



When Does Putin's Russia March Off to War?

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When Does Vladimir Putin's Russia Intervene Militarily and Why?

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Abstract:

This article explores what drove Vladimir Putin's decisions on whether to intervene in foreign countries militarily or not during the 21 full years of his rule (2000-2020). The author first infers hypothetical drivers of military interventions from the academic literature on the subject. The author then explores whether any of the drivers, which he has inferred from the literature, have been present in instances when, as indicated by the evidence that is presented in this article, Putin was likely to have deliberated whether to use military force in foreign countries. The author examines seven such instances, including three instances in which the Russian leader ultimately decided to intervene and four instances in which he did not during that period. This examination revealed that a confluence of three drivers was both necessary and sufficient for Putin not just to seriously consider a military intervention abroad but to actually order one. First, Putin had to be directly motivated by a clear, acute threat to one or more of Russia's vital national interests. Second, he had to have reasonable hope that a military intervention would succeed in warding off this threat, with such hope acting as one of the facilitators of his decision to opt for a military intervention. Third, Putin had either to have run out of non-military and, therefore, less costly options of responding to these threats or to lack the time needed to exercise such options due to the acutely urgent nature of the threats. These findings could constitute a modest contribution to the body of academic knowledge about use of force by post-Soviet Russia against other countries, in the author's view. These findings may have practical implications, as they may be used to help forecast Russian military interventions.

I. Introduction

More than two decades after Vladimir Putin's dramatic ascent to presidential power on New Year's Eve in December 1999, it is worth asking when this leader—who has already ruled Russia longer than any other since Josef Stalin—orders military interventions in other countries and when he does not, and why. The author believes it is necessary to investigate the confluence of which factors shape Putin's decisions to intervene militarily abroad if only because unilateral unauthorized interventions by Russia in Europe can have a debilitating effect on the continent's already broken system of collective security, as the ongoing intervention in Ukraine has demonstrated. Moreover, as the case of Ukraine has also demonstrated, such interventions can lead to significant deterioration in relations between Russia on one side and the U.S. and its allies on the other, which in turn significantly increases the probability that an incident involving Russian and NATO forces could escalate first into a conventional conflict and then into a nuclear exchange that would have devastating consequences not only for the continent but for the entire world. As multiple scholars have noted, the chances of such a worst-case scenario materializing have grown in the past several years and are no longer negligible.¹

The author will begin his comparative study of Putin's decisions on whether to intervene militarily in a foreign country by reviewing literature on the subject of military interventions to infer hypothetical drivers

¹ See "Closer than ever: It is 100 seconds to midnight," 2020 Doomsday Clock Statement, Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, <https://thebulletin.org/doomsday-clock/current-time/>. For a summary of additional views of both Western and Russian policy influentials on how the risk of nuclear war between Russia on one side and the U.S. and its allies on the other side has increased since the Russian intervention in Ukraine, see Simon Saradzhyan, "How High Is Risk of Nuclear War Between Russia and US?" *Russia Matters*, August 6, 2019, <https://www.russiamatters.org/blog/how-high-risk-nuclear-war-between-russia-and-us>.

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of such interventions, so that he can then ascertain whether any of these drivers may have been present in individual instances when the Russian leader has deliberated whether to send troops to fight abroad. The literature will include cross-country studies of military interventions, which have either examined Russia among other intervening countries and/or have external validity. The author will also review Russia-specific studies of such interventions. Having inferred the hypothetical drivers from this literature, the author will then describe the research techniques he will employ to assess whether these drivers were present or absent in individual cases when, as indicated by the evidence to be presented below, Putin was likely to have deliberated whether to order use of military force abroad in 2000-2020. The author will then also describe what criteria he will use to select such cases for a comparative set that he will assemble for his study. The set will include not only instances in which Putin has ended his deliberations by ordering a military intervention abroad but also instances in which, as indicated by the evidence to be presented below, Putin was likely to have considered ordering such an intervention but chose not to do so. This will be done for the purposes of obtaining and analyzing counterfactuals.

Having outlined the design of his research, the author will then proceed to conduct it, examining each of the entries in his comparative set to ascertain whether any of the hypothetical drivers of interventions were present in any of these cases and, if so, how they may have influenced the outcome of Putin's deliberations on whether to order use of military force abroad or not. The purpose of that examination will be to try to establish which confluence of factors was both necessary and sufficient for Putin to order use of military force abroad. Having ascertained that confluence, the author will conclude his study by describing what contribution his findings may have made to the body of academic knowledge of military interventions by post-Soviet Russia as well as what next steps he may take.

II. Inferring Hypothetical Drivers of Military Interventions from Literature

Ever since Thucydides wrote his *History of the Peloponnesian War* in the fifth century BC, scholars of war have been debating what makes states use force against each other. Thucydides famously argued it was the surge in ancient Athens' power that prompted Sparta to go to war against the rising rival city-state and its allies. More recently, scholars have proposed various explanations other than changes in balance of power to elucidate the reasons behind military interventions in other states, which this article defines as covert or overt deployment of formations of regular and/or irregular troops on orders of one country's leadership into another country to engage in combat there for purposes of attaining military, political, economic or other ends desired by that leadership.² For instance, Hans Morgenthau has observed that state leaders' perceptions that national interests are at stake can motivate them to order such interventions. However, as Morgenthau has also noted, such perceptions are not sufficient for a military intervention to materialize—they need to be complemented by the leader's confidence that he has sufficient national power at his disposal for the intervention to succeed. "Intervene we must where our national interest requires it and where our power gives us a chance to succeed," Morgenthau wrote.³ In addition to Morgenthau, Wyn Q. Bowen and Stephen Krasner have also found that national interests can drive state leaders' decisions to initiate military interventions while these leaders' confidence of having sufficient national power can facilitate such decisions.⁴ Kenneth Waltz, Robert Endicott Osgood and Robert W. Tucker have also found that state leaders favor military interventions when their countries' national interests are at stake, provided that they also

² This definition is in part synthesized from definitions of military interventions crafted in the following works: Charles W. Kegley, Margaret G. Hermann, and Herbert K. Tillema. Charles W. Kegley, and Margaret G. Hermann. "Putting Military Intervention into the Democratic Peace: A Research Note." *Comparative Political Studies* 30, no. 1 (February 1997): pp. 78–107; Herbert K. Tillema, "Foreign overt military intervention in the nuclear age," *Journal of Peace Research* 26, no. 2 (1989): pp. 179–196.

³ Hans J. Morgenthau, "To intervene or not to intervene." *Foreign Affairs*, No. 45 (April 1966), p. 425.

⁴ Wyn Q. Bowen, "U.S. National Interest," in Andrew M. Dorman and Thomas G. Otte, eds., *Military intervention: From gunboat diplomacy to humanitarian intervention* (Sudbury, Massachusetts, USA: Dartmouth Publishing Company, 1995) p.100; Stephen D. Krasner, *Sovereignty: organized hypocrisy*, (Princeton, NJ, USA: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 202.

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believe that the resources needed to execute such interventions are reliably available to them.⁵ Scholars who believe that a leader has to be confident that there is a favorable asymmetry between the power of his state and the target state include Thomas Otte,⁶ Michael Ignatieff,⁷ Taylor Fravel⁸ and Stephen Krasner.⁹ In addition to being confident that his armed forces will prevail over the targeted country's military, the intervening state leader also needs to be sure that his intervention will not trigger a counter-intervention by a third country (or alliance of countries) that is stronger than his, according to Krasner.¹⁰

State leaders' conviction that their countries' interests are at stake and that the armed forces at their disposal will prevail are not the only potential drivers of military interventions that can be found in the academic literature on the subject. For instance, writing at the height of the Cold War, Morgenthau also found that some of the two competing superpowers' interventions were being driven by ideology rather than national interest.¹¹ In addition, Stephen Saideman has posited that domestic political purposes can shape leaders' decisions to intervene militarily in other countries.¹² George Edwards, Samuel Kernell and John Benson have all found that foreign military intervention can boost the public ratings of a country's leadership and increase the support that leaders receive from their legislatures and from the public.¹³ Finally, Thomas Otte,¹⁴ Robert Gates¹⁵ and Eamon Aloyo¹⁶ have found that leaders order military interventions when they have exhausted non-military alternatives of responding to a challenge.

In addition to the aforementioned cross-country studies, there have also been a number of notable Russia-specific studies of military interventions. For instance, Marita Kaw has argued that Soviet Russia was most likely to intervene in a foreign country if its leadership both felt compelled to defend national interests,¹⁷ such as rescuing either an existing embattled ally or a potential client state, and was confident that the risk of military confrontation with the United States was limited.¹⁸ Kaw—whose 1989 article stood out for her decision to develop a framework for not just analyzing past Soviet interventions but also predicting new ones—also concluded that the closer the source of a threat to the USSR was to Soviet borders, “the greater the cost Moscow [was] willing to pay to secure a favorable outcome.” Echoing Kaw, Simon Saradzhyan found that threats to national interests (as seen by the Soviet leadership), such as having loyal neighbors and ensuring the security of the country's frontier regions, shaped the deliberations of Politburo members on whether to send troops to Afghanistan in 1979, ultimately pushing them to order the intervention into this

⁵ Kenneth N. Waltz, "Theory of international politics. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley." *Chapter 4*, no. 5 (1979), p. 6; Robert Endicott Osgood and Robert W. Tucker. *Force, order, and justice* (Baltimore, MD, USA: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), p.228.

⁶ Thomas Otte, "Conclusions and Reflections" in Andrew M. Dorman and Thomas G. Otte. *Military intervention: From gunboat diplomacy to humanitarian intervention*. (Sudbury, Massachusetts, USA: Dartmouth Publishing Company, 1995), p. 201.

⁷ Michael Ignatieff, "Intervention and State Failure," *In The New Killing Fields: Massacre and the Politics of Intervention* (New York, New York, USA: Basic Books 2002), pp. 229–244.

⁸ M. Taylor Fravel, "Power shifts and escalation: explaining China's use of force in territorial disputes." *International Security* 32, no. 3 (2008): pp. 44-83.

⁹ Stephen D. Krasner, *Sovereignty: organized hypocrisy*, (Princeton, NJ, USA: Princeton University Press, 1999), p.153, p.186.

¹⁰ Stephen D. Krasner, *Sovereignty: organized hypocrisy*, (Princeton, NJ, USA: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 202.

¹¹ Hans J. Morgenthau, "To intervene or not to intervene." *Foreign Affairs*, No. 45 (April 1966), p. 425.

¹² Stephen M. Saideman, *The ties that divide: Ethnic politics, foreign policy, and international conflict*. (New York, New York, USA: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 7.

¹³ George C. Edwards, *The Public Presidency: The Pursuit of Popular Support*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983; p. 26; Samuel Kernell, "Explaining Presidential Popularity." *American Political Science Review* 72, no. 2 (1978): pp. 506-522; John M. Benson, "The Polls: U.S. Military Intervention." *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 46, no. 4 (1982): pp. 592-598.

¹⁴ Thomas Otte, "Conclusions and Reflections" in Andrew M. Dorman and Thomas G. Otte. *Military intervention: From gunboat diplomacy to humanitarian intervention*. (Sudbury, Massachusetts, USA: Dartmouth Publishing Company, 1995), p.201.

¹⁵ Robert M. Gates, *Exercise of Power* (New York, New York, USA: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2020), p. 393.

¹⁶ Eamon Aloyo, "Just war theory and the last of last resort." *Ethics & International Affairs* 29, no. 2 (2015), p. 187.

¹⁷ Here and elsewhere Soviet and post-Soviet Russia's interests are described the way the leadership of the country saw and see them. Their vision of these interests may differ or even contradict the views of parts of the population, as well as views of the leaders and populations of other countries, but it is that vision that shapes their decisions and, therefore, it is on that vision that this article focuses.

¹⁸ Marita Kaw, "Predicting Soviet military intervention." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 33, no. 3 (1989): pp. 402-429.

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Central Asian country.¹⁹ As for Putin's Russia, it would intervene if its leaders saw threats to their country's "geostrategic interests" emerge, such as the expansion of what they saw as hostile alliances to areas of "strategic importance" to Russia, such as the Ukrainian segment of the Black Sea, according to Domitilla Sagramoso.²⁰ Saradzhyan's study of Putin's military interventions has found that for this Russian leader to order an intervention in another country, he has to be not only convinced that Russia's vital national interests (as he sees them) are being threatened but also have a reasonable hope that a military intervention would succeed in defending those interests.²¹ Looking beyond Russia's national interests, Jeremy Azrael and his co-authors have found in their bi-country study of military interventions by post-Soviet Russia and the United States that the former's leaders would order interventions either because they lacked better ideas or policy alternatives or because they wanted to save face and look good.²² At the same time, Azrael and his co-authors concluded in their study that economic factors have played no significant role in motivating Russia's military interventions.²³ In contrast, Cullen Hendrix has found that the growth of Russia's national wealth, fueled by rising oil prices, did make Russia more aggressive toward other states and more inclined to resort to military action,²⁴ as did Maria Snegovaya.²⁵ Simon Saradzhyan and Nabi Abdullaev have asked in their comparative study of Russia's might whether it was increases in Russia's overall power vis-à-vis its competitors rather than increases in the economic component of that power alone that made this country more willing to employ force against other states.²⁶ Finally, Nicholas Bouchet has posited that Russian leaders would order an intervention in a post-Soviet state if they believed the latter was undergoing a Western-engineered color revolution.²⁷

The review of literature on military interventions above has illuminated at least seven factors, which, in the author's view, merit investigation in the case of Putin's Russia in order to ascertain whether and how any of them may have influenced this Russian leader's decisions on whether or not to intervene militarily in a foreign country. These seven factors are as follows: threat to vital national interests as seen by the Russian leader; the Russian leader's need to save face; the Russian leader's need to ensure his popularity; a color revolution in a country Russia seeks to either anchor or to keep anchored; the Russian leader's reasonable hope²⁸ that the intervention will succeed; exhaustion or lack of non-military options for responding to crisis; and increase in Russia's national power (Table 1).

While the author will include these seven factors in his investigation, he has chosen to omit one factor even though it has been identified in some of the literature reviewed above. The author chose not to include

¹⁹ Simon Saradzhyan, "Lessons for Leaders: What Afghanistan Taught Russian and Soviet Strategists," *Russia Matters*, February 28, 2019.

²⁰ Domitilla Sagramoso, *Russian Imperialism Revisited: From Disengagement to Hegemony*. (London, UK: Routledge, 2020), p. 338.

²¹ Simon Saradzhyan, "100,000 troops will engage in Russia's Zapad-2017 war games," *The Washington Post*, September 13, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/09/13/100000-troops-will-engage-in-russias-zapad-2017-war-games/> and Simon Saradzhyan, "When Does Vladimir Putin's Russia Send in Troops?," *Russia Matters*, August 7, 2018.

²² Jeremy R. Azrael, Benjamin S. Lambeth, Emil A. Payin, and Arkady A. Popov, "Chapter 12: Russian and American Intervention Policy in Comparative Perspective," in eds. Azrael, Jeremy R., and Emil A. Payin, *US and Russian Policymaking with Respect to the Use of Force*. RAND Corporation, 1996.

²³ Jeremy R. Azrael, Benjamin S. Lambeth, Emil A. Payin, and Arkady A. Popov, "Chapter 12: Russian and American Intervention Policy in Comparative Perspective," in eds. Azrael, Jeremy R., and Emil A. Payin, *US and Russian Policymaking with Respect to the Use of Force*. RAND Corporation, 1996.

²⁴ Cullen S. Hendrix, "Oil Prices and Interstate Conflict Behavior." *Peterson Institute for International Economics Working Article 14-3* (2014).

²⁵ Maria Snegovaya, "Think of Russia as an ordinary petrostate, not an extraordinary superpower," *The Washington Post*, March 9, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/03/09/to-understand-russia-think-of-it-as-an-ordinary-petrostate-as-opposed-to-an-extraordinary-superpower/>

²⁶ Simon Saradzhyan and Nabi Abdullaev, "Measuring National Power: Is Vladimir Putin's Russia in Decline?," *Russia Matters*, May 4, 2018.

²⁷ Nicolas Bouchet, "Russia's 'militarization' of colour revolutions." *CSS Policy Perspectives* 4, no. 2 (2016).

²⁸ This article relies on the following definition of what constitutes a reasonable hope by John Patrick Day: "A's hope that P is reasonable if and only if (1) P is probable in some degree, however, small; (2) the degree of A's probability-estimate that P corresponds to the degree of probability that P; and (3) P is consistent both with itself and with the other objects A's hopes." John Patrick Day, "Hope." *American Philosophical Quarterly* (1969): pp. 89-102.

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ideology, which Morgenthau found to have driven some of the Soviet Union's interventions during the Cold War, into the set of drivers examined in this article. The author decided to omit this factor because he found no compelling evidence that post-Soviet Russia would intervene because of ideological reasons. It is true that Putin has generally felt more affinity toward fellow authoritarian leaders and sought to distinguish Russia ideologically from the liberal West. However, as the author's examination of Putin's interventions below indicates, this veteran Russian leader would not intervene militarily in a country just because it did not share the conservative values to which he publicly subscribes.

However, before the author sets out to investigate which of the aforementioned drivers influenced Putin's decisions on use of force abroad and how, he needs to decide how he will determine the presence or absence of these drivers in each of these intervention and non-intervention cases. The author also needs to decide how he will establish instances in which this Russian leader may have considered intervening but chose not to. The author will make these decisions and explain them in the section on research design below.

III. Research Design

As stated above, before the author can set out to ascertain what drove Putin's deliberations on whether to intervene militarily or not in individual cases in 2000-2020, he also needs to decide how he will identify these instances and then select them for the set of cases that he will assemble for his comparative study. This set will obviously include all three cases in which Putin's deliberations culminated in his decision to order a military intervention in another country (in Georgia in 2008, in Ukraine in 2014 and in Syria in 2015, see Table 3.A). As for instances when Putin may have considered intervening but chose not to, the author will use the following criteria to identify them: either Putin himself stated publicly that he considered or would consider intervening, or it is known from open sources that a leader of a foreign country asked Putin for such an intervention. The author counted four instances that met these criteria in the research period, which covers the 21 full years of Putin's rule (2000-2020): Ukraine in 2008; Kyrgyzstan in 2010; Belarus in 2020 and the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2020 (Table 3.A).²⁹

Having selected the cases of intervention and non-intervention into his set, the author will compare them, tabulating manifestations of the potential explanatory variables and the outcome variable in each of the cases to search for relationships between any of the potential explanatory variables on one side and the outcome variable on the other per the comparative method (Table 3.A). If these tabulations reveal evidence of any such relationships, the author will then examine these newly detected relationships to ascertain whether they may have been of causal nature or not. Before the author engages in tabulations of the variables' manifestations, however, he needs to decide how he will assess these manifestations. The author's general approach would be to tabulate these manifestations as binary outcomes (e.g., absence or presence of a variable in individual instances), lagging, where possible, explanatory variables ahead of the outcome variable to reduce probability of reverse causality per the technique employed in a number of previous studies of military interventions by scholars such as Cullen Hendrix,³⁰ Jeffrey Pickering and Emizet F. Kisangani.³¹

To ascertain whether the first potential explanatory variable in the form of threats to Russia's vital national interests as seen by the country's leadership was present or absent in individual instances (X1 in Table 3.A),

²⁹ In addition to the aforementioned four instances of non-intervention, the author is also aware of several other potential cases when Putin may have considered intervention. They are listed in Table 3.B but not included into discussion because the author lacks sufficient evidence to demonstrate that Putin considered intervention in these instances.

³⁰ Cullen S. Hendrix, "Oil Prices and Interstate Conflict Behavior." *Peterson Institute for International Economics Working Article 14-3* (2014).

³¹ Jeffrey Pickering and Emizet F. Kisangani. "Democracy and diversionary military intervention: Reassessing regime type and the diversionary hypothesis." *International Studies Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (2005): pp. 23-43.

Working draft

the author has relied on an updated effort to infer the hierarchy of Russia's vital national interests from Russian leaders' statements and Russia's strategic documents (Table 2).³² The author has chosen to synthesize descriptions of Putin's Russia's vital interests, which he defines as conditions that are strictly necessary for the survival of Russia as a viable and successful state, from Russian leaders' statements and strategic documents instead of simply quoting them. He did so for multiple reasons. One reason was the (perhaps deliberate) vagueness of the language that the authors of Russia's recent strategic documents, such as the Military Doctrine of 2014 and the National Security Concept of 2015, have used to define and describe Russian national interests. For instance, the 2015 security concept defines national interests as "objectively significant requirements of the individual, society and the state with regard to ensuring their protection and sustainable development" and refers to a "totality of balanced interests of the individual, society and the state in economic, domestic political, social, international, informational, military, border, environmental and other fields." More important, the 2015 document does not explicitly refer to some of the interests Russian leaders have identified in their statements, such as: the designation of the post-Soviet neighborhood as a zone of Russia's privileged interests,³³ including the national interest in preventing the emergence of hostile powers or regional hegemony in this neighborhood;³⁴ the interest in ensuring that Russia is surrounded by friendly states, among which Russia can play a lead role and in cooperation with which it can thrive; and the interest in the survival of Russian allies.³⁵

To assess whether the second potential explanatory variable in the form of the Russian leader's need to save face by intervening was present or absent in individual instances (X2 in Table 3.A), the author has sought to ascertain whether the Russian leader was either legally obligated to intervene in a country per Russia's treaty commitments or could have felt morally compelled to do so. The author also believes Putin may have felt a certain degree of moral obligation to intervene in a country if a significant part of the Russian public viewed that country as an ally in need of Russia's help (Table 5) or because the Russian leader felt personally committed to a leader of that country, for instance, as a result of their personal friendship.

In contrast to the binary approach toward assessing some of the aforementioned explanatory variables, the author relied on measurements of Putin's approval ratings by the Levada Center in the preceding year to assess whether the Russian leader may have come to believe in any of the examined cases that a protracted decline in his popularity³⁶ could be threatening his vital personal interest in retaining power (X3 in Table 3.A) and, therefore, potentially requiring a response in the form of a "small victorious war." The author's choice of how to assess the presence or absence of another binary explanatory variable, the occurrence of a color revolution (X4 in Table 3.A), is self-explanatory.

The author has assessed whether Putin could have a reasonable hope that an intervention would succeed in defending vital interests in a particular case (X5 in Table 3.A) both by comparing Russia's national power with that of the country (or countries) in which Russia would intervene (Table 4) and by estimating how

³² Simon Saradzhyan, "Russia and the U.S.: are national interests so different?," *Russia in Global Affairs*, May 10, 2015.

³³ Andrew Kramer, "Russia Claims Its Sphere of Influence in the World," *New York Times*, August 31, 2008

<https://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/01/world/europe/01russia.html>

³⁴ The 2015 concept does refer to "the unacceptability of ...the approach of its [NATO's] military infrastructure toward Russia's borders," but prevention of such an approach is not explicitly listed as a Russian interest. National Security Concept of the Russian Federation, official web site of the Russian president, December 31, 2015, <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/40391>. Similarly, the 2015 military doctrine identifies "bringing the military infrastructure of NATO member countries near the borders of the Russian Federation, including by further expansion of the alliance" as one of the main "external military risks." Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, the official web site of the Russian embassy to Great Britain, December 25, 2014, <https://rusemb.org.uk/press/2029>.

³⁵ See, for instance, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's 2018 description of this Russian interest in repelling aggression against Russia's allies, which he describes as a crossing of a redline, citing the Georgian offensive on South Ossetia as an example. Simon Saradzhyan, "When Does Russia See Red? Foreign Minister Lavrov on Red Lines," *Russia Matters*, January 23, 2018.

³⁶ While Putin's regime is authoritarian, it still is sensitive to public opinion in general and his popularity ratings. Samuel A. Greene and Graeme B. Robertson, "Putin's power depends on his popularity. That makes him vulnerable," *The Washington Post*, August 27, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/putins-power-depends-on-his-popularity-that-makes-him-vulnerable/2019/08/27/c5e0cf1a-b4a2-11e9-8e94-71a35969e4d8_story.html.

Working draft

likely the U.S. or NATO or China, all with national power greater than Russia's, was to counter-intervene in that case, given the presence or absence of multilateral or bilateral treaty commitments such as the mutual aid clause in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty.

The author has assessed whether the Russian leadership may have either lacked or run out of policy alternatives to intervention (X6 in Table 3.A) in a particular case by ascertaining whether either or both of the two following conditions were present at the time when the Russian leadership was deliberating about intervention. The first condition was that the preceding year saw Russia employ diplomatic/non-violent methods per Kaw's description of levels of Soviet Russia's responses to threats to its national interests.³⁷ The second condition was lack of policy alternatives at the time of these deliberations, for instance due to the fact that Russia's opponent had already launched a military operation that was threatening to overwhelm one of Russia's allies.

Finally, to assess whether there has been an increase in Russia's national power (X7 in Table 3.A), fueled by rising oil prices³⁸ (Figure 4) or other factors, the author has relied on measurements of national power in the preceding calendar year per a modification of the Correlates of War project's formula for calculating national power (Table 4 and Figure 1).³⁹ Having assessed which confluence of the aforementioned seven potential causes was sufficient and necessary for Putin to order a military intervention, the author will then distinguish between compelling causes, which directly motivate leaders to opt for military interventions, and contextual factors, which facilitate such choices without directly motivating them per the typology of drivers of leaders' military decisions proposed by scholars of strategy such as Carl von Clausewitz,⁴⁰ Colin Gray⁴¹ and Bart Schuurman.⁴²

Having outlined the research design and research techniques, the author will now proceed to conduct the research itself, examining the seven cases, in which, as suggested by the evidence presented below, the Russian leader deliberated whether or not to order a military intervention in a foreign country. When doing so, the author will remain cognizant of the collective nature of many decisions that the Russian government takes on key domestic issues and, therefore, recognize the potential limitations of attributing such decisions to one leader. However, he still has chosen to concentrate on what drives Putin's decision-making with regard to military interventions abroad because in the view of multiple Russia scholars,⁴³ including the author, Putin has enjoyed independence in decision-making in foreign, defense and security domains that has been unseen since the days of Stalin.⁴⁴

These methods, which tend to cause less human and economic costs than use of military force, may have included issuing threats to impose (or actually imposing) sanctions against threatening state actors; making promises to provide (or actually providing) economic aid and/or preferences to friendly actors; and delivering arms supplies to friendly belligerent actors in order to prevent an undesired outcome in a country or promise (or give) incentives to that country in unsuccessful efforts to attain desired outcomes. Marita Kaw, "Predicting Soviet military intervention." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 33, no. 3 (1989): pp. 402-429.

³⁸ Changes in oil prices, the author has relied on pricing data available of the web site of the U.S. Energy Information Agency U.S. Energy Information Agency, undated, <https://www.eia.gov/analysis/>.

³⁹ Simon Saradzhyan, and Nabi Abdullaev. "Measuring National Power: Is Putin's Russia in Decline?." *Europe-Asia Studies* (2020): 1-27. The Correlates of War project's formula is also used to measure national capabilities in studies of military intervention such as Pickering, Jeffrey, and Emizet F. Kisangani. "Democracy and diversionary military intervention: Reassessing regime type and the diversionary hypothesis." *International Studies Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (2005): 23-43; and Kaw, Marita. "Predicting Soviet military intervention." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 33, no. 3 (1989): 402-429.

⁴⁰ Michael Howard, Peter Paret and Rosalie West, *Carl Von Clausewitz: On War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 185.

⁴¹ Colin S. Gray, *Irregular Enemies and the Essence of Strategy: Can the American Way of War Adapt?* (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2006), p. 38.

⁴² Bart Schuurman, "Clausewitz and the 'New Wars' Scholars," *Parameters* (Carlisle) 40, no. 1 (2010): p. 97.

⁴³ See, for instance, Maitra Sumantra, "Was Putin Ever a Friend of the West? Realism and the Rise and Decline of Putin's Rapprochement with the Bush Administration after 9/11." *Realism and the Rise and Decline of Putin's Rapprochement with the Bush Administration after* (2015): pp. 9-11; Trenin, Dmitri, "Moscow's New Rules," Carnegie Moscow Center, November 12, 2020. <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/83208>; Taylor, Brian D. *The code of Putinism*. Oxford University Press, 2018, p.11 and p.104.

⁴⁴ For instance, as early in his rule as 2001, he could overrule his entire Security Council to offer intelligence assistance on Afghanistan to George W. Bush as the latter prepared to topple the Taliban regime there. "The Frontline Interview: John Beyrle," *PBS*, June 13, 2017, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/interview/john-beyrle/>.

IV. Russian Military Interventions Abroad Under Putin

IV.A. Georgia: 2008

When Georgian president Mikhail Saakashvili ordered his ground forces to launch a ground assault on the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali in August 2008 in an effort to try to re-establish control over this separatist province, Russia's then-Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and the country's President Dmitry Medvedev responded to that move with overwhelming force. Such a response should have come as no surprise to anyone (except, perhaps, for Saakashvili, who may have harbored hopes that Russia would refrain from doing so out of concern that the U.S. and NATO might counter-intervene on Georgia's side).⁴⁵ After all, the entire post-Soviet neighborhood was designated by Putin and his interim caretaker in the Kremlin as a zone of Russia's privileged interests, and these interests (Table 2 and X1 in Table 3.A) required protecting Russia's client entities, such as South Ossetia, from encroachments by other countries, even if they had been part of the same republic in Soviet times. As important, Russia's vital interests also required preventing the arrival of what the Kremlin saw as a hostile alliance (Table 6 and Figure 6) on its country's borders. That Saakashvili's Georgia could facilitate the extension of one such alliance (NATO) to Russia's southwestern borders was viewed by Putin and Medvedev as a distinct possibility at the time, given the official outcome of the summit NATO leaders held in Bucharest in April 2008. That summit saw U.S. President George W. Bush push fellow NATO leaders to officially invite Georgia and Ukraine to join the alliance. Although the summit ultimately did not offer a Membership Action Plan (MAP) to either of the two countries, its final summit communique did welcome "Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO." More specifically it noted, "We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO." Furthermore, NATO's Secretary General, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer promised at the time that the actual decision of granting a MAP to Ukraine and Georgia would be made by NATO foreign ministers as soon as December 2008.⁴⁶

The first half of 2008 also saw the Russian leadership exercise non-intervention policy options (X6 in Table 3.A) to try to prevent what they saw as an unacceptable outcome in the form of MAPs for Georgia and Ukraine in ways that promised to be less costly than a full-blown military intervention. For instance, with one month left before the April 2008 summit, Russia warned Georgia that it would recognize the independence of the breakaway provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia if the former Soviet republic either joined NATO or attacked the two separatist regions. Putin then personally attended the summit to tell its participants that inviting Georgia and Ukraine into NATO would constitute a compelling threat to Russia's national security interests,⁴⁷ while his foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, warned that Russia would "do everything in our power to prevent the admission of Ukraine and Georgia into NATO."⁴⁸ Right after the summit, chief of the Russian General Staff Yuri Baluyevsky warned that Russia would take "military steps" if either Ukraine or Georgia joined NATO,⁴⁹ while Lavrov called on Georgia to pledge not to use force against Abkhazia or South Ossetia, and Russia's envoy at the United Nations Security Council tabled a formal resolution, calling on Georgia to defuse tensions with the breakaway regions. Then, in July 2008, Medvedev postponed his meeting with Saakashvili indefinitely to signal Moscow's discontent with Tbilisi's policies toward Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In addition to this diplomatic signaling, the Russian leadership also made a number of non-military moves in the first half of 2008 designed to dissuade Georgia from using

⁴⁵ "Saakashvili May Have Misjudged U.S. Support," *NPR*, August 13, 2008, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=93573814>.

⁴⁶ Fyodor Lukyanov, "Pilyuli dlya Kieva," *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, April 5, 2008.

⁴⁷ Vladimir Kuzmin, "Putin vystupil v NATO," *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, April 5, 2008.

⁴⁸ "Rossiya sdelaet vsyo, chtoby ne dopustit prinyatia Ukrainy i Gruzii v NATO," *RIA Novosti*, April 8, 2008, <https://ria.ru/20080408/104075411.html>.

⁴⁹ "Russia army vows steps if Georgia and Ukraine join NATO," *Reuters*, April 11, 2008.

Working draft

force against its separatist provinces and discourage its drift toward NATO. For instance, March 2008 saw Russia announce that it would be abandoning sanctions that it had imposed, along with other CIS members, on South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 1996. The Russian leadership also resorted to military assets to signal its displeasure to Tbilisi, ordering the Russian air force not only to fly sorties over South Ossetia but also to publicly admit to it in July 2008, with less than a month left before the outbreak of the Russian-Georgian war. All these moves, however, proved to be unsuccessful either in dissuading Saakashvili from continuing his campaign to press the breakaway republics toward reintegration into Georgia or in putting the brakes on Tbilisi's drive for NATO membership.

Thus, sometime in the first half of the summer of 2008, the die was cast, though Russian leaders may have still felt they needed a pretext to employ the military option against Georgia, and Saakashvili gave them one on August 8. As the EU's Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia has clearly established, Georgian troops launched a ground assault on the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali shortly after 3:00 am on that day.⁵⁰ As stated above, the Russian military-political leadership did not hesitate to forcefully respond to this offensive not only to defend the aforementioned vital interests of their country but also to avoid losing face (X2 in Table 3.A). Had Russia not defended South Ossetia, it would have undermined Russia's image as a reliable security guarantor in the post-Soviet neighborhood and affected Putin's popularity (X3 in Table 3.A). In addition, Putin's approval had been sliding in the preceding year and he could have personally benefited from a "small victorious war" (X3 in Table 3.A and Figure 4), especially given his plans to eventually return to the Kremlin (which he did in 2012). When ordering the counter-offensive, Russian leaders could be confident that it would succeed (X5 in Table 3.A), given the stark disparity between Russia's and Georgia's national power in general (Table 4) and between their military capabilities in particular. The Russian leaders may have also calculated that the probability that NATO would counter-intervene (X5 in Table 3.A) was low in the absence of the alliance's Article 5 obligations vis-à-vis Tbilisi.

In the end, the Russian leaders turned out to be correct in their calculations that they could successfully defend their country's vital interests vis-à-vis Georgia and its Western partners, and that they could do so at a cost that would not be prohibitive. The war did cause further damage to Moscow's already strained relations with Tbilisi, but it also ensured the survival of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and dimmed Georgia's prospects of NATO membership. "Russia's intervention succeeded in putting a halt" to NATO's expansion not only to Georgia but also to the entire former Soviet space, in Domitilla Sagramoso's assessment.⁵¹ Moreover, neither Russia's political nor economic ties with the West suffered any lasting damage, given that Georgia was found to have initiated the offensive on Tskhinvali. Indeed, a year or so after the intervention it was business as usual in Russia's relations with the U.S. and EU, in what may have later prompted Putin to miscalculate the severity and length of Western sanctions over his intervention in Ukraine in 2014, which the author will examine in the next subsection.

When recalling the aforementioned dual push by Georgia and Ukraine for NATO membership at the alliance's April 2008 summit, one cannot help wondering why Russia intervened in Georgia to derail its NATO membership aspirations that year but did not do so in Ukraine at the time. After all, Ukraine's then-president Yushchenko lobbied for this membership as actively as Saakashvili and got the same kind of promise of eventual NATO membership at the Bucharest summit as Saakashvili did, threatening Russia's vital interests as seen by Putin (X1 in Table 3.A). "I think the situation is very simple. One possible reason why Putin chose not to intervene in Ukraine after the 2008 summit was that it was, perhaps, unclear to the Russian leadership whether Russia had sufficient resources to successfully intervene in two countries either simultaneously or within the same year, even though NATO was unlikely to have staged a military counter-intervention in either of the two cases (X5 in Table 3.A). Parallel intervention into two neighboring countries with a combined population of more than 45 million would have stretched the Russian military

⁵⁰ "Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, Report, Volume I-III," Max Planck Institute, 2009.

⁵¹ Domitilla Sagramoso, *Russian Imperialism Revisited: From Disengagement to Hegemony*. (London, UK: Routledge, 2020), p. 353.

Working draft

thin, especially in the counter-insurgency phase that would have had to follow any military phase meant to establish control over territory. That the Russian military might have struggled with such a dual mission follows from the serious setbacks that Russia's 58th Combined Arms Army and supporting units suffered when fighting the Georgian military.⁵² The Western punishment for such a double intervention would have also been more tangible than it was over Russia's intervention in Georgia. Therefore, if Putin were to think that he could afford to intervene only in one of the countries, then Georgia represented a less costly option. Georgia's armed forces were significantly weaker than Ukraine's. Putin may have concluded that Georgia posed a greater threat, especially as tensions over Russia's client entities South Ossetia and Abkhazia escalated throughout the spring and summer of 2008 (X1 in Table 3.A). More important, whatever deliberations Russian leaders may have had on whether and in which order to intervene against these two NATO aspirants, Saakashvili cut those short by launching a ground assault on Tskhinvali on August 8. In addition, while obliged to intervene to defend South Ossetia from Georgia, Putin faced no face-saving dilemmas vis-à-vis Ukraine at the time (X3 in Table 3.A). Moreover, he may have still hoped that non-military instruments that are generally less costly than war could still succeed in slowing down Ukraine's drive for integration into the Western clubs (X6 in Table 3.A). With Russia being Ukraine's largest trading partner and largest source of remittances sent by Ukrainians working abroad at the same time, it would not have been unreasonable for Putin to hope that alternative non-military policies could eventually lead to the suspension of Ukraine's *Drang nach Westen*. His hopes were realized (albeit only temporarily) during Ukraine's January 2010 presidential elections. Thanks in part to strong support from the Kremlin, a Moscow-friendly candidate (Yanukovich) beat the pro-Western incumbent (Yushchenko) and then proceeded to uncross some of Russia's redlines, as described in the first half of subsection IV.B above.

IV.B. Ukraine: 2014 - Present

While August 2008 saw Russia deal a decisive blow (though no coup de grace) to Georgia's NATO ambitions, Ukraine's hopes of closer integration into the West never fully faded away (X1 in Table 3.A) even after Ukrainians voted pro-Western president Viktor Yushchenko—who attended the 2008 NATO summit—out of power, replacing him with a pro-Russian veteran of Ukrainian politics, Viktor Yanukovich, in 2010. Having become the president of Ukraine in February 2010, Yanukovich sought to roll back some of the steps his pro-Western predecessor had taken in the direction of NATO. For instance, Yanukovich publicly announced that there was “no question of Ukraine joining NATO,” while a key aide of his also stated that Ukraine may enter a strategic partnership with Russia.⁵³ More important, Yanukovich agreed in April 2010 to extend the Russian Black Sea Fleet's lease of facilities in Crimea, which was to expire in 2017, for 25 years, until 2042. However, while choosing to keep Ukraine's cooperation with NATO at pre-existing levels, Yanukovich never fully gave up on the idea of his country's closer cooperation with the EU, much to Moscow's dismay. In fact, the Russian leadership spent much of 2013 trying to dissuade Yanukovich from entering Ukraine into an Association Agreement (AA) and a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the EU. The DCFTA would have made Ukraine's participation in the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union impossible, thus undermining Russia's hopes of drawing Ukraine closer into its economic and political orbit, reducing demand for Russian exports to Ukraine and creating a more attractive employment alternative for Ukraine's skilled laborers at a time when Russia suffered from a shortage of skilled human capital. More importantly, the Russian leadership feared that an AA would put Kyiv firmly on a path that would lead first to EU membership and then to NATO membership.⁵⁴ In trying to convince Yanukovich to walk away from an AA and a DCFTA, the Russian leadership used both sticks, such as threats of increasing trade tariffs, and carrots, such as promises of loans (X6 in Table 3.A). Russian diplomats got so desperate to dissuade the Ukrainian government from signing a DCFTA and an AA that

⁵² Simon Saradzhyan, “Conflict Exposes Obsolete Hardware,” *The Moscow Times*, August 15, 2008, <http://oldtmt.vedomosti.ru/news/article/tmt/369809.html>.

⁵³ “Havrysh: Ukraine-NATO cooperation not excluding strategic partnership between Moscow, Kyiv,” *Kyiv Post*, May 26, 2010, <https://www.kyivpost.com/article/content/ukraine-politics/havrysh-ukraine-nato-cooperation-not-excluding-str-67685.html>

⁵⁴ The AA referred to “relevant exercises and training activities, including those carried out in the framework of the Common Security and Defense Policy.”

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they even warned that the EU would deem one of Ukrainians' traditional food products, *salo*, to be unsafe. In the end, the Russian government's December 2013 promise to buy \$15 billion worth of Ukrainian Eurobonds tipped the balance, convincing Yanukovich to announce a deferral of completion of talks with the EU on an AA and a DCFTA, only to see the country's pro-Western opposition launch massive protests. These culminated in the ouster of Yanukovich in late February 2014 with the victorious pro-Western leaders of what became known as the Euromaidan revolution (X4 in Table 3.A) vowing to enter Ukraine into a DCFTA and an AA as soon as possible.

The ouster of Yanukovich nullified the effect of all the Kremlin's previous stick-and-carrot efforts to try dissuading Ukraine from entering agreements with the EU (X6 in Table 3.A). The Russian leadership may have also retained memories of its previous unsuccessful efforts to employ non-military sticks, including bargaining over fees and the volume of Russia's exports of gas to and via Ukraine, to try to alter Ukraine's pro-Western course in the wake of Ukraine's previous pro-Western revolution of 2004–2005 (X6 in Table 3.A). More importantly, the abrupt change of leadership in the country, which was Russia's fifth largest trading partner at the time and which every sixth Russian viewed as one of Russia's closest allies (see Table 5), represented a threat to at least two of Russia's vital interests (Table 2 and X1 in Table 3.A) as seen from the Kremlin. First, the change of guard in Kyiv substantially increased the probability that an alliance of hostile powers (Table 6 and Figure 6) would arrive on Russia's border with Ukraine in the form of NATO, evicting Russia's Black Sea Fleet from Crimea. Second, the decisive economic, military and geopolitical reorientation of Ukraine toward the West undermined Russia's vital interest in being surrounded by friendly states, among which Russia can play a lead role and in cooperation with which it can thrive economically and geopolitically. As important, Russian leaders could have a reasonable hope that if they were to intervene in post-revolutionary Ukraine, NATO would not counter-intervene in Ukraine in the absence of Article 5 obligations (X5 in Table 3.A). "The prospect of Ukraine's integration into a different geostrategic bloc than the one being promoted by Russia was a predicament that the Russian leadership—and the Russian population at large—could not accept," according to Domitilla Sagramoso's analysis of the Kremlin's views on the consequences of the Euromaidan revolution.⁵⁵

In addition, it would not have taken a crystal ball for Russian strategists to see that if Russia were to intervene in Ukraine militarily right after the revolution, then Ukraine—whose system of governance was yet to return to normal functioning after the revolutionary change of power and whose armed forces had been undermanned, undertrained and underequipped for years—might struggle to mount an effective response. The state of the Ukrainian military, which subsequently had to raise funds from the general public to procure batteries for some of their vehicles, contrasted with the state of the Russian armed forces, whose operational capabilities had been improving (Table 4, X7 in Table 3.A) thanks to a well-funded campaign of modernization that the Russian leaders launched after their forces' not-so-flawless performance in the August 2008 war with Georgia. While during that war Russia employed mostly regular army units featuring conscripts, some of whom were not adequately trained, and senior commanders had to borrow satellite phones from journalists to coordinate operations in August 2008, the Kremlin had sufficient numbers of fully professional special forces at its disposal in early 2014 to execute a covert intervention in Ukraine.⁵⁶ The Russian leadership also partly relied on "volunteers," such as personnel from the Wagner Group and other private military companies, for ground operations, which helped Moscow conceal the involvement of the Russian military and downplay "official casualties." However, while Russia's intervention did dim Ukraine's prospects for NATO membership, it had no such impact on Ukraine's aspirations for closer cooperation with the EU in the form of a DCFTA and an AA. As important, the intervention antagonized much of Ukraine's elite and general public, with the share of Ukrainians who had positive views of Russia declining from almost 85% in 2013 to about 35% in 2014,⁵⁷ undermining Russia's vital interest, as seen from Moscow, in being surrounded by friendly states in cooperation with which it can thrive. In the words

⁵⁵ Domitilla Sagramoso, *Russian Imperialism Revisited: From Disengagement to Hegemony*. (London, UK: Routledge, 2020), p. 355.

⁵⁶ "Putin: V proshlom marte v Krymu rabotal spetsnaz," *Vesti*, March 15, 2015.

⁵⁷ Simon Saradzhyan, "Levada Polls Show Russian Public Opinion Toward West Is Thawing," *Russia Matters*, February 21, 2020, <https://www.russiamatters.org/blog/levada-polls-show-russian-public-opinion-toward-west-thawing>

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of Domitilla Sagramoso, Russia's actions in Crimea and Donbass led to the "loss of Ukraine."⁵⁸ In addition, if Putin had hoped that the West would react to Russia's intervention in Ukraine in 2014 the same way it had reacted to Russia's intervention in Georgia in 2008, these hopes turned out to be futile. The U.S. and its European allies reacted forcefully to the annexation of Crimea and Russian backing for separatism in Donbass, imposing a series of long-term economic sanctions, which in combination with sanctions over Syria and alleged election interference, have been lowering Russia's GDP growth by an estimated 1 percentage point every year.⁵⁹ At the same time, Putin did personally benefit from this intervention in general and the annexation of Crimea in particular. While his approval rating had been sliding since circa 2009 (X3), dipping to 60% in late 2013, it then soared to almost 90% in the wake of the annexation of Crimea (Figure 5).

IV.C. Syria: 2015 - Present

When anti-government protests took a violent turn in Syria in 2011, Western leaders saw them as a popular revolution against a brutal dictator. Putin, however, viewed the protests as yet another "coup" against a Russian ally (X4 in Table 3.A) that threatened his country's national interests (X1 in Table 3.A). Thus, the Russian leadership increased military and other types of aid to Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad in hopes of helping him defeat his opponents. Putin also issued threats of use of force to try compelling the warring sides to discontinue hostilities.⁶⁰ By the autumn of 2015, however, the Kremlin was running out of alternatives to intervention in Syria as it was becoming clear that Assad was losing the fight in spite of all the material, political and other help his regime had been receiving from Russia and Iran (X6 in Table 3.A). In fact, there emerged a distinct possibility at the time that Russia's sole ally in the Middle East could be ousted from power. Such a development would have had a major negative impact on Russia's vital interests in ensuring the survival of its allies (X1 in Table 3.A) as well as diversifying its energy-driven economy (Table 2). The ouster of Assad would not only have resulted in the loss of Russia's naval facility in Syria's Tartus, but it would have also led to a loss of lucrative contracts, including sales of non-energy products such as high-value military equipment to Damascus. Furthermore, there was a real chance that significant parts of post-Assad Syria would be ruled by the likes of the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, which would then turn their gaze toward Muslim regions of Russia's North Caucasus, where both organizations had multiple armed loyalists in addition to having thousands of Russian nationals in their ranks in Syria. Attacks on Russia by these jihadists would have damaged Russia's vital interest in preventing large-scale or sustained terrorist attacks on Russia (Table 2). A failure to defend Russia's long-term ally, which the Assad dynasty had been since Soviet times, would have also resulted in loss of face by the Russian leadership (X2 in Table 3.A) and may have affected Putin's standing abroad, but not as much at home (X3 in Table 3.A), where only 12% of Russians viewed Syria as a close ally (Table 5). When deliberating whether to intervene in Syria on Assad's side, the Russian leadership may have calculated that the U.S. and its Western allies may choose to limit their counter-intervention given their experience in Libya, where their support for the opposition contributed not only to the downfall of dictator Muammar Gaddafi but also to the subsequent failure of the Libyan state (X5 in Table 3.A). All this explains why Putin decided to up the ante in September 2015, ordering Russian warplanes, warships, special forces and PMCs into Syria upon Assad's invitation to do so.

While agreeing to intervene on Assad's side to protect Russia's vital interests, Putin sought to keep the costs of doing so as low as possible (perhaps, that effort was influenced by his memories of the numerous casualties among the Russian military in the course of two Russian-Chechen wars and the backlash it generated among members of the Russian public). The Russian intervention took the form of air and missile assaults with personnel from private military companies, such as the aforementioned Wagner Group, tasked

⁵⁸ Domitilla Sagramoso, *Russian Imperialism Revisited: From Disengagement to Hegemony*. (London, UK: Routledge, 2020), p. 332.

⁵⁹ Alexey Yeremenko, "The 'Who, What, When' of Russia Sanctions: A Cheat Sheet for Laymen," *Russia Matters*, September 25, 2018. <https://russiainmatters.org/analysis/who-what-when-russia-sanctions-cheat-sheet-laymen>

⁶⁰ See, for instance, "Russian President Vladimir Putin says that the Syrian government and opposition groups should be "forced" to start a dialogue," *AP*, July 10, 2012, <https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/putin-syrians-should-be-forced-to-start-talks/>.

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with performing ground operations, so that Russia's "official" casualties would be limited. The costs of Russia's intervention were, therefore, seen by the Kremlin as not exceeding the benefits of keeping a secular pro-Moscow regime in Syria even as Russia's economy contracted following a decline in oil prices, as did its national power (Table 4, X7 in Table 3.A, Figures 3 and 4). As a result of that intervention, Russia's aforementioned interests in ensuring the allied Syrian regime's survival and its active cooperation with Russia remained successfully defended as of 2020, contrary to Barack Obama's October 2015 predictions of a "quagmire" for Moscow in Syria.⁶¹

V. Counterfactuals: When Has Putin's Russia Not Intervened?

V.A. Ukraine: 2008

When recalling Georgia's and Ukraine's dual push for NATO membership at the alliance's April 2008 summit, one cannot help wondering why Russia intervened in Georgia to derail its NATO membership aspirations that year but did not do so in Ukraine at the time. After all, Ukraine's then-president Yushchenko lobbied for this membership as actively as Saakashvili and got the same kind of promise of eventual NATO membership at the Bucharest summit as Saakashvili did, threatening Russia's vital interests as seen by Putin (X1 in Table 3). "I think the situation is very simple. Ukraine will become a NATO member," Yushchenko's Foreign Minister Volodymyr Ohryzko proclaimed after that summit ended with a promise of Ukraine and Georgia acceding to the alliance. It should also be noted that, at the time, Russia was experiencing a protracted increase in national power, fueled by rising energy prices (Figures 1-3), and that Putin's domestic approval had been sliding in 2007-2008 (X3 in Table 3.A and Figure 4). Therefore, he could have theoretically benefited from a "small victorious war" to realign the fate of Ukraine, which Russians viewed as a brotherly Slav nation (Table 5), with that of Russia. That the Russian leadership considered a military response to Ukraine's NATO membership plans also follows from chief of the Russian General Staff Yuri Baluyevsky's April 2008 statement that Russia would take "military steps" if either Ukraine or Georgia joined NATO.⁶² In short, the author believes that the confluence of the aforementioned conditions should have made Putin at least consider an intervention in Ukraine among other policy options in 2008.

In the end, however, Russia did not intervene in Ukraine in the wake of the April 2008 summit. One possible reason was that it was unclear whether Russia had sufficient resources to successfully intervene in two countries either simultaneously or within the same year, even though NATO was unlikely to have staged a military counter-intervention in either of the two cases (X5 in Table 3). Parallel intervention into two neighboring countries with a combined population of more than 45 million would have stretched the Russian military thin, especially in the counter-insurgency phase that would have had to follow any military phase meant to establish control over territory. That the Russian military might have struggled with such a dual mission follows from the serious setbacks that Russia's 58th Combined Arms Army and supporting units suffered when fighting the Georgian military.⁶³ The Western punishment for such a double intervention would have also been more tangible than it was over Russia's intervention in Georgia. Therefore, if Putin were to think that he could afford to intervene only in one of the countries, then Georgia represented a less costly option. Georgia's armed forces were significantly weaker than Ukraine's. Putin may have concluded that Georgia posed a greater threat, especially as tensions over Russia's client entities South Ossetia and Abkhazia escalated throughout the spring and summer of 2008 (X1 in Table 3). More important, whatever deliberations Russian leaders may have had on whether and in which order to intervene against these two NATO aspirants, Saakashvili cut those short by launching a ground assault on Tskhinvali

⁶¹ "Obama warns Russia's Putin of 'quagmire' in Syria," *Reuters*, October 2, 2015. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-airstrikes/obama-warns-russias-putin-of-quagmire-in-syria-idUSKCN0RW0W220151003>.

⁶² "Russia army vows steps if Georgia and Ukraine join NATO," *Reuters*, April 11, 2008.

⁶³ Simon Saradzhyan, "Conflict Exposes Obsolete Hardware," *The Moscow Times*, August 15, 2008, <http://oldtmt.vedomosti.ru/news/article/tmt/369809.html>.

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on August 8. In addition, while obliged to intervene to defend South Ossetia from Georgia, Putin faced no face-saving dilemmas vis-à-vis Ukraine at the time (X3 in Table 3.A). Moreover, he may have still hoped that non-military instruments that are generally less costly than war could still succeed in slowing down Ukraine's drive for integration into the Western clubs (X6 in Table 3.A). With Russia being Ukraine's largest trading partner and largest source of remittances sent by Ukrainians working abroad at the same time, it would not have been unreasonable for Putin to hope that alternative non-military policies could eventually lead to the suspension of Ukraine's *Drang nach Westen*. His hopes were realized (albeit only temporarily) during Ukraine's January 2010 presidential elections. Thanks in part to strong support from the Kremlin, a Moscow-friendly candidate (Yanukovich) beat the pro-Western incumbent (Yushchenko) and then proceeded to uncross some of Russia's redlines, as described in the case of Ukraine in 2014 above.

V.B. Kyrgyzstan: 2010 (and 2005 and 2020?)

Kyrgyzstan holds an undisputable (and, perhaps, unenviable) record for the number of color revolutions, which have resulted in change of leadership, among ex-Soviet republics. This Central Asian state has seen three revolutionary changes of power: in 2005, in 2010 and then again in 2020 (X4 in Table 3.A). We can be certain that Putin at least considered to intervene in one of these three revolutions, the so-called the Melon Revolution of 2010 because Kyrgyzstan's then-President Kurmanbek Bakiyev publicly pleaded for a Russian-led intervention by the Collective Security Treaty Organization to keep him in power in 2010, citing the CSTO's charter.

Had Putin wanted to intervene in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 (or, for that matter in 2005 or 2020) he could have done so due to three factors. First, while oil prices went up and down, as did Russia's national power (X7 in Table 3.A), in 2005-2020, Russia remained comfortably stronger than all of the Central Asian republics combined throughout that period, to say less of Kyrgyzstan alone. Second, Russian forces were already present in the country at the Kant air base and some other military facilities inside Kyrgyzstan. Third, the chances that a more powerful player, such as China or NATO, would have counter-intervened in any of the three cases were negligible in the absence of any treaty obligations by Beijing and Brussels vis-à-vis Kyrgyzstan. In addition, one of the three revolutions This plea gave Putin a pretext to intervene in the 2010 revolution. Moreover, the plea arguably created some pressure on Putin to either find an accommodation of the request by the leader of Russia's CSTO ally or risk damaging Russia's reputation as a reliable ally and, perhaps, losing face on the personal level (X2).

As stated above, the author believes that Bakiyev's plea should have made Putin at least consider a military intervention in Kyrgyzstan in 2010. However, as we all know, Putin chose not to exercise this particular option. The primary reason for Russia's non-intervention in that instance was the absence of a threat to Russia's vital interests (Table 2), in the author's view. Rosa Otunbáeva and her colleagues who emerged victorious from the 2010 revolution were seen by the Kremlin to be as acceptable as their predecessor Bakiyev, primarily because the Russian leadership considered these revolutionary leaders to be sincere in their public pledges to accommodate Russia's vital interest in being surrounded by friendly states and the absence of alternative hegemons (X1 in Table 3.A). In addition, Russia's status as Kyrgyzstan's largest trading partner and largest source of remittances sent by Kyrgyz workers abroad to their families at home ensured that Putin had plenty of other non-military and, therefore, less costly policy options to explore first, before the intervention option, if the revolutionary leaders failed to keep their promises to Moscow (X6 in Table 3.A). It should also be noted that Putin's popularity was either stable or growing (X3) in the 12-month period that preceded the 2010 revolution. As important, Russians did not view the fate of the Kyrgyz as intertwined with theirs, as was the case with the Ukrainians or Belarussians, with only an average of 7% of the Russian public viewing Kyrgyzstan as one of Russia's five closest allies in 2005-2020 (Table 5).

V.C. Belarus: 2020

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As Belarussians prepared to vote in the presidential election of August 2020, there were few public signs that the outcome would be different from the previous five elections of the head of this small ex-Soviet republic. In each of those elections, Belarus' authoritarian leader, Alexander Lukashenko, declared victory while his rivals decried alleged fraud, as did some Western leaders, while the Kremlin habitually offered congratulations to a man whom Western media like to call "Europe's last dictator." However, the aftermath of the August 9, 2020, poll turned out to be starkly different from that of the previous five. Not only did the consolidated opposition's candidate, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, refuse to accept the results of the elections, but she and other leading opponents of the incumbent managed to bring more than 100,000 people onto the streets of Minsk and other Belarussian cities day after day, awakening the specter of another color revolution in Eastern Europe (X4 in Table 3.A). Moreover, rather than just criticize the alleged electoral fraud, the U.S. and EU refused this time to recognize Lukashenko as a legitimate president of Belarus altogether. Western media outlets began to refer to Lukashenko as "self-appointed," while legislative authorities in EU countries such as Lithuania declared Tikhanovskaya to be the legitimate president of Belarus.

The initially massive scale of these protests and the pro-Western leanings of some of their organizers created a real possibility that Lukashenko would not just be ousted but that Belarus could resume its drive toward membership in the Western clubs, which it had pursued under Lukashenko's predecessor, Stanislav Shushkevich, in the 1990s. That would set back Russia's vital interest in the survival of its allies (Interest 8 in Table 2, X1 in Table 3.A), given that under Lukashenko not only has Belarus joined all the Russia-led integration projects, but the two countries have even formed a joint "Union State." In addition, Putin's failure to save this allied leader from losing power would have amounted to a loss of face for the Russian president (X2 in Table 2), whereas a "small victorious war" to prevent such an outcome could have helped reverse the preceding decline in the Russian president's popularity (X3 in Table 2) among his own compatriots, more than half of whom view Belarus as one of Russia's five closest allies (Table 5). Putin could have also been reasonably confident that a Russian military intervention to prop up Lukashenko would succeed, if coordinated with the Belarussian leader. Deploying Russian troops to Belarus would not have been a problem given the common border and the fact that some crack units, such as the 76th Pskov airborne division and 2nd *spetsnaz* brigade, are stationed near that border. In addition, chances that NATO would counter-intervene in the absence of Article 5 obligations vis-à-vis Belarus were minimal, especially as long as Lukashenko remained in power. That Putin considered an intervention in Belarus as the post-electoral protests gained momentum in that country follows from the fact that he and his key aides publicly hinted that they were considering such an option and Lukashenko himself asked for it.⁶⁴

However, in spite of the presence of this option in his toolbox, Putin chose not to exercise it. The author believes that the primary reason for this "non-intervention" was the Russian leadership's belief that the level of threat to Lukashenko's rule was not yet urgent or existential and, therefore, less costly non-military options (X6 in Table 3.A) should be employed first to try to keep him in power. Putin did exercise some of these options, publicly promising to send a contingent of Russian law-enforcers to help Lukashenko restore "law and order" if needed, warning NATO to refrain from interfering and pledging new financial and economic perks to the fellow strongman. Whether these threats and promises played their part is unclear, but the onset of winter did see the protests in Belarus subside from peak levels of more than 100,000 protesters a day in late August 2020 to under 20,000 in December 2020.

V.D. Armenia and Azerbaijan: 2020

While the Belarussian protests of August 2020 (and the Kyrgyz revolution of October 2020) sent shock waves across the ex-Soviet neighborhood, the most consequential and deadliest regional crisis that year, in the author's view, erupted in the South Caucasus in September 2020. The September-November 2020 war between Russia's military ally Armenia and Azerbaijan, which enjoyed the direct support of an external

⁶⁴ See, for instance, Shaun Walker, "Belarus protests: Putin ready to send Lukashenko military support," *The Guardian*, August 27, 2020.

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power (Turkey), over that Armenian-majority enclave did not only kill over 5,000 soldiers and scores of civilians, but it also destabilized the South Caucasian region, creating acute threats to a number of vital Russian interests, such as the need to prevent armed conflicts waged against Russia's allies and the need to prevent large-scale or sustained terrorist attacks on Russia (Interests 1 and 7 in Table 2, X1 in Table 3.A). That second interest was threatened by the participation of thousands of Syrian mercenaries sent by Turkey to fight in the Karabakh conflict on Azerbaijan's side.⁶⁵ Many of these mercenaries were former or current members of jihadist groups Russia has designated as terrorists, such as: the Islamic State (IS); Ahrar al-Sham, which had worked with IS until 2014; and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, which was affiliated with al-Qaeda until 2016. It went without saying that it could not have been in Russia's interest to have scores of armed jihadists in a country bordering Russia's North Caucasus, where a large-scale jihadist insurgency was underway in the 2000s-2010s and where both al-Qaeda and IS established vilayets. In addition, it was clear from the very beginning of this war that if Azerbaijan defeated Armenia with Turkey's direct military support, then Ankara would significantly expand its clout in the South Caucasian part of what the Kremlin saw as a zone of Russia's privileged interests. This would have contradicted Russia's vital interest in preventing the emergence of alternative regional hegemonies in that neighborhood (Interest 2 in Table 2). Had Putin decided to intervene militarily on Armenia's side, as Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan asked him to in October 2020,⁶⁶ he could have been confident that his armed forces would compel the warring sides to discontinue hostilities for a number of reasons. The first was that, even though Russian national power had stopped growing by 2020 (X7 in Table 3.A, Figures 1-3), Russia still enjoyed supremacy over Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey combined in all components of national power (Table 4), including military might. Second, Russian forces were already pre-positioned close to the area of hostilities: 4,000 Russian troops man an arms base equipped with armored vehicles, fighter jets and air defense systems outside Yerevan, while 4,500 Russian border guards patrol parts of Armenia's frontiers. The Russian leadership could also be confident that if they sent troops to force an end to the hostilities, NATO would not counter-intervene (X5 in Table 3.A),⁶⁷ and they did deploy such troops, but military collisions between the Armenian and Azerbaijan troops continued.

It is Pashinyan's October 2020 appeal to Putin for Russia's military help and reports that he discussed this appeal with Putin that makes the author believe that Putin did consider a military intervention among other policy options of how to respond to the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. That Putin had such an option at least pre-planned for him also follows from the not-so-subtle threat that the Russian military could "enter the armed conflict if the leadership of Azerbaijan decides to use force to restore jurisdiction over Nagorno-Karabakh," dropped by the then-commander of Russia's military base in Armenia in an interview with the Russian defense ministry's official daily in 2013.⁶⁸ Yet, in spite of the likely presence of the military intervention option in his toolbox, Putin chose not to exercise it.

The author believes that the primary reason Putin opted not to use military force to coerce the sides to discontinue hostilities was that he thought he had sufficient non-military leverage to attain the same outcome without risking the lives of Russian soldiers or incurring other costs associated with military interventions. That leverage included Putin's ability to block the flow of remittances from Russia to these countries, to impose constraints on the operations of businesses owned by citizens of the warring countries and to curb trade with them. Russia has previously employed all these levers during earlier crises involving Georgia and Turkey (X6 in Table 3.A) and it could do so again in 2020 vis-à-vis Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey. In

⁶⁵ Simon Saradzhyan, "Is Stopping the War Between Armenia and Azerbaijan in Russia's (Vital) Interest?," *Russia in Global Affairs*, November 6, 2020, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/stop-war-armenia-azerbaijan/>.

⁶⁶ Bocharova, Svetlana, "Armenia zaprosila voennoi pomoshchi u Rossii po dvkhstronnyy dogovory," *Vedomosti*, November 1, 2020, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2020/11/01/845401-armeniya-zaprosila>; "Pashinyan obratilsya k Putinu s pros'boy o podderzhke iz-za Karabakha," *Current Time*, October 31, 2020 <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/armenia-russia-karabah/30922739.html>

⁶⁷ Even though Turkey is a NATO member, Ankara did not clear its intervention with other members of the alliance, just as it did not in the case of Syria or Libya, prompting the author to observe that NATO may be not as brain-dead as Emmanuel Macron has claimed but is suffering from Tourette syndrome in the form of Turkey (see X5 in Table 3).

⁶⁸ Yuri Belousov, "Yuzhnyy forpost Rossii," *Krasnaya Zvezda*, October 10, 2017, <http://archive.redstar.ru/index.php/nekrolog/item/12045-yuzhnyj-forpost-rossii>.

Working draft

fact, Putin had publicly hinted he could use some of these levers in the heat of the September-November 2020 war.⁶⁹ The author believes it was the availability of these already tested non-military tools in Putin's arsenal (X6 in Table 3.A) that convinced the warring sides to agree to discontinue hostilities with Moscow's mediation and then let Russia deploy peacekeepers between them in November 2020.⁷⁰ (This deployment is best described as a peacekeeping operation and it fell short of this article's definition of military intervention because the Russian troops did not engage in combat, but rather were deployed after large-scale hostilities ceased and the warring sides agreed to such deployment.) In the end, Putin's decision to employ non-military means to both discontinue the Karabakh war and convince the warring sides to agree to the deployment of Russian peacekeepers to the zone of conflict for the period of five years yielded such benefits for Russia, as enhancement of its military presence in the South Caucasus, at least in the medium term. Putin may also have betted that Russia's decision not to coerce the warring sides into discontinuing hostilities early, that is before its military ally, Armenia, was overwhelmed, will cause no lasting damage in the longer-term to such vital interests of Russia, as being surrounded by friendly states, among which Russia can play a lead role. This could prove to be a losing bet, however. When conducting their next review of costs and benefits of their countries' choices of allies (or patrons), leaders of states presently allied with Russia could, at the very least, be expected to wonder why Russia did not attain discontinuation of major hostilities early in the conflict before a coalition of a country, which is not Russia's military ally (Azerbaijan), with a member of a military alliance, which Moscow designates as hostile (NATO member Turkey), dealt a shattering defeat to a country that had participated in all of Russian-led post-Soviet cooperation organizations, including its military alliance (CSTO member Armenia).

VI. Conclusion and next steps

This article has examined seven instances in which, as indicated by the evidence presented above, Putin was likely to have deliberated whether or not to use military force in foreign countries, including three instances in which the Russian leader ultimately decided to intervene and four instances in which he did not. This examination revealed that a confluence of three drivers was both necessary and sufficient for Putin not just to seriously consider a military intervention abroad but to actually order one in the aforementioned cases of Georgia in 2008, Ukraine in 2014 and Syria in 2015. First, Putin had to be directly motivated by a clear, acute threat to one or more of Russia's vital national interests (Driver 1). Second, he had to have reasonable hope that a military intervention would succeed in warding off these threats, with such hope acting as one of the facilitators of his decision to opt for a military intervention (Driver 2). Third, Putin had either to have run out of non-military and, therefore, less costly options of responding to these threats or to lack the time needed to exercise such options due to the acutely urgent nature of the threats (Driver 3). Such exhaustion (or absence) of non-military options also acted as a facilitator of Putin's decisions to intervene in other countries militarily without directly motivating those decisions. As this article has demonstrated, these three drivers were present when Putin's Russia intervened militarily in Georgia in 2008, in Ukraine in 2014 and in Syria in 2015. Additionally, the opposite has held true with regard to these three drivers in the instances when the commander-in-chief of the Russian armed forces was likely to have considered intervening militarily but chose not to. One or two of these three drivers were absent in each of the three non-intervention instances. For instance, while Driver 2 (reasonable hope that a military intervention would succeed) was present during the revolutions in Kyrgyzstan in 2010, Driver 1 (threat to vital interests) was absent in that case, helping to explain why Putin did not intervene. In contrast, while Driver 1 (threat to vital interests) was present in the cases of Belarus and of Armenia and Azerbaijan, Driver 3 (exhaustion or absence of non-military options) was absent; helping to explain why Putin chose not to order military interventions there. The author's findings with regard to Driver 3 (exhaustion or absence of non-military options) confirm earlier propositions of scholars such as Otte, Gates, Aloyo and Azrael that leaders order military interventions when they have exhausted non-military alternatives of responding to a challenge. The

⁶⁹ Simon Saradzhyan, "Is Stopping the War Between Armenia and Azerbaijan in Russia's (Vital) Interest?," *Russia in Global Affairs*, November 6, 2020, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/stop-war-armenia-azerbaijan/>.

⁷⁰ "Meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club," Official web site of the Russian president, October 22, 2020. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64261>.

Working draft

author's findings with regard to Driver 1 (threats to vital interests) and Driver 2 (reasonable hope that a military intervention would succeed) confirm earlier propositions of Morgenthau, Osgood, Tucker and some other scholars whose studies of military interventions have been reviewed above. All these scholars have argued that state leaders tend to favor military interventions in other countries if, first, they have concluded that their nations' interests are at stake and, second, if they believed that they have sufficient resources at their disposal to ensure the intervention would succeed. However, while partly rooting his propositions with regard to Drivers 1, 2 and 3 in these scholars' studies, the author has gone beyond these studies by ascertaining which confluence of drivers was both sufficient and necessary in the case of Russia's Putin to warrant a military intervention and why. As important, the author drew a distinction between these drivers in terms of impact, noting that threats to vital national interests served as a direct motivator of Putin's decisions in favor of military intervention, while his perception that a military intervention would succeed and the exhaustion (or absence) of non-military options facilitated such decisions. In other words, Putin would not intervene in other countries militarily just because he was running out of non-violent options or believed that a military intervention would succeed. For that to happen, he had to also see an acute threat to Russia's vital interest. These findings may qualify as a modest contribution to the body of scholarly knowledge about post-Soviet Russia's interventions, in the author's view.

While the confluence of Putin's seeing threats to vital Russian interests, anticipating the success of intervention in warding off those threats and lacking alternative responses (or lacking time to execute such responses) has been found to be both sufficient and necessary for this leader to order use of military force abroad, the same cannot be said about the other four hypothetical drivers of interventions that the author has inferred from the literature on the subject and examined in this article. First, the author has found that the need for Putin to reverse a decline of his popularity did not prove to be a sufficient condition for him to order military intervention, contrary to the findings of Azrael and Benson. Putin's popularity had been tanking in the years that preceded the mass protests in Belarus in August 2020 and the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2020. Yet he chose not to intervene in either of these instances. Second, the author has found that the hypothetical need for Putin to save face was neither sufficient nor necessary for him to order a military intervention, contrary to Azrael and his co-authors' findings. For instance, Kyrgyzstan's then-president Bakiyev publicly pleaded for a Russian-led CSTO intervention to keep him in power during the revolution of 2010 while Pashinyan pleaded for Russia's military help in October 2020. These pleas, arguably, created pressure on Putin to either accommodate the allied leaders' request or risk losing face in his capacity as the leader of a military alliance. However, that pressure turned out to be insufficient to make the Russian leader act to intervene. Third, the author has found that color revolutions in ex-Soviet republics have failed to serve as reliable predictors of Putin's military interventions. Contrary to Bouchet's proposition, such revolutions per se did not warrant a Russian intervention unless they were accompanied by the confluence of Drivers 1, 2 and 3, as was the case in Ukraine in 2014. The Kyrgyz revolutions of 2010 demonstrated that a revolutionary change of power in a state Russia seeks to anchor or has anchored did not suffice to trigger a Russian military intervention. Just because there was a revolution in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 did not mean Putin felt it was his duty to intervene (just like he probably did not feel that way and, therefore, did not intervene during the Kyrgyz revolutions of 2005 and 2020, the Georgian revolution of 2003, the Ukrainian revolution of 2004-2005 and the Armenian revolution of 2018). Fourth, the author has found that a protracted increase in national power, fueled by rising energy prices and/or other factors, does not constitute either a necessary or sufficient driver for a military intervention by Putin's Russia in another country, contrary to Hendrix's proposition. Another proposition that a number of scholars have made, but this paper has contested, is that Putin is inclined to engage in excessive risk-taking and adventurism. That notion has been put forward in the writings of scholars such as Stephen Sestanovich, Tor Bukkvoll, Joshua Sanborn, and Andrei Piontkovsky.⁷¹ However, as the evidence presented in the case of Syria in 2015 illustrates, Putin first tried less costly options than direct use of military force, such as military

⁷¹ Stephen Sestanovich, "Putin's Reckless Gamble," *New York Times*, March 29, 2014; Tor Bukkvoll, "Why Putin went to war: ideology, interests and decision-making in the Russian use of force in Crimea and Donbas." *Contemporary Politics* 22, no. 3 (2016): pp. 267-282; Joshua A. Sanborn, "Russian imperialism, 1914-2014: annexationist, adventurist, or anxious?." *Revolutionary Russia* 27, no. 2 (2014): pp. 92-108; and Andrei Piontkovsky, "Putin's Russia as a revisionist power." *Journal on Baltic Security* 1, no. 1 (2015): pp. 6-13.

Working draft

and economic aid to the Assad regime, before he acquiesced to the notion that perhaps only a military intervention could save Assad from a forceful, unconditional ouster, thereby defending Russia's national interests. The "counter" findings that the author of this article has made can qualify as another modest contribution to the body of scholarly knowledge on post-Soviet Russia's interventions, in the author's view, as they demonstrate, perhaps somewhat counterintuitively, that Putin's perceived need to save face or to reverse the loss of his popularity, a protracted increase in national power and color revolutions in post-Soviet states are neither sufficient nor necessary for the Russian leader to order a military intervention abroad and that he does not rush headlong into such interventions without weighing other, non-military options.

In addition to contributing to the body of academic knowledge about use of force by post-Soviet Russia against other countries,⁷² this article's findings may have practical implications, as they may be used to forecast Russian military interventions. That is something that has been lacking since Kaw's commendable 1989 effort to predict when Moscow would use military force, and which may be used not only by academics but also by policymakers to gain an understanding of the conditions under which Putin would intervene and those under which he would not. That such understanding may be lacking follows from multiple incorrect predictions of imminent Russian aggression made by some current and former military and political leaders of Russia's ex-Soviet neighbors each time Moscow would announce plans to hold yet another major wargame in the western or southwestern parts of the country.⁷³ Scanning carefully and constantly for evidence of an emerging confluence of the aforementioned three drivers could, perhaps, help U.S., NATO, EU and other decision-makers in charge of the Russia portfolio to distinguish false alarms from genuine ones, if only to avoid overreacting in ways that could escalate into an unintended war.

Going forward and beyond his study of Putin's decision-making in 2000-2020, the author would like to expand his set of cases to include the case of Russia's actions in the Central African Republic in 2021. Having begun in the form of limited military advice and sales of arms in 2018, Russia's involvement in CAR escalated in the course of the first half of 2020 to feature significant involvement of personnel of private military companies (PMCs), such as Wagner Group, in combat,⁷⁴ and therefore, complying with this article's definition of a military intervention.⁷⁵ The case of CAR is particularly interesting, because it can help to answer the question of whether a modest contribution, which sales of arms to CAR and mining of its natural resources may have made to advancement of Russia's vital interest in development and diversification of the Russian economy, could have been among drivers of Putin's decision to escalate a limited program of military-technical assistance into a military intervention, featuring hundreds of PMC troopers in addition to more than 500 MoD advisors. Going even further, when Putin has left the Kremlin, it might become possible to interview his key advisors on his decision-making in general and on military interventions, in particular to expand this study's body of evidence.

⁷² All of these findings are Russia-specific, and the author does not profess that their small-N study has an external validity.

⁷³ See, for instance, Simon Saradzhyan, "100,000 troops will engage in Russia's Zapad-2017 war games," *Washington Post*, September 13, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/09/13/100000-troops-will-engage-in-russias-zapad-2017-war-games/> and Simon Saradzhyan "Yes, Russian Generals Are Preparing for War. That Doesn't Necessarily Mean the Kremlin Wants to Start One," *Russia Matters*, August 30, 2017, <https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/yes-russian-generals-are-preparing-war-doesnt-necessarily-mean-kremlin-wants-start-one>.

⁷⁴ For recent reports on this escalation and accounts of Russian personnel's engagement in combat see "Russian Diplomat Says Hundreds Of Soldiers Heading To C.A.R. Are Instructors ," RFE/RL, May 29, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-troops-car-instructors/31279721.html>; and "Bomb Kills 2 CAR Police, 3 Russian Paramilitaries," AFP, May 30, 2021, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/05/30/bomb-kills-2-car-police-3-russian-paramilitaries-govt-a74051>

⁷⁵ Military intervention is defined for purposes of this article as deployment of formations of regular and/or irregular troops on orders of one country's leadership into another country to engage in combat there for purposes of attaining military, political, economic or other ends desired by that leadership

Tables and Figures

Table 1: Factors which can potentially explain Putin’s decisions on whether to order a military intervention in another country

X1: “Threat to vital national interests as seen by the leader.”	X2: “Need for the leader to save face.”	X3: “Need for the leader to ensure his popularity.”	X4: “Color revolution in a country Russia is an ally of or which Russia seeks to make an ally.”	X5: “Leader’s reasonable hope that the intervention will succeed.”	X6: “Leader has run out of non-military options for responding to crisis or such options were absent at the time of that crisis.”	X7: “Increase in national power in preceding calendar year.”
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Table 2: Russia’s vital national interests as seen by the Russian leadership (in order of importance)⁷⁶

1. Prevent, deter and reduce threats of secession from Russia; insurgency within Russia or in areas adjacent to Russia; and armed conflicts waged against Russia, its allies or in the vicinity of Russian frontiers;
2. Prevent emergence of hostile powers or regional hegemonies or failed states on Russian borders, ensure Russia is surrounded by friendly states, among which Russia can play a lead role and in cooperation with which it can thrive; ⁷⁷
3. Establish and maintain productive relations, upon which Russian national interests hinge to a significant extent, with core European Union members, the United States and China;
4. Ensure the viability and stability of major markets for major flows of Russian exports and imports;
5. Ensure steady development and diversification of the Russian economy and its integration into global markets;
6. Prevent neighboring nations from acquiring nuclear arms and long-range delivery systems on Russian borders; secure nuclear weapons and materials;
7. Prevent large-scale and/or sustained terrorist attacks on Russia;
8. Ensure Russian allies’ survival and their active cooperation with Russia.

⁷⁶ Simon Saradzhyan, “Russia and the U.S.: are national interests so different?”, *Russia in Global Affairs*, May 10, 2015, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/russia-and-the-u-s-are-national-interests-so-different/>.

⁷⁷ Simon Saradzhyan, “Russia and the U.S.: are national interests so different?”, *Russia in Global Affairs*, May 10, 2015, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/russia-and-the-u-s-are-national-interests-so-different/>.

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Table 3A: Cases of intervention and non-intervention in chronological order: Manifestations of factors which can potentially explain Putin’s decisions on whether to order a military intervention in another country in 2000-2020

Case	Intervention Y: (occurred or not)	X1: “Threat to vital national interests as seen by the leader.” (present or not)	X2: “Need for the leader to save face.” (present or not)	X3: “Need for the leader to ensure his popularity.” (present or not, measured by % change in Putin’s approval in the preceding year)	X4: “Color revolution in a country Russia is an ally of or which Russia seeks to make an ally.” (happening or not)	X5: “Leader’s reasonable hope that the intervention will succeed.” (present or not)	X6: “Leader has run out of non-military options for responding to crisis or such options were absent at the time of that crisis.” (yes or no)	X7: “Increase in national power in preceding calendar year, fueled by rising energy prices and/or other factors.” (present or not)
Georgia on verge of being granted MAP by NATO in 2008	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes (-5.9%)	No	Yes	Yes (because of Georgia’s assault on S. Ossetia)	Yes (7%)
Ukraine on verge of being granted MAP by NATO in 2008	No	Yes	No	Yes (-5.9%)	No	No	No	Yes (7%)
Kyrgyzstan revolution of 2010	No	No	Yes	No (0.0%)	Yes	Yes	No	No (-6%)
Syrian civil war of 2011 - present	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes (-3.5%)	No	Yes	Yes	No (-2%)
Ukrainian revolution of 2013-2014	Yes	Yes	Yes	No (0.0%)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes (3%)
Belarus protests of 2020	No	Yes	Yes	Yes (-11.8%)	Not yet	Yes	No	No (-2%)
Conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2020	No	Yes	No	Yes (-1.5%)	No	Yes	No	No (-2%)

Table 3.B: Additional hypothetical cases, in which the author hypothesizes that Putin may have considered whether to intervene and decided against, but lacks evidence to back his proposition.

Case	Intervention Y: (occurred or not)	X1: “Threat to vital national interests as seen by the leader.” (present or not)	X2: “Need for the leader to save face.” (present or not)	X3: “Need for the leader to ensure his popularity.” (present or not, measured by % change in Putin’s approval in the preceding year)	X4: “Color revolution in a country Russia is an ally of or which Russia seeks to make an ally.” (happening or not)	X5: “Leader’s reasonable hope that the intervention will succeed.” (present or not)	X6: “Leader has run out of non-military options for responding to crisis or such options were absent at the time of that crisis.” (yes or no)	X7: “Increase in national power in preceding three calendar years, fueled by rising energy prices and/or other factors.” (present or not)

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Georgian revolution of 2003	No	No	No	Yes (-5%)	Yes	Yes	No	Yes (1%)
Ukrainian revolution of 2004-2005	No	No	Yes	Yes (-1.4%)	Yes	No	No	No (-1%)
Kyrgyzstan revolution of 2005	No	No	No	No (5.3%)	Yes	Yes	No	Yes (3%)
Montenegro on the verge of NATO membership in 2016	No	No	No	Yes (-2.4%)	No	No	No	No (-7%)
Armenian revolution of 2018	No	No	No	Yes (-9.5%)	Yes	Yes	No	No (-3%)
Kyrgyzstan revolution of 2020	No	No	No	No (1.5%)	Yes	Yes	No	No (-2%)

Table 4: National power

Military affiliation	Political/economic affiliation	Country	Share in world's GDP, PPP, in 2016	National power in 2016, as measured in the Revised Geometric Indicator of National Capabilities, based on the Correlates of War project's formula
NATO	EU candidate	Albania	0.029%	0.00022
CSTO	CIS/EAEU	Armenia	0.021%	0.00026
	EU	Austria	0.347%	0.00291
	CIS	Azerbaijan	0.140%	0.00090
CSTO	CIS/EAEU	Belarus	0.142%	0.00108
NATO	EU	Belgium	0.425%	0.00586
	NATO and EU candidate	Bosnia and Herzegovina	0.035%	0.00028
NATO	EU	Bulgaria	0.113%	0.00093
NATO		Canada	1.384%	0.01220
NATO	EU	Croatia	0.081%	0.00053
	EU	Cyprus	0.024%	0.00015
NATO	EU	Czech Republic	0.294%	0.00366
NATO	EU	Denmark	0.237%	0.00199
NATO	EU	Estonia	0.033%	0.00036
	EU	Finland	0.196%	0.00158
NATO	EU	France	2.264%	0.02456
		Georgia	0.031%	0.00030
NATO	EU	Germany	3.270%	0.03272
NATO	EU	Greece	0.232%	0.00182
NATO	EU	Hungary	0.224%	0.00252
	EU	Ireland	0.261%	0.00400
NATO	EU	Italy	1.872%	0.01188
NATO	EU	Latvia	0.041%	0.00032
NATO	EU	Lithuania	0.071%	0.00051
NATO	EU	Luxembourg	0.049%	0.00021
	EU	Malta	0.014%	0.00013
	CIS	Moldova	0.019%	0.00022
NATO	EU candidate	Montenegro	0.009%	0.00005

Working draft

NATO	EU	Netherlands	0.722%	0.01005
	NATO candidate	North Macedonia	0.024%	0.00017
NATO	EU	Norway	0.299%	0.00219
NATO	EU	Poland	0.881%	0.00626
NATO	EU	Portugal	0.250%	0.00164
NATO	EU	Romania	0.381%	0.00232
CSTO	CIS/EAEU	Russia	3.219%	0.02969
NATO	EU	Slovakia	0.141%	0.00130
NATO	EU	Slovenia	0.055%	0.00039
NATO	EU	Spain	1.378%	0.00817
NATO	EU	Sweden	0.409%	0.00383
NATO	EU candidate	Turkey	1.679%	0.00935
	CIS	Ukraine	0.291%	0.00462
NATO	EU	United Kingdom	2.299%	0.01975
NATO		United States	15.402%	0.14313

Table 5: What five countries would you describe as the closest friends/allies of Russia?⁷⁸

	2006	2007	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Belarus	47	38	50	49	35	34	46	51	55	50	46	49	62	58
China	24	19	18	16	18	16	20	40	43	34	39	40	42	40
Kazakhstan	33	39	38	32	33	28	31	37	41	39	34	32	38	35
Armenia	14	15	15	15	11	11	12	15	18	13	12	11	22	17
Azerbaijan	7	5	10	8	9	9	8	9	11	7	9	8	16	13
India	15	14	12	14	16	9	7	13	18	18	14	19	14	13
Syria	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	4	2	10	15	21	14	12
Venezuela	–	2	8	10	6	5	6	5	9	6	3	4	11	11
Germany	22	24	17	24	20	17	14	4	2	2	2	5	9	10
Kyrgyzstan	7	7	9	4	6	5	5	6	10	7	8	8	9	9
Cuba	–	8	11	10	13	8	9	10	14	10	11	11	9	9
Uzbekistan	6	6	9	5	7	5	5	6	8	9	9	11	9	9
Vietnam	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	4	4	5	10	7
Turkey	3	3	4	5	7	4	5	4	8	1	6	9	9	7
Bulgaria	10	9	9	8	9	7	10	8	4	4	4	7	8	6
Georgia	3	1	1	1	2	1	2	1	3	2	4	3	8	6
Serbia	4	3	5	5	4	4	3	5	8	6	5	6	6	6
Tajikistan	3	7	9	4	5	4	5	8	7	6	9	7	6	5
Israel	3	3	3	4	5	4	3	4	2	3	3	3	4	4
Iran	4	3	2	2	1	2	1	2	2	2	4	5	4	4

Table 6: What five countries would you describe as the most unfriendly, hostile toward Russia?⁷⁹

	2006	2007	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
USA	37	35	45	26	33	35	38	69	73	72	69	78	67	60
Ukraine	27	23	41	13	20	15	11	30	37	48	50	49	40	35
Great Britain	5	3	8	6	8	7	9	18	21	18	15	38	38	29
Latvia	46	36	35	36	35	26	21	23	25	23	24	26	27	26
Lithuania	42	32	35	35	34	25	17	24	25	23	24	23	26	26
Poland	7	20	10	14	20	8	8	12	22	24	21	24	22	26
Georgia	44	46	62	57	50	41	33	19	11	10	9	8	11	16
Germany	2	2	3	1	4	3	3	18	19	19	24	17	18	15
Estonia	28	60	30	28	30	23	16	21	19	16	16	15	12	11
Afghanistan	12	11	7	14	15	8	10	5	4	2	3	3	4	7
Canada	1	<1	1	<1	1	1	1	7	8	6	3	8	9	7

⁷⁸ Multiple answers allowed, respondents were offered a card with a list of countries, and they could name several countries; the answers are ranked in descending order according to the results in 2020; the table shows countries that scored $\geq 1.5\%$ in August 2020, source: Levada Center.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*

Working draft

Iraq	9	8	5	9	9	8	7	3	2	2	3	4	5	6
Iran	7	7	3	7	7	7	5	2	2	2	2	2	3	4
Syria	<1	<1	<1	<1	1	2	3	1	1	3	4	4	4	4
Japan	4	3	3	3	9	6	7	5	6	5	6	3	4	4
Israel	4	3	3	2	3	3	3	2	2	2	1	5	4	3
China	–	3	3	4	4	4	5	1	<1	1	2	1	3	3
Turkey	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	29	8	3	2	3
France	1	1	1	<1	1	1	2	5	7	4	8	8	8	3
Australia	<1	<1	<1	<1	1	<1	<1	1	3	2	1	1	2	2
Bulgaria	1	1	<1	<1	2	<1	<1	<1	1	1	<1	1	2	2

Figure 1: Change in Russia’s national power in 1999-2019⁸⁰



Figure 2: Change in Russia’s GDP, PPP in 1999-2019

⁸⁰ Formula available in Simon Saradzhyan and Nabi Abdullaev. "Measuring National Power: Is Putin’s Russia in Decline?." *Europe-Asia Studies* (2020): 1-27.



Figure 3: Change in Russia's defense expenditures in 1999-2019

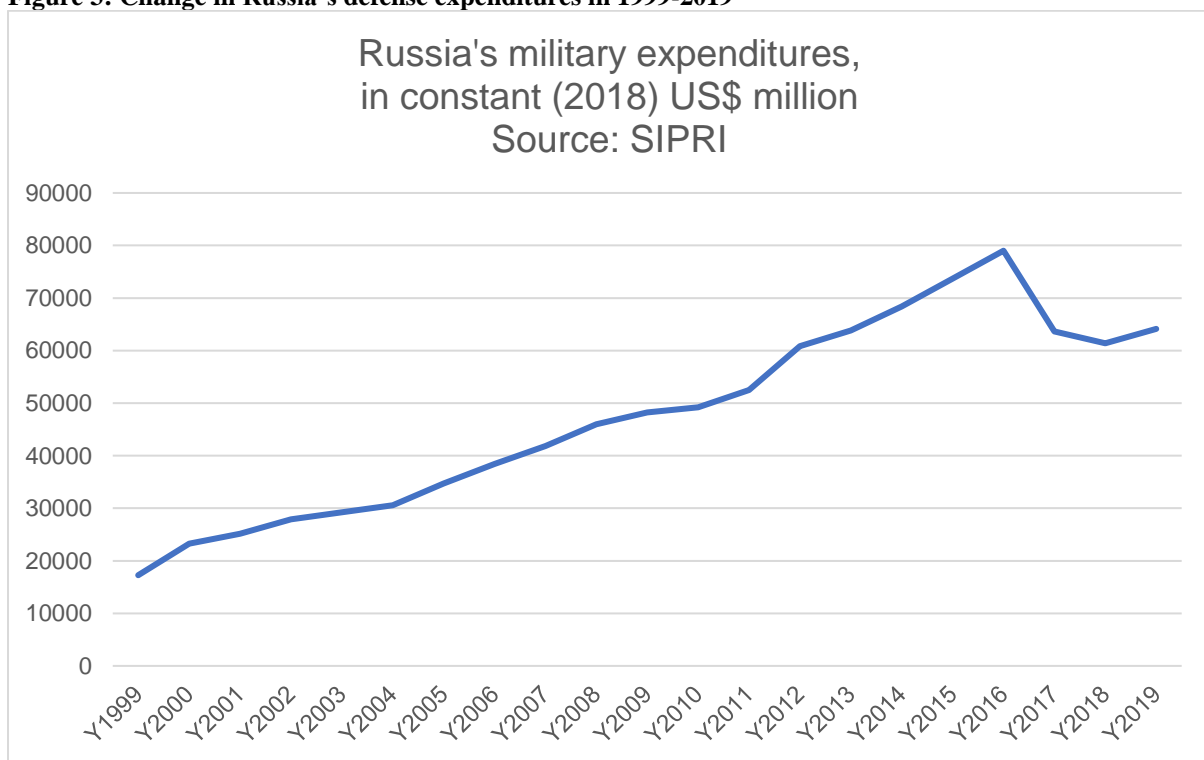


Figure 4: Change in oil prices in 1999-2019

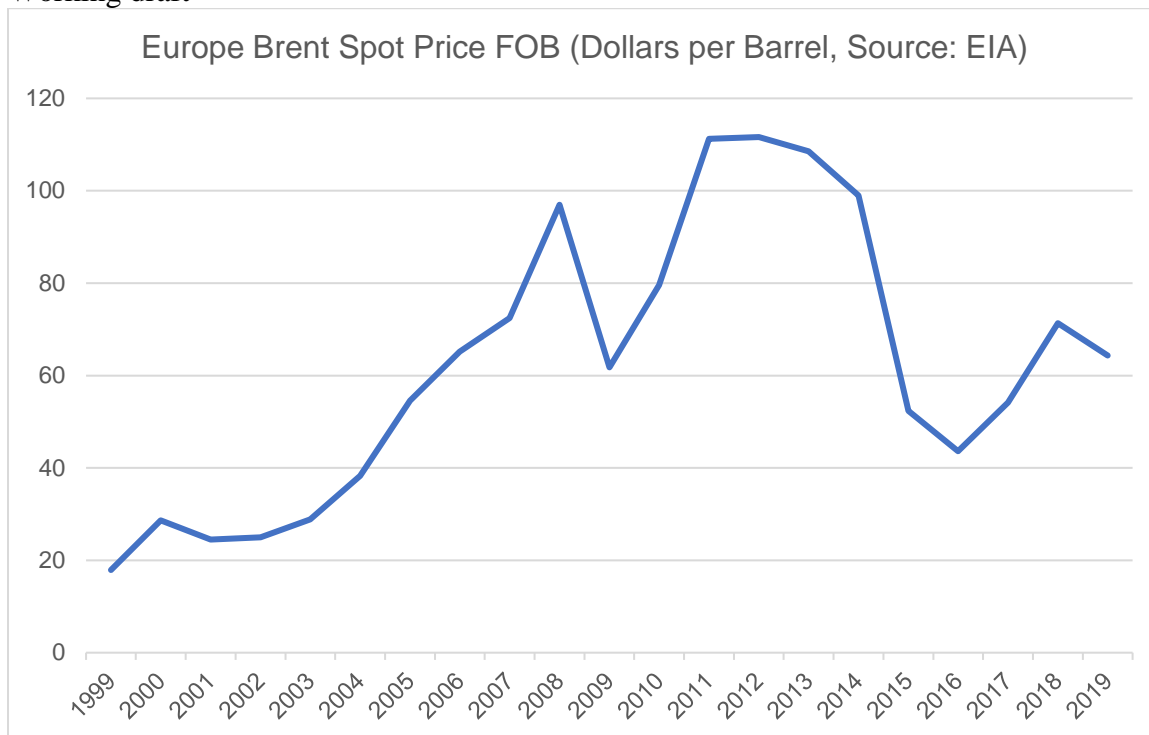


Figure 5: Putin's approval rating

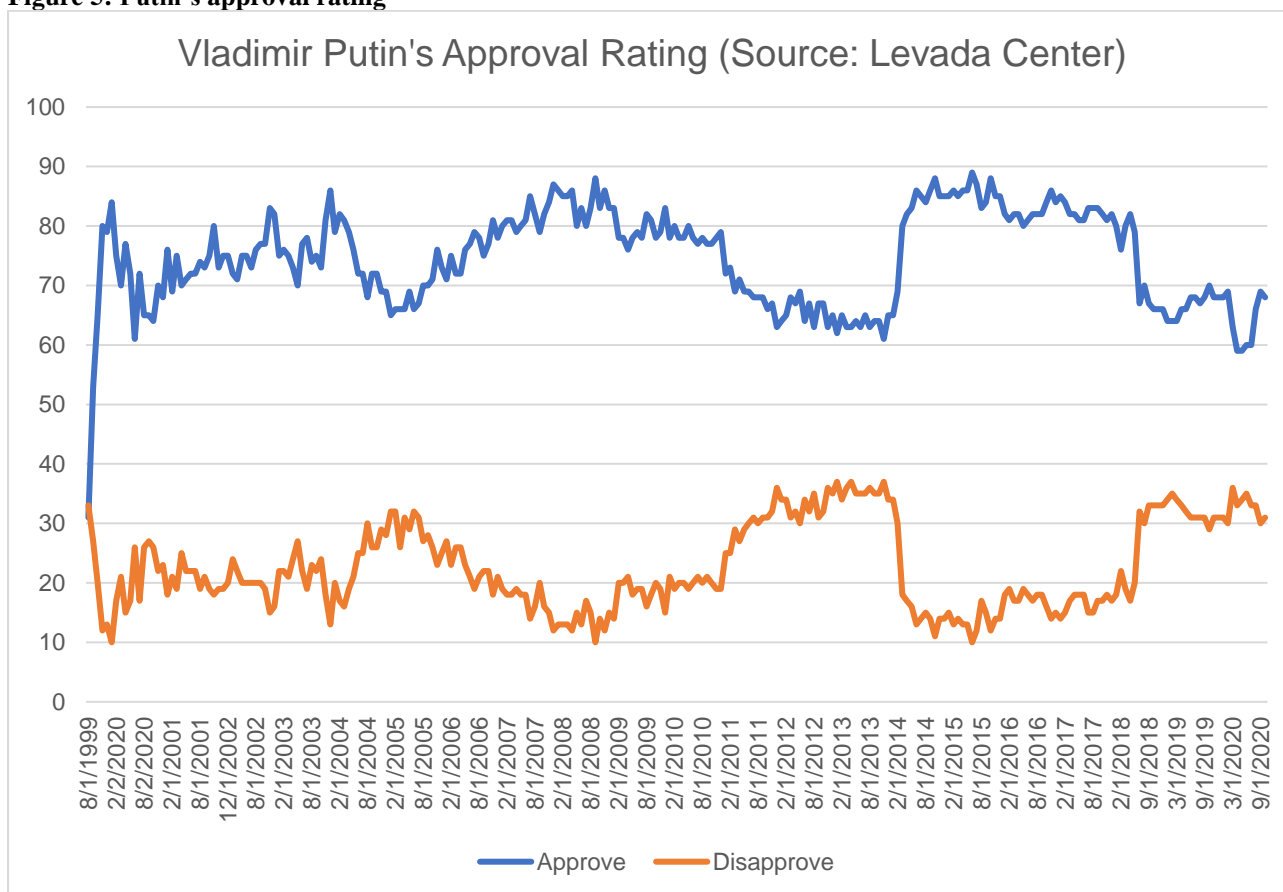


Figure 6: Russians' attitudes toward NATO

