

The Shadow of the USSR? Russia's Foreign Policy Goals in the Near Abroad under Vladimir Putin

By

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Submitted to Central European University – Private University Undergraduate Studies

*In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy,
Politics and Economics*

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For bibliographic and reference purposes this thesis/dissertation should be referred to as: Sidamon-Eristavi, Shalva. 2025. The Shadow of the USSR? Russia's Foreign Policy Goals in the Near Abroad under Vladimir Putin. BA dissertation, Philosophy, Politics and Economics, Central European University, Vienna.

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Vienna, 05 May 2025

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Abstract

Russia starting the biggest war in Europe since World War II convinced a lot of people that they are indeed trying to restore the Soviet-era sphere of influence. This process also raised a question, of what kind of strategies Putin uses to achieve his goals. The thesis integrates qualitative analysis and shows the scholarly debates about Putin's intentions and the examination of how he is trying to reinstate Russian dominance in its near abroad. This paper uses international relations ideologies, scholars, and directly involves individuals and agencies such as Vladimir Putin's essay and the official statements of Russian foreign ministry. By employing and then synthesizing realism and liberalism, it aims to fill in the gaps and limitations that those frameworks have separately. It shows how they use hybrid warfare, military actions, economic coercion, and the manipulation with energy dependency to achieve their goals.

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Introduction: Russia's role, background, and theoretical frameworks

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 is one of the most significant shifts in the global balance of power in the contemporary world. The event disintegrated one of the biggest spheres of influence and resulted in the independence of fifteen states. In this process, Russia is the successor state of the USSR, and this is the reason why Vladimir Putin called this event in 2005 "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century." Since coming to power, Putin has consistently tried to reinstate the lost influence of the USSR. Even though the strategies have been different, including military aggression, economic pressures, and political manipulations, the shadow of the USSR is still visible.

The main question for the thesis is the following: How is Vladimir Putin trying to restore the Soviet-era sphere of influence in the Near Abroad? It is not a question of theoretical symbolism, but a question of strategy. The strategies that are used in countries like Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and Belarus show a direct pattern of external interference from Russia. It is an attempt to violate sovereignty in order to prevent these countries from joining western structures. These strategies have also started scholarly debates of whether Russian foreign policy is reactive towards Western enlargement or proactive, driven by the ambition to restore the lost influence, which I will talk about in the next section.

The thesis also examines two of the most used international relations frameworks: realism and liberalism. Realism sees Russia's behavior as a pursuit of power maximization in the anarchic international system. It shows that by creating buffer zones and proxy states, it challenges the rival structures. In addition to that, liberalism offers a perspective about Russian fear. It examines Russia being against the democratization of former Soviet countries. From this point

of view, countries like Ukraine and Georgia are not just security concerns but also existential threats to Putin's legacy, as seeing them as thriving democracies can challenge his own legitimacy internally. That is why a synthesized theoretical approach allows a more nuanced understanding of how military, political, and economic tools are used not only to project power but also to prevent the spread of democratic norms in the post-Soviet region.

This paper is focusing on three main strategies that Putin uses to increase his influence: military coercion, political manipulation, and economic leverage. The strategies are examined through empirical case studies. First, it will focus on how Russia uses military force to reassert influence and destabilize Ukraine. The 2014 annexation of Crimea, the war on Donbas, and the 2022 full-scale invasion show the depth that Russia is ready to go to, to achieve its goals. The second case study highlights how political influence is used against Belarus and how Putin uses political leverage to maintain loyalty from other leaders. And finally, the case of Moldova shows how economic coercion can pressure countries into compliance. Each case study reflects a different style of Soviet-era influence.

By having strategies in focus, this paper argues that Russian foreign policy is deliberate, adaptive, and multidimensional, which is manifested through both realist and liberal calculations. Examining the strategies and understanding how they work in practice is necessary to anticipate the future challenges that Russia can create.

The thesis will first present ideological frameworks of realism and liberalism, showing the relevance and meanings for this paper, and how their synthesis helps to fill the theoretical gaps. The following section will focus on cases like the Ukraine war, the political influence of Putin on Belarus, and how contemporary Russia uses economic leverage to strengthen their influence. And the final section will talk about the general, broader implications of these

perspectives for understanding international politics and reflect on the usefulness and limitations of theoretical analysis in real-world conflicts.

Literature review: Defining key terms

Russia's foreign policy towards the former Soviet territory, often referred to as the Near Abroad, has been a constant subject of debate since the election of Vladimir Putin. Scholars have debated whether Russia's actions in this region are an attempt to restore a Soviet-era sphere of influence or if they are just being reactive to Western enlargement. It is important to answer these questions to understand the motivations in the neighboring countries of Russia, like Ukraine, Georgia, Belarus, and others. This literature review will discuss what different scholars think of the reasons why Russia operates this way. That is why a question has been brought up in the modern political discourse: What are the goals of Russia's foreign policy in the Near Abroad under Vladimir Putin? Is it seen by scholars as a restoration of a Soviet-style sphere of influence, or a reaction to Western expansion?

To answer that, I will briefly define some terms that are used in the question. The term Near Abroad refers to former Soviet Republics that gained independence and sovereignty after the dissolution of the USSR in 1991. This term is mainly used in Russian political discourse to talk about the countries that Russia is interested in. It often implies an informal influence over them (Stent 2020). It is also important to describe what a "sphere of influence" refers to. It is an area in which one country exerts a significant influence over the political and economic decisions of other states. It can be both formal and informal, but both lead to the weakening or complete disintegration of the sovereignty of the countries that are being controlled (Jackson 2019). And lastly, a redefinition of national identity in this context means how countries and their leaders use historical narratives, symbolism, and memory politics to shape their strategies in foreign policy and have justifications for them (Siddi 2016).

In addition to summarizing and synthesizing scholarly ideas on Russia's post-Soviet strategy, this review will have more general theoretical considerations. Realist, and liberal frameworks

will help to create a more nuanced and better understanding of why Russia operates this way. This review will first examine the realist framework and how scholars use the theory and apply it to real-world events. It will then be followed by liberal framework and perspectives.

Realist perspective on Russia's foreign policy

Realism focuses on defining the international system as anarchic, which makes countries prioritize survival and power. While both use history and memory, the main differences lie in how they interpret them and what kind of significance they assign to it. Realism uses history to explain what kind of strategies other countries might use in terms of power and security (Duryea 2022).

John J. Mearsheimer, in the article “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault,” in 2014, states that the argument that Putin is trying to restore the Soviet sphere of influence is incorrect, and it is the fault of the West and NATO enlargement that the 2014 annexation of Crimea happened. He also says that at the same time, the EU’s expansion eastward and the West’s backing of the pro-democracy movement in Ukraine, beginning with the Orange Revolution in 2004, were critical elements, too. He states that the Euromaidan happened illegally, as the citizens overthrew the democratically elected pro-Russian president, which then resulted in the annexation of Crimea. He categorizes and justifies the Russian invasion by saying that the West had been moving into Russia’s backyard and that the US and Europe tried to turn Ukraine into a Western stronghold. He names the 2008 Bucharest summit as the ignition point. It was said there that Ukraine and Georgia would eventually join NATO, which, in his point of view, resulted in the 2008 war in Georgia. To justify Russia’s actions, he gives a hypothetical argument that the United States would not allow other great powers to deploy military forces anywhere in the Western Hemisphere, and especially not in Mexico and Canada, who are the neighbours of the US. And the reason why Russia does not want Ukraine to join NATO is that

the territory of Ukraine was used by Napoleonic France, imperial Germany, and Nazi Germany to attack Russia, and that Ukraine should serve as a buffer state (Mearsheimer 2014). Florian Zollmann adds to that point in the article "A war foretold: How Western mainstream news media omitted NATO eastward expansion as a contributing factor to Russia's 2022 invasion of the Ukraine." He focuses on the idea that NATO's eastward expansion was the main reason for Russia's invasions in the past years. Even though Russia has consistently objected to NATO expansion, they still did not listen to them and alienated Moscow. To support this argument, he talks about 2017 declassified documents that reveal Western leaders' assurances that NATO would not grow "one inch." He highlights the fact that after the 2022 war, only one-fourth of the German, British, and American press mentioned NATO expansion and historically consistent warnings from Russia (Zollmann 2024).

On the other hand, several realist scholars counter this argument by emphasizing that Russia's actions are not merely defensive but proactive assertions of regional hegemony. Andrew A. Michta argues in the article "The Real Reason Russia Invaded Ukraine (Hint: It's Not NATO Expansion)" that a significant portion of the public debate over the war in Ukraine seems increasingly disconnected from reality. He says, "The responsibility for the invasion and the carnage is unequivocally Russian President Vladimir Putin's, and this simple fact ought to be the departure point for any rational path forward to ending the conflict" (Michta 2025). He points to the fact that the Soviet Union lost the Cold War in 1991, and because of that, the Western countries decided to shape their interests as it seemed fit and enlarge the defence of Europe. He says that there is nothing immoral in it, and if the Soviet Union had won instead of the West, they would have claimed to do the same. He emphasizes that NATO enlargement (not "expansion," as Moscow prefers to call it) happened because former Soviet countries wanted to join the alliance, and that the West did not force anyone. "Victory in war has consequences—

this is what realism in international affairs has always looked like” (Michta 2025). For him, this sentence explains the fact that the US did not have a devious plot to betray

Russia and Mikhail Gorbachev, but it was just a consequence of a Soviet defeat in the Cold War. He does not blame the West for this war in the same way as others. He says that the only responsibility the West has in this war is their inability to show the strength to let the next enlargement of NATO happen by accepting Ukraine and Georgia into the alliance. This demonstration of weakness gave Putin a sign that he could indeed invade Ukraine in 2022. He says that if the final peace agreement ratifies the current status quo on the battlefield, it would mean that the Trump administration handed a major win to Moscow, which will undo the Cold War results to some extent. He ends by saying, “Deterrence is both about military capabilities and the willingness to use them. If you have neither, the correct term is “appeasement,” with all that this is likely to entail down the line (Michta 2025). In addition, Roy Allison, in chapter 6 of his book *Russia, the West, and Military Intervention*, describes Russia’s efforts to restore the Soviet-era sphere of influence within the Commonwealth of Independent States, as Russia claims their “special role” in the former Soviet space. He argues that Russia tries to implement multilateral frameworks like the Collective Security Treaty Organization and economic policies like gas disputes to regain regional hegemony. This kind of tactic makes it harder for post-Soviet countries to integrate into the Western structures, as they become like a buffer zone between the West and Russia. He also explains that even though Russia upholds the principle of sovereignty globally, it undermines this norm at the regional level, particularly in CIS countries like Moldova and Tajikistan (Allison 2013).

Russia's diplomatic messages framed the 2008 war in Georgia as a military intervention to protect the Russian-speaking population and separatists from Georgia. The Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the UN published a statement where the Kremlin highlighted the

importance and responsibility to defend the populations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as many of them identified culturally and linguistically with Russia and even had Russian citizenships. Moscow described the Georgian offensive operation in Tskhinvali as a crisis that needed immediate protection to prevent the following civilian casualties. This kind of approach is consistent with the general idea of Russian foreign policy. Almost the same statements were made towards the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the 2022 total war against Ukraine. By positioning itself as a guarantor of peace and security for vulnerable populations in the Caucasus, Russia sought to legitimize its actions in the eyes of both domestic and international audiences (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2008).

However, an article by Pavel Felgenhauer suggests that the 2008 invasion was preplanned, citing a statement attributed to Vladimir Putin. According to Felgenhauer, Putin claimed, “The General Staff of the Armed Forces prepared the plan for military action against Georgia at the end of 2006, and I authorized it in 2007.” Under this plan, heavy weaponry and troops were mobilized for the impending invasion. As part of the Russian Defence Ministry’s strategy, South Ossetian separatist forces were trained and armed to serve as auxiliary units in the preplanned engagement with the Georgian military. Thus, Felgenhauer argues that the NATO confirmation in 2008 Bucharest summit of future membership for Ukraine and Georgia, and Georgia attacking Russian-speaking population was not the primary reasons for their invasion (Felgenhauer 2012).

Andrea Maria Pelliconi also tries to disprove the theory that defending the Russian-speaking population is the reason why Russia wages wars. She provides a critical analysis of how Russia uses self-determination and the protection of Russian-speaking populations as a pretext to justify its imperial ambitions. According to the article, they used it as a strategy to justify their invasions of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Ukraine, and Crimea by reinterpreting the international

legal principles of self-defence and self-determination. The author emphasizes that Russia employs a "remedial" self-determination card, which means that groups facing injustices have the right to secede and join Russia. This is happening, despite the lack of international agreement on the subject. The analysis demonstrates that Russia's actions are not motivated by humanitarian concerns or the protection of Russian-speaking populations but rather as a tool to continue its expansionist geopolitical strategy. It is apparent because Russia only uses self-determination when it is consistent with its strategies (Pelliconi 2024).

The article "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," written by Vladimir Putin, focuses on the idea that Ukrainians and Russians are, in essence, one people. He thinks that they share the same historical, cultural, and linguistic identity. He argues that Ukraine's independence is a contemporary construct, which is created by external influences and artificial historical events, rather than a natural development of ethnic and national identity. He emphasizes the fact that they were historically, religiously, and culturally the same people during the state of Kievan Rus' and that it is impossible to separate the two. Most notably, he blames Poland and the Soviet Union for the artificial intervention of separating the two countries. He thinks that geopolitical and ideological manipulations are the only reasons for this division and that there is not an inherent national difference. This argument is the core of his justification of the actions in Ukraine (Putin 2021).

However, the article "Revising History and 'Gathering the Russian Lands': Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian Nationhood," written by Björn Alexander Düben, critically disagrees with that theory, as it is historically inaccurate and motivated by political reasons. Düben argues that Ukrainian national identity has been shaped by the unique political, linguistic, and cultural influences distinct from those of Russia. He says that Ukraine's history was shaped by periods of Lithuanian, Polish, and Ottoman rule, which had a significant impact on their politics,

culture, and identity. In contrast, Russia developed its own distinct imperial identity, especially after the rise of the Tsarist state. So, Düben writes that diminishing these factors and merging Ukrainian and Russian histories ignore the complex differences that both countries experienced. He also examines the historical roots of Ukrainian statehood, particularly the Kievan Rus' as a different entity from Moscow's political power (Düben 2023).

Liberal perspective on Russia's foreign policy

While realist scholars focus on anarchic world and reactive security concerns, Liberalism, by contrast, considers that it is possible to have cooperation through institutions even in anarchic world, challenging the realist assumption that states are primarily in conflict with one another. Liberals prioritize trade, spreading democratic values, diplomacy, and international organizations over zero-sum power projection. They use and interpret history through the change and development of international structures, cooperation, or failures that can result in conflict or mistrust (Duryea 2022).

In the article "What Putin Fears Most," written by Robert Person and Michael McFaul, they argue that the main reason why Putin invades his neighbours is not because of NATO but because of fear of democracy. They remember that Putin has consistently cooperated with NATO, even supporting post-9/11 actions. They state that following John Mearsheimer's provocative 2014 Foreign Affairs article, where he argued that it was the West's fault what happened to Ukraine, it has become a strong and dominant justification of Moscow's wars. Mearsheimer's arguments were repeatedly used not only in Moscow but also in the USA, Europe, and elsewhere by political analysts. McFaul and Person say that the invasions of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 have secured Russia a de facto veto over NATO accession, as they would never admit countries with partial occupation, which means that the 2022 Ukraine war could not have started because of NATO enlargement. They also make an

example of the 2004 Orange Revolution and say that Putin is afraid to have a democratic and viable alternative in his neighbourhood, and especially in Ukraine. His obsession with Ukraine stems from its potential as a flourishing democracy, which could inspire similar movements in Russia. So, ultimately the article focuses on the idea that Putin's aggression reflects a general strategy to weaken democratic aspirations in his neighbourhood (Person and McFaul 2022).

In addition to that, the American Statecraft program at the Carnegie Endowment initiated a debate series in which James Goldgeier and Joshua Shiffrin discuss the topic of NATO enlargement. In his letter, Goldgeier explains that NATO enlargement was not the reason why Russia invaded Ukraine. He disagrees with Joshua Shiffrin, whose position is that even though he acknowledges Russian imperialism, he still thinks that NATO was the main driver for strengthening the nationalist and imperialist level of Russians. He says that Russian imperialism did not develop in a vacuum and that constant expansion of NATO strengthened it (Shiffrin 2023). However, Goldgeier thinks that Shiffrin misinterprets the causal direction and looks at it backwards and that Putin's aggression is the primary causation of NATO taking Ukrainian membership more seriously. He also cites Concordia College professor Rebecca R. Moore's chapter on the evolution of the NATO-Ukraine relationship from the book *Evaluating NATO Enlargement*. Rebecca R. Moore argues that "The principal problem with the argument that NATO enlargement precipitated Russian aggression is not only that it mischaracterizes the impetus for NATO enlargement; it also presumes that in its absence, Russian foreign policy would have steered a different course." James Goldgeier then continues by saying that he does not believe that in the absence of the US, Central and Eastern Europe would be safer. He says that when Biden took office in 2021, China was the main focus and that he tried to have a stable relationship with Russia; however, the only reason that membership of Ukraine is on the table, and the only reason why Finland and Sweden sought membership, was due to the 2022 aggression by Putin. Putin's latest aggression is causing the current wave of NATO

enlargement, not the reverse (Goldgeier 2024). In addition to that, after the 2022 war in Ukraine, NATO issued statements to fight against disinformation coming from Moscow. They stated that NATO is not at war against Russia and that they support Ukraine in their right to self-defence, as is said in the UN Charter (United Nations 1945). They also say that the myth that Western leaders promised Russia that NATO would not allow new members to join is false. Even though, you can find it in the records that in the beginning of talks about German unification, US Secretary of State James Baker and his West German counterpart, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, mentioned this idea with Soviet leaders, it was quickly dropped. It is also mentioned in the statement that before the 2014 annexation of Crimea, there was no permanent deployment of multinational NATO troops in the eastern part of the Alliance. And, because of the 2022 invasion, NATO doubled the number of troops there. They also mention that it is impossible to encircle Russia, as it is the world's largest country and even two times larger than the US or China. NATO's land border doubled in 2023 when Finland joined the alliance; however, even after that, only 11% of Russia's land borders NATO countries, which shows that Russia is not backed into a corner (NATO 2022).

There are many convergences and divergences across the body of this literature review. The literature review focuses on two main ideas of how Russia's post-Soviet foreign policy operates. Restoration of a Soviet-style sphere of influence, and reaction to the Western enlargement are the ideas that these scholars debate, whether they are applicable or not.

Realist scholars such as Mearsheimer and Zollmann describe Russia's foreign policy as reactive. They argue that because of NATO expansion after 1991, Russia took a reactive stance trying to stop it. They attribute the Russian invasion of Georgia and Ukraine to that expansion. However, there are other realist figures, such as Michta and Allison, who see the causation as

flawed. They think that Russia seeks regional dominance among the post-Soviet countries, and without the US power projection, those countries would be under a much more significant threat.

If the logic of Mearsheimer and Zollmann is correct, and without NATO expansion Russia would not have intervened, then it would be completely wise for the West to block the accession of other states into the alliance. However, I think that there is a gap in their research, as they do not answer the question of why post-Soviet countries want to join NATO in the first place if Russia does not pose a danger to them without it. In the conflict of these ideas, Michta and Allison's arguments are answering that question, as they think that the goal of contemporary Russia is to restore the Soviet sphere of influence again. And if you apply that answer, then it becomes clear that the reason why those countries try to join NATO is because they are against becoming proxy Russian states. However, it would have been better if they discussed in more detail to what degree Putin wants to increase the influence in his neighbourhood and what kind of state structure, he would be okay with. It is an interesting process to observe, as even the people who can be classified into the same theoretical framework have such big differences among them.

It is important to look at Vladimir Putin's statements as well. He draws a picture where Russia is obliged and forced to protect the Russian-speaking population because he sees them as "one people." However, Düben says that Putin uses that language to reconstruct a shared post-Soviet identity. He accuses the Russian president of revisionism and says in reality he looks at the foreign policy from the realist perspective and just uses the argument of "one people" to justify his power-maximizing actions.

If we listen to Putin's statements, there should be proof and legitimation from the international community that he is indeed defending so-called "one people." However, Düben nicely frames the inconsistencies of Putin's statement. The only argument that at one point they were the same

people does not result in them being the same so much later. Düben provides clear evidence that since Kievan Rus time, a lot has happened and that it is illogical to still look at them as if they were the same people. And if Düben is correct in his statements, then it becomes evident Vladimir Putin uses that logic to justify his foreign policy ambitions and actions.

There is more unity among the liberal scholars, who, in contrast, blame Russia fully in this war but see the reasons for Putin's behaviour differently. For them, the biggest fear that Putin has is having thriving democratic neighbours. The logic behind it is that it can help persuade and motivate Russians that democratic process is indeed possible. Person, McFaul, and Goldgeier think that this democratization process will have a bigger impact on Putin's legitimacy than NATO's military positions. Even though these political figures can be characterized more as liberals, they still converge with realism to some degree. If Putin operates this way because the democratization process in the Near Abroad will delegitimize him, then it means that because of state survival, it is necessary for Russia to disrupt these processes.

These narratives on both sides illustrate the broader debates: whether Russia's foreign policy is best understood as a proactive effort to restore lost influence, or a reactive stance against the Western enlargement.

Theoretical Framework

This section describes how the theoretical frameworks explain Vladimir Putin's attempt to reinstate the Soviet-era sphere of influence in his Near Abroad. It is impossible for this process to exist in a vacuum; it directly challenges liberal norms that were established during the Cold War and then enlarged to Eastern Europe after the collapse of the USSR. Instead of asking the question of whether Putin is really trying to reinstate the lost influence and join the discussion that scholars are still debating, this thesis will proceed from the premise that Russia is indeed actively trying to restore the Soviet-era sphere of influence in its Near Abroad. The goal is to identify the strategies that they use and explain how they help Putin to achieve his aims. This is the reason why this section will focus on the theoretical frameworks that can explain the actions and moves that Russia is implementing. To analyse this process, a synthesized dualtheory approach will be used where I will combine elements of realism and liberalism. It will allow for a more nuanced explanation of Russia's actions and will fill the gaps that realism or liberalism have separately.

Liberalism and realism are often seen as competing ideologies within international relations. However, in the contemporary world, Russian foreign policy is best understood through the lens of both realism and liberalism. Each ideology has a relevant understanding of international relations, but they also have some gaps. To address these gaps and understand how Putin seeks to restore a Soviet-era sphere of influence, synthesizing realism and liberalism provides a clearer and more comprehensive explanation.

Realist Framework

An important theoretical framework for this study is realism. It is one of the core schools of international relations, which considers that the international system is anarchic without any overarching authority to balance the behavior of countries. This is the reason why realists

believe that states act mainly to maximize their power and ensure their survival. Military capabilities, balance of power, and spheres of influence are important parts in shaping global politics for them. This framework can tie to Putin's aggressive actions and explain them perfectly. The fact that Russia lost its influence and control over the former Soviet and buffer states after the collapse of the USSR perfectly ties to the realist logic that Russia is trying to restore the lost sphere of influence. Putin's attempts to exert influence over Georgia, Ukraine, Belarus, and other states fall primarily in the category of maximizing the power and ensuring the survival of the current Russian government type. The only way to bring Russia back to the same state as it was before the end of the Cold War is to challenge the liberal international order that the West has promoted.

Liberal Framework

On the other hand, liberalism focuses on institutions, norms, and economic interdependence as key drivers of peace and cooperation. After the collapse of the USSR, there was a strong belief that post-Soviet countries would insert themselves into the liberal international order. However, from the liberal perspective, Russia is against its Near Abroad countries to have a strong cooperation with other western countries, as it would take those post-Soviet countries further from the Russian orbit.

Even though both liberalism and realism offer a valuable view into Russian foreign policy strategies, each has some limitations that are necessary to address. Realism to some extent overlooks the roles of ideas and regime type and assumes that almost every country prioritizes survival under anarchy in the same way. This is the reason why most prominent realist scholars, such as Mearsheimer and Henry Kissinger, blamed NATO for the wars that Russia waged. From the realist perspective, it is hard to explain why Russia is particularly aggressive towards democratic post-Soviet states other than blaming Western military structures and the direct

survival strategies. On the other hand, liberalism often does not focus enough on the role of hard power and usually exaggerates the idea of the attractiveness of liberal norms. It stands on the idea that institutions and cooperation can overcome strategic competition. However, in the case of Russia, it is evident that it shows a will to use military force and economic coercion to block liberal integration. These kinds of limitations show that a single theoretical framework is not enough to describe certain events and that a synthesis of these frameworks will provide a more nuanced understanding.

Synthesis of liberalism and realism

The synthesis of liberalism and realism becomes productive, as within the prevailing liberal international order, the democratization of the former Soviet republics challenges the stability of contemporary Russia's autocratic regime. The liberal international order is the antithesis of what modern Russian ideology stands on today. Thus, the democratization of its neighboring countries creates a precedent and example, which can become the core driver for Russians to demand more. That is why when you synthesize both ideologies, it becomes clear that in an anarchic world where liberal international order is dominant, it is vitally important for Russia to challenge this system. It does not apply only to military alliances but to a democratic system in general, where states are free to cooperate with each other. To challenge that and maximize their power, the necessary action for Russia is to spread fear towards the post-Soviet countries, that by aligning with the West, they are becoming the enemies of Russia. If it lets those countries choose their own path, there is a high likelihood that Russia will completely lose influence over them. This is the reason why, whenever Russia sees the weakness from the West, it immediately tries to exploit those weaknesses.

Realism explains what Russia is doing: using coercive means to reestablish control in its neighborhood. Liberalism explains why the timing of these efforts has evolved like this: the liberal order, through democratization, EU, and NATO enlargement, poses a threat not just to Russia's regional influence but to the domestic survival of its authoritarian lead

Main Body

The next step, after examining scholarly debates, historical background, and theoretical frameworks that help to interpret Russia's foreign policy the correct way, is to show how these actions look in practice. This part will analyze the strategies that Vladimir Putin uses to restore the Soviet-era sphere of influence in the post-Soviet region. Understanding the dual approach of how realist and liberal perspectives synthesize with each other will help to draw a picture of how Russia uses different instruments for achieving its goals, including military coercion, political influence, and economic leverage to reassert control over its neighbors. A case study will be applied to each strategy to show the specific examples of how Russia operates. This way the paper will move from abstract theoretical frameworks to specific examples that will demonstrate the strategies that are used to reinstate the lost influence.

War as a weapon: The case of Ukraine

The most evident strategy that Vladimir Putin demonstrated to restore the Soviet-style sphere of influence is the wars that he has waged. And even more clearly, it is visible in the multistage aggression against Ukraine. It includes the 2014 annexation of Crimea, supporting separatists in Donbas, and the full-scale invasion that Putin started in 2022 (Mirovalev 2024). The Ukrainian case clearly demonstrates how Russia manipulates legal narratives and the way they use hybrid warfare against their enemies for destabilizing their sovereignties and regaining the lost influence on the former Soviet states. From a realist perspective, it can be interpreted that Russia needs to create a buffer or a proxy state to survive in the anarchical international system. From the liberal perspective, it shows deeper problems, of how they are afraid of thriving liberal democracies, which increase the chances of delegitimizing Putin's regime. So, by synthesizing those two worldviews, you can see that in order for Russia to survive against the liberal international system, they need to increase the influence on the post-Soviet countries and challenge the stability of that system.

Annexation of Crimea

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 is a clear case of Russian military and foreign strategy. At first they deployed unmarked troops, the so-called "little green men," to capture the infrastructure across Crimea (Pifer 2014). These men were later recognized by Putin as Russian forces. The main reason why he used them in that way was to defend Russia from the international backlash and delay their effectiveness. This is an example that highlights how they use hybrid warfare in military coercions. It blends military, informational, and political tools so that Russia achieves its goals quickly. Putin justified this annexation by stating that Russia was defending the Russian-speaking population. However, this justification masks the real reasons for wanting to increase dominance and instability over Ukraine and, at the same time, strengthen its position in the Black Sea.

From a realist perspective, the annexation can be justified as Russia trying to deter the western enlargement. As John Mearsheimer argued, the illegal overthrow of Yanukovich and the NATO expansion were the catalysts for this Russian invasion. However, the problem with this opinion is that it is not based on the factual evidence. First of all, the Ukrainian parliament passed legislation that gave Ukraine a non-aligned status. It meant that Ukraine would not pursue joining the North Atlantic Alliance (Roininen 2017). So, blaming the annexation of Crimea on the West and Ukraine when they directly issued a law that prohibited them from joining NATO totally disproves the narrative that NATO enlargement was the reason for this annexation. The second argument is that Russia did not like that the Ukrainian people overthrew pro-Russian president Yanukovich. It is also blamed on the West and especially on the US, that they funded and supported this illegal revolution. However, the legitimation of the president or a government does not come only from the elections. If the leader commits a completely opposite action that he promised he would not do, which also can threaten the sovereignty of the country, it can delegitimize him. If enough people are protesting, they have every right to demand the

resignation of the government or president. However, even if it was illegal, you cannot justify the invasion of another country just because the leader they supported was expelled from the country. So, like Andrew Michta and Roy Alisson have pointed out, Russia's actions reflect much more than just not supporting NATO enlargement. It shows a deliberate attempt to reestablish the lost influence on the post-Soviet country and stop them from democratization.

Russian Support for Separatists in Donbas and the Full-scale invasion

In addition to the annexation of Crimea, the Russian government supported the separatist movements in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. These so-called "people's republics" declared independence with the backing of Russian weapons, advisors, and intelligence operatives. This conflict served two goals: to destabilize Ukraine and be ready for the next invasion. This kind of approach is used by Moscow to get leverage over its neighbors, a tactic used previously in Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) and Moldova (Transnistria).

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 marked a dramatic escalation from supporting those separatists in eastern Ukraine. However, it was not anything like Crimea or Donbas. This time they relied on the frontal attack. They aimed at multiple Ukrainian cities, where the goal was a regime change, by either occupying the whole country or by Ukrainian government officials and especially President Zelensky fleeing the country. The battlefield has even reached Kiev; however, despite that, neither could the Russians go any further and take over Kiev, nor did President Zelensky surrender and run from the country (Brown 2025). This was again blamed by some scholars on the USA, as Biden has continued to affirm NATO's open-door policy for Ukraine. However, the fact is that they got attacked even when they were not trying to join NATO, so using that kind of realist lens that it was necessary for Russia for its survival to go against the western military alliance is incorrect. Militarily, it is clear that Putin has miscalculated this invasion. He expected a swift victory since he did not face strong barriers

during the annexation of Crimea. He thought that the Ukrainian people would uprising in support of them, which did not materialize. Ukraine's resilience, international support, and NATO's accession of Finland and Sweden ironically weakened Russian positions. Finland and Sweden's accession into NATO either completely disproves the narrative that NATO was at fault for the invasion, or it shows an enormous miscalculation from Putin by forcing his neighbors to join the alliance. This kind of military invasion mirrors Soviet-era invasions of Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968), where they wanted to establish their influence fully.

This war has employed many strategies that Putin had already been using. Information warfare, cyberattacks, energy blackmail, and legal narratives to supplement its military campaigns were already tested tools. However, in this case he used them all together to win the biggest war in Europe since World War II.

Political influence: The case of Belarus

Another significant way Putin has tried to reinsert the Soviet-era sphere of influence is through supporting pro-Russian regimes. This kind of influence relies not on the military action but on strategic alignment with the autocratic leaders, interference in domestic politics, and increasing their dependency on Russia to ensure that they stay loyal. One of the most evident cases is Belarus. Unlike Ukraine and Georgia, where the support for the integration in the western structures is high, Belarus remains strongly in the Russian orbit, mainly due to political, economic, and security reasons (Yeryoma 2025).

Russian support amid 2020 Belarusian protests

One of the key examples of Russian support towards Belarus is what happened after the 2020 elections. The election triggered the largest anti-government protests in Belarusian history, as it was seen by the people that Lukashenko stole it (BBC 2020). The protestors demanded free elections, civil liberties, and an end to the 26-year rule of Lukashenko. Western countries

imposed sanctions on Belarus, as Lukashenko was cracking down violently on demonstrators. On the other hand, Russia supported him completely, framing these protests as a westernbacked "color revolution." Putin even stated that he would assist Belarus security-wise if the situation escalated (Deutsche Welle 2020). This shows another Soviet-style doctrine of loyal and friendly government in the bordering states as the buffer zones against liberal democracies. This process highlighted the informal political grip that Russia has on Belarus. These events deepened the ties even more between the two states, and in 2022, Lukashenko changed the constitution and allowed Russian troops and nuclear weapons to be placed in Belarusian territory. This kind of action shows that invasion is not the only strategy that Russia uses, and giving away your sovereignty and aligning yourself completely with the Russian regime would perish that possibility.

Synthesizing realism and liberalism can be helpful in this case as well. Not only does this strategy ensure Russia has a close ally. Belarus also becomes a buffer and proxy state, which reminds of the Soviet practices of supporting authoritarian regimes that were aligned with Moscow's interests. Having entrenched autocracies is vital for Russia to continue to dominate the region. This perspective aligns well with realism. However, there are also other factors at play that liberalism describes better. A democratic breakthrough in Belarus and the increase of cooperation with the democratic world can be the strongest sign of what can happen to Russia. By losing the influence and control over Belarus, Putin would signal the weakness and instability that can become the primary source for the regime change. Especially when the two countries are so aligned with each other, it would be a big surprise for Russians to see their allies changing the system. 2020 protests in Belarus echoed Ukraine's Orange Revolution and Euromaidan, which were framed as destabilizing events. However, the strategy behind Putin's support of Lukashenko was not coming from his goodness but from the fear of having a model

of successful democracy next door. This is why protecting internal legitimacy and also having a buffer state in its neighborhood are an important strategy for Russia.

Hybrid warfare

It is important to take into account that Russian influence is not limited to elite-level support. Media propaganda, security cooperation, economic dependency, and shared cultural narratives are all at play. The Russian hybrid warfare is strong in Belarus. Russian media narratives dominate the Belarusian information space, shaping the public opinions about the threat of liberal revolutions. They have integrated their military and intelligence structures under the Union State and the Collective Security treaty. Belarus also increased its dependency on Russian energy, which is another leverage that Moscow has on them. This kind of political integration also mirrors the Soviet past, where Eastern Bloc countries were tied to Russia through ideological, economic, and security dependencies. The way that Russia treats Belarus is as if they are not equal partners, but Belarus is just an extension of Russian foreign policy. This kind of country represents the perfect proxy state for Russia, as they are compliant, politically repressive, and dependent on Moscow. It shows the restoration of Soviet-style influence in the clearest way.

A brief but similar example of Russia's use of political influence to establish and maintain control is the presidency of Viktor Yanukovich, who served as a Ukrainian president from 2010 to 2014. His presidency is marked by a period of getting away from the western institutions and closer to the Russian orbit. His parliament passed a law that said that Ukraine would not try to join NATO. He also rejected an association agreement with the European Union under the significant pressure from Russia, which then triggered the Euromaidan demonstrations (BBC News 2013). As of the 2020 protests in Belarus, Russia viewed these protests as Western-backed threats against its influence. However, unlike the 2020 Belarusian protests, it resulted in ousting the pro-Russian Ukrainian president.

Rather than supporting a peaceful democratic transition, Russia started a hybrid warfare, portraying these protests as a coup, and continued to back his ally in Ukraine. Immediately after the revolution, Putin annexed Crimea to destabilize the country and have more leverage on them. Just like Belarus, Russia's strategy was to make Ukraine comply with its foreign interests and keep them under its sphere of influence. However, as soon as it was not an option anymore, the immediate reaction was occupation of the country. Comparing these two countries portrays Russian strategy perfectly. If a country follows a democratic path, which automatically means fleeing from the Russian orbit, the main strategy for Putin becomes to use military power against them. That is why the only reason Belarus did not experience the Russian imperialism is because the people of Belarus lost its battle of restoring their sovereignty. Backing pro-Russian leaders in its Near Abroad is a key strategy for Putin. This way he creates buffer zones between the west and him, and also his legitimacy. This kind of approach reflects both realist and liberal frameworks.

Economic coercion: The Case of Moldova

Another key strategy that Russia reinforces is asserting influence through economic leverage. Moldova is a great example of that, where Moscow uses gas pipelines, trade dependence, and financial manipulation instead of sending tanks. This kind of economic plan is based on punishing pro-Western shifts and rewarding political loyalty. The Moldovan case shows how the modern form of imperial power uses energy and market access as a tool of control.

Gas crisis

Moldova, like other Russian neighbors, is heavily dependent on Russian natural gas imported through Gazprom (Tejeda 2025). This dependency gave Moscow the power to turn the energy supply into a political leverage. Every time there was a political tension in Moldova, Russia either raised prices or cut off gas supplies. In 2006, there was a huge gas crisis in Moldova

when Russia dramatically increased the prices of gas and suspended the supply for some time (Socor 2006). This action came after Moldova tried to strengthen ties with the European Union and diversify their energy sources. So in order to ensure Moldova did not diversify the options, Russia resorted to these methods. Russia escalated the tensions again in 2021, after proWestern leader Maia Sansu won the presidency. In response to that, Putin pressured Moldova by not renewing gas contracts unless Moldova weakened ties with the EU and Ukraine. However, in the end, Moldova signed the deal with higher prices and under a threat of supply distribution. These kinds of actions show that energy dependency is a big leverage for the Russian side.

Trade bans

Adding to the energy crisis, Russia has used trade bans as well. After the strong progress towards signing the association agreement, Russia decided to use an embargo on Moldovan wine, which is a vital part of Moldova's economy (Chetrari 2025). The same has happened with other products as well, which Russia was doing strategically. The reason, as mentioned before, was the integration with the West. It meant that westernization would mean economic problems, while showing support towards Russia would bring economic rewards. This kind of strategy can be compared to the Comecon system of the Soviet Union, which was designed not only for coordination but also to ensure that the Eastern bloc would remain economically dependent on the USSR. However, contemporary Russia uses Gazprom and easy market accession conditions as political levers. Moldova, like Georgia and other post-Soviet countries, is caught in this problem, moving forward with the West and focusing on long-term stability or cooperating with Russia to see the short-term. benefits.

To further unmask this Russian strategy, another example of Ukraine must be applied. In 2006, when Ukraine was moving towards the EU and NATO, Russia cut gas supplies (Stern 2006, 7). These energy crises cause an internal instability and signal to Russia that it can use this tactic

for blackmailing. Even though Ukraine has diversified their energy resources more, at the early stage of the collapse of the USSR, they were heavily dependent on them.

Even in these strategies, we can catch the realist and liberal patterns. Moldova might not be considered strategically important for Russia right now to use military power, so instead they are using economic leverage, which is a low-cost, high-efficiency strategy. So basically, Russia tries to maximize their influence and also uses low-cost strategies. However, from a liberal perspective, this kind of intervention in the politics of Moldova only necessitates one thing: Russia does not want to see Moldova democratize, and because of that, they use economic leverage on them. Controlling the energy supply channel over post-Soviet states is a strong tool to have leverage on them. That is why the case of Moldova is a great example to show how Russia applies economic barriers against other countries.

Conclusion: Liberal and realist interpretations of Putin's strategies

The main goal for this thesis was to answer the question: How is Vladimir Putin trying to restore the Soviet-era sphere of influence in the Near Abroad? By analyzing how Russia operates in countries like Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova, it becomes evident that Putin's foreign strategy is not reactionary against NATO enlargement but is generally against those countries leaving the Russian orbit and attempting democratization. Military coercion, political manipulation, and economic leverage are key tools that Putin uses to increase his sphere of influence in the Near Abroad. Even though these strategies are used today, they still mirror many aspects of the Soviet Union era of control and influence by making Russia's neighborhood dependent, compliant, and aligned with Moscow's interests.

The case study of Ukraine shows how Russia uses military aggression to destabilize democratic transition and block western integration. In Belarus, especially the 2020 protests, demonstrate how Putin asserts political influence and uses leverage to maintain Lukashenko's loyalty. And finally, the economic coercion against Moldova illustrates how Russia uses these kinds of barriers to punish countries that try to attempt to democratize and join western structures.

This paper shows that by synthesizing and applying both realism and liberalism, the goals and motivations of Putin become more evident. From a realist perspective, Putin tries to maximize his powers and restore the regional hegemony. The liberal perspective, however, highlights that Russia is afraid of its Near Abroad countries democratizing, as it can pressure Russia itself. The views are not mutually exclusive; rather, they complement each other by filling the gaps that they have separately.

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