Russian unwillingness to support Armenia's war effort: one is the need not to impair relations with Azerbaijan; another, as seen from Moscow, Armenia had not tried hard enough to resolve the conflict peacefully (Baunov, 2020). However, it has also been speculated that Russia refrained from military involvement in the conflict in order to send a signal to Yerevan.

As opposition leader, Pashinyan had been vehemently opposed to Armenian membership in the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union; as Prime Minister, he now unenthusiastically accepted it as a fact he could not change (BBC, 2018). Despite assurances of steadfast geopolitical loyalty to Russia, Armenia also made increasingly stronger overtures towards Western countries (Mejlumyan, 2020a). The Kremlin had a feeling that the Armenian government was not keeping its side of the patron–client bargain. In July 2020, Margarita Simonyan, senior editor of the TV station RT and a powerful voice in the Russian PR apparatus, launched a broadside against the Armenian government on her Telegram channel: “In response to the many years of goodwill and protection you have received from Russia, you have not recognized Crimea.... You have become... a bridgehead of anti-Russian forces in the Caucasus... After all you have done, Russia has every moral right to turn her back at you” (RBK, 2020).

This blistering attack came only days after deadly clashes had occurred in Nagorno-Karabakh. When a full-blown war erupted two months later, many Armenians began to speculate whether “Moscow's relatively aloof approach to the conflict is a way to teach their leader a lesson” (Mejlumyan, 2020b). The lack of a strong response from

Western countries nevertheless seemed to reaffirm that “for better or worse, the best hope lies with Russia.” Some observers also suggest that Russia's lack of military involvement may indeed have paid off: after the Russia-brokered ceasefire agreement was signed in November 2020, the Armenian leadership started to show greater accommodation towards Moscow (Ibid.).

This indicates an important difference between de facto states and other client states: in contrast to the de facto states, internationally recognized client states face a commitment problem, as they can more easily defect to “the other side.” That may also partially explain why the Kremlin's attitude towards the opposition movement in Belarus differs from its initially relaxed and accommodating approach to the new democratic regime in Armenia.

Belarus has links with Russia that are no less close than Armenia's—in fact, Belarus and Russia have officially been a “union state” since 1999. For the anti-Lukashenko opposition, it was vital to reassure Moscow that their revolution was not directed against Russia and would not bring any changes in the Russian–Belarusian partnership (*Moscow Times*, 2020). Members of the Coordination Council of the Belarusian opposition traveled to Moscow to offer reassurances that, after a regime change, existing economic ties with Russia would not only be used to the full, they could even be deepened.

Due to the absence of anti-Russian sentiments in Belarus (Okunev et al, 2020), Russian commentators argued that the situation there should not be compared with the 2014 Euromaidan in Ukraine (Yuranets, 2020). For Lukashenko it was crucial to undermine this narrative. In the runup to the elections he had warned about the possibility of Russia's interference, but now he accused the opposition of Russophobia. Evidently, he managed to get the latter message across in Moscow: not only did Putin promise substantial economic support, Russia also issued arrest orders on Belarusian opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya.

Why then was the Putin regime not willing to give Tikhanovskaya the same chance as it gave to Pashinyan? Here we can only offer some conjectures. Some have suggested that at an early stage the Putin

regime might have been willing to accept Lukashenko's "gradual" removal from office and the election of "a pro-Russian candidate who could be acceptable also to the West" (Meduza, 2020). However, when Lukashenko fought back and apparently managed to stave off the crowds, Moscow realized the benefits of retaining him as an ostracized and chastened leader now more than ever obliged to do Russia's bidding.

Moreover, the geopolitical location of the two countries may have played in. Whereas a democratic Armenia is "stuck" in the South Caucasus, unable to escape the Turkish–Azerbaijani semi-encirclement and hence dependent on Russia, Belarus' location in Europe is an inescapable geographical fact. Thus, despite the opposition's protestations to the contrary, the pledge not to "defect to the West" came with fewer guarantees.

### **SOME TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS**

The "Russia factor" has played out in various ways in de facto state politics—prominent or behind the scenes, active or detached. The changes have not been totally haphazard, though, as a pattern has gradually crystallized: from initially playing a fairly active and occasionally menacing role, Moscow has become progressively more aloof.

We see 2011 as a turning point in Moscow's approach towards elections in its de facto state-clients, and perhaps more broadly, towards the utility of interfering in the domestic affairs of the de facto states. Since then, Russia has occasionally indicated who would be its preferred candidate in a presidential race—but if the electorate has chosen someone else, the Kremlin has accepted the outcome.

Initially, the Kremlin clearly believed that it had an uncontested right to interfere in local politics in its de facto state-clients in basically the same way as it intervenes in local politics in Russian regions as a matter of course. However, after several embarrassing incidents—Abkhazia 2004 and South Ossetia 2011 in particular—Moscow apparently realized that such meddling might backfire, creating more problems than solutions. Gradually the Kremlin seems to have come to the conclusion that it could establish amicable, no less solid relations

with its clients by letting them sort out their internal differences among themselves. Whoever won elections in these entities would in any case crave Russia's friendship.

Even if the three Eurasian de facto states have displayed much higher levels of political pluralism than their patron, they are far from full-fledged democracies. The only state where significant groups of the population are engaged in civil society activities is Abkhazia, but here the political culture displays worrying signs of ochlocracy (mob rule), ethnocracy, and un-civil society. In Transnistria, the opening towards pluralism after the fall of the Smirnov regime has proven transient. In the November 2020 parliamentary election, there was only one candidate—from *Obnovlenie*—in two-thirds of the electoral districts—and the party won a total of 29 out of 33 seats in the Transnistrian Supreme Soviet. There is little reason to believe that Sheriff will allow a more open contest in the upcoming December 2021 presidential election. But the point here is that this autocratic turn in Transnistrian politics is a result of local political dynamics (and possibly a general post-Soviet political culture)—not Russian pressure.

As client states, Eurasian de facto states are critical, not typical, cases. On a dependence scale, all three are located on the extreme end, close to maximum dependence. Thus, the regularities of de facto state politics detected in this article cannot necessarily be expected to feature to the same degree in Russia's relations with other states located closer to the middle of this dependency scale. This becomes clear when we turn to the other two cases examined here, Armenia and Belarus. Both states can be characterized as Russian clients, with Yerevan relying heavily on Russian security guarantees and Minsk on Moscow propping up its economy. At the same time, these two internationally recognized states have more ways and means to balance out this dependence than the de facto states.

When the clients have more room for maneuver, the patron has less. In such situations, the patron (here, Russia) may conclude that it must take recourse to stronger measures to retain the loyalty of the client—including support for an authoritarian leader against politicians who might more readily develop links to Western, democratic countries.

Hence the different approaches to Armenia in 2018 and Belarus in 2020. But even in such situations, Moscow's support for autocratic regimes abroad appears to be more a pragmatic means to enhance security and national interests than an end in itself.

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