The Russian Playbook
– Using History & Path Dependence to Analyse How Russia Operationalises Grand Strategy in Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova

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Abstract

To predict and prevent future armed conflicts like Russia’s war against Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2022, there is more value in knowing how these wars occurred rather than why they occurred. The Russian Playbook is built from three distinct “plays” employed by Moscow and organised in the theoretical framework of Historical Institutionalism through Path Dependence modelling. This research focuses on Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova as cases for comparison by building on the Soviet legacy in each state which forms the antecedent historical conditions of the Playbook’s Path Dependence. Where Play 1 focuses on offensive and defensive influence seeking as a form of structural persistence, Play 2’s shaping and weaponisation acts to counter reactive sequences. Both Plays function within path dependency’s punctuated equilibrium and appear consistently throughout Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova following the collapse of the Soviet Union. When Play 1 and Play 2 are overpowered by reactive sequences that cannot be countered, Moscow deems the disequilibrium as irremediable and the path towards conflict begins. Play 3 refers to the start of lock-in effects towards conflict, beginning with “pre-crisis” conditions. Play 3’s Lock-in Effects serve as the period in which a predictable conflict outcome is likely to occur, though lock-in refers to the path adherence in preparation for future conflict. This Play occurs in both Georgia and Ukraine at the time of this research, though its future employment within Moldova should not be excluded. These actions, in the form of the Russian Playbook and its Plays act as a guide for operationalising and implementing Russia’s grand strategy. This research goes beyond individual figureheads of Russia or specific institutions and instead focuses on patterns that exist throughout historical cases. These patterns show there is nothing particularly “new” in how Russia operates despite the vast number of newly coined phrases including “hybrid” leading people to believe otherwise. As such, Putin did not create the Russian Playbook, he inherited it.

Keywords: Playbook, Russia, Ukraine, Crimea, Donbas, Georgia, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Moldova, Transnistria, Pridnestrovia, Post-Soviet, Frozen Conflict, Path Dependence, Historical Institutionalism

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“[Russian President Vladimir] Putin, [is] very aggressive about it, and he’s got a playbook that has worked for him now two or three times. And he will continue to [use it].” – 18th Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin E. Dempsey, 24 July 2014, Aspen Security Forum, Aspen Colorado (USA).
1. Introduction

1.1. Background

On 24 February 2022 Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that Russian military forces have been mobilized Ukraine’s Donbas for a “special military operation” to demilitarize the area in response to “abuse [and] genocide by the Kyiv regime” against the predominantly ethnic-Russian and separatist population.\(^1\) The international community was shocked by Russia’s decision to initiate an armed invasion against sovereign Ukraine, especially as the announcement came during talks between Russia and the EU, the US and UK that appeared to progress towards a diplomatic and peaceful resolution.\(^2\) Diplomacy has been placed as the crown-jewel of contemporary political and international relations since the end of WWII with a belief that the European nations suffered so greatly during WWI and WWII that conflict must be avoided at all costs.

However, the “shock” that swept across Europe upon Putin’s announcement should not have really been shocking at all. Intelligence sharing by both the UK and U.S. intelligence services had rung alarm bells for months and years, desperately trying to convince European leaders that the threat of the Russian invasion of Ukraine is very real and very imminent.\(^3\) It also should not have come as a surprise that Russia decided to use armed intervention against Ukraine under the guise of protecting its citizens abroad. Certainly, it also should not have been a surprise that Russian officials were uncompromising in diplomatic negotiations to prevent armed conflict. The only real surprise about Russia’s invasion was why so many world leaders vehemently opposed the idea that Russia had no intention to resolve grievances peacefully and diplomatically. Leaders ignored the hauntingly familiar tactics of Russia leading up to the 2022 Ukrainian invasion that had already been seen in Crimea in 2014 and 2008 in the Russo-Georgian War.\(^4\)

Debate has grown in recent years as to what, if anything, can or should be done to prevent Russia from engaging in armed conflict against another sovereign nation. Scholars like Mearsheimer claim the 2014 Crimean Crisis was the fault of the West.\(^5\) Other arguments emphasize the U.N.’s “soft power” approach as the cause of the crisis, calling for less compromise and a stronger stance in response to emerging threats.\(^6\) It is increasingly evident that to prevent WWIII and future conflicts, scholars, politicians, and decision-makers must identify the warning signs and indicators that repeatedly emerge and pave Russia’s road to war. To do this, we must not look exclusively to the future for answers, rather, we must look from the past and present to determine how and through what means Russia intervenes beyond their borders. Scholars refer to theories of “Putinism”, or “Kremlinology” to explain the reasons behind the conflict, but these theories are limited in scope and fail to highlight the

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interconnectedness of areas like security, defence, and foreign policy, socioeconomic conditions, and history. Such theories cannot account for the recurring patterns seen before Russia initiates conflict. Prior research is highly informative for explaining the origins of conflicts, origins of identity, or even historical recounts of events in general, but that research has yet to unify and address the existing gap that I aim to fill.

1.2. Summary of Research Outcomes

Through the use of Historical Institutionalism’s path dependence modelling through process-tracing, my research has identified three primary methods used by Russia to operationalise its grand strategy. These methods, known as “Plays”, lie within the Russian Playbook and are built on identified historical antecedent conditions leading to the critical juncture of endured Russian interests in the post-Soviet spaces. First, “Play 1: Influence” acts as path dependency’s “structural persistence” in which offensive influence seeking leads to institutional production versus defensive influence seeking which acts as institutional reproduction. In response to structural persistence, reactive sequences take many forms, but some examples are colour revolutions, EU or NATO cooperation, or pro-western political regimes.

To counter these reactive sequences, “Play 2: Shape and Weaponise” occurs to restore balance to a state of punctuated equilibrium. When Play 1 (structural persistence) and Play 2 (counter-reactive sequences) are balanced, punctuated equilibrium is restored. When Play 2 is unable to counter the momentum of reactive sequences, as was seen in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine following the Revolution of Dignity, Russia employs Play 3. “Play 3: Pre-Crisis/Crisis” serves as a point in which a lock-in effect occurs, and the trajectory is now on a path towards an irremediable outcome of crisis that leads to armed conflict. This play is not a single moment and instead refers to the process of creating conditions in preparation for war or invasion. Each of these three plays form the Russian Playbook that has been employed in many areas though my research focuses on Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. There are almost certainly additional plays that exist within the Playbook but due to time and resource constraints, those fall beyond the scope of this research.

| Figure 1: Conflict Path Dependency & The Russian Playbook |
The Russian Playbook

Justine Westbrook | juswe946

2. Research Context

2.1. Research Gap and Purpose

A research gap currently exists in the lack of a comprehensive framework for a theoretical approach to explain how, what are, and by what means methods used by Russia are predictable and observable. Rather than the international environment waiting for a crisis to occur and planning for reactive measures, we should work to identify the indicators of an unstable situation in pre-crisis before it turns into a crisis and conflict. Moscow relies on the latency of the West’s reaction to their activities; the West can reduce that latency and respond during pre-crisis before Russia can force a crisis or armed conflict lock-in to develop.

The purpose of my research and analysis is to fill this gap and contribute to unifying and developing theories that help explain how and by what means the Plays of the Russian Playbook can be recognised. Specifically, to use this Playbook as a tool to identify pre-crisis conditions and prevent future violent conflict. My research aims to investigate and analyse what the essential components are and how the Russian Playbook is geopolitically employed throughout history. Most importantly, I seek to contribute to current research and provide for the possibility of further and future research into the topic.

2.2. Hypotheses & Research Questions

First, I challenge the prevailing assumption that failed diplomatic efforts were a motivator or even a cause of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022. I propose that Russia’s participation in diplomatic talks was to feign cooperation and provide a “justifiable” decision for the use of force when demands were unmet. The primary reason diplomatic talks were unable to prevent an invasion was that Moscow had no intention of a diplomatic and peaceful settlement in the first place. Second, I propose that an inherited guide-like instruction to statecraft with detailed plans (the Russian Playbook and Plays) inclusive of strategies, systematic actions, decision points, and opportunities exists. This guide is the tool of choice for Moscow and cannot be simply categorized as a ‘Grand Strategy’ or ‘Strategic Culture’. Finally, I propose that the Russian Playbook continues to be used and is an extremely effective geopolitical strategy tool employed relatively unchanged throughout history. Russia’s Playbook is not new, mysterious, or hidden under layers of secrecy. In fact, most of the Playbook’s Plays are well-known and understood by its closest allies and rivals. But just because they know Russia’s Plays does not mean path dependence can easily be affected before a transition from pre-crisis to crisis where conflict becomes locked-in.

To answer the three proposals put forth as hypotheses, my research questions are the following:

(RQ 1) What are the essential components of the “Russian Playbook”?
(RQ 2) How is the Russian Playbook employed within a geopolitical context?
(RQ 3) How might indicators of pre-crisis be identified?

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2.3. Limitations

One of the most significant limitations I face is resource and time constraints available for the purpose of this research. The sheer labour demand for any large-scale historical analysis, detailed document and discourse analysis, or statistical modelling to identify mathematically determined causal indicators throughout history is unfortunately beyond the scope of my research. This does however leave options available for future research. Keeping in line with these limitations, the availability of information for the purpose of this research is restricted to what is found in open-source and public domains. This includes up to but not exceeding unclassified sources. All information, research data, and sources were collected exclusively through publicly available means. As such, all analysis is based on the sources and information used. For sources in languages other than English, open-source translation software was used. Information availability as a limitation is also a part of nearly all research methods. Additionally, some information is just not available during the research process due to classification or state security protocols during conflicts.

Another limitation I face throughout the course of this research, as in all research, is the potential for researcher bias to affect the results. In an effort to prevent bias, I selected Historical Institutionalism for the theoretical framework because of the flexibility it offers in which a focus on history and patterns takes primacy over motivations or ideology. This allowed me to place empirical evidence and data at the forefront of the research rather than abstract theory-bound ontology. Only after a recurring system appeared based on history, the use of path dependency modelling was selected. In this sense, I used structured empirical observations to identify the ideal model that best fits my results. I do not claim to predict the future, that my research is infallible, or will provide all the answers and solutions to an extremely complex issue. The intent of my research is to contribute towards developing new theories to better understand the systems and processes that exist by analysing the past and present to unveil indicators in the future.
3. Research Design

3.1. What is ‘The Russian Playbook’?

The most difficult portion of my research was designing, defining, and validating the concept of what the Playbook is and what it is not. This section of the paper addresses the origin, the character, the purpose, and the framework of what the Russian Playbook is and what it is used for, in part answering RQ1. The etymology of “playbook” lies in the sports and coaching world. A team’s ‘playbook’ is a comprehensive plan of what actions and moves (plays) need to be completed and how to successfully achieve the stated goals of the team, such as winning the game against the opponent. These ‘plays’ have been rehearsed and prepared for implementation on the playing field to include contingencies and possible responses to intervening variables. Essentially, this idea of having a set of executable and rehearsed plans to be carried out to successfully achieve the desired goals is what my Playbook is; with an exponentially larger “playing field” and far longer “plays”. Playbooks in sports, business management, or other areas are also rarely accessible to those on the outside and are inherently intrinsic, protected, and meant for internal use.

I must therefore stress how this playbook differs from those used in sports or other environments. The Russian Playbook is meant to serve as a guide for use by external actors and reflects what Russia’s internal “Playbook” may look like. Therefore, it is intended to be used as a tool for identifying the indicators of pre-crisis in order to prevent the emergence of a conflict path dependency lock-in. If the goal is to prevent future wars before a conflict is “locked-in”, then knowing how these conflicts emerge and what can be predicted next is important to counter those activities early enough to affect and prevent conflict. Knowing why Russia is taking those actions can be found by looking towards research on grand strategies, such as what is found in Russian Grand Strategy by RAND. Knowing how Russia operationalises their grand strategy is found within this Playbook.

The ‘Playbook’ is formed through empirical data analysis to build a guidebook on what can be observed. This is done through the use of previous research to highlight patterns. Patterns identified were then categorised by themes which are then overlayed into individual “Plays”. Each play contains analysis and case-based empirically guided discussions. The Playbook is not designed to be a fortune telling guide, nor is it realistic to expect that the outcomes of the research will ever replace sound military judgement, well-advised policy decisions, or overcome human nature’s unpredictability. I theorize that there is a pattern and deeper systematic process that exists within Russian strategy that goes beyond Putin and beyond Ukraine. In some academic circles, the theory of Grand Strategy may seem to be the answer. However, Grand Strategic theory does not fully encompass the patterns and actions taken as that is not its purpose. The ambiguity in not only the definition of Grand Strategy but what is included in the term, and what elements contribute to it create difficulty for process tracing and place history too far in the periphery to effectively analyse.10.

3.2. Theoretical Framework

While no single theory can fully explain or account for the continued use of the Playbook’s tactics in so many different instances, nearly every theory within IR can provide a

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lens for analysis and discussion. Considering the limitation of time and resources available and at my disposal, I use comprehensive works by RAND and CSIS to form what the ‘plays’ hope to achieve, therefore giving context to what the “successful achievement of goals” looks like. This guides my research to serve as a direction for preliminary case selection criteria and relevant lines of inquiry. Considering the quality of work both institutions hold a reputation for, I work under the presupposition of the credibility, validity, reliability, and to some extent transferability of their findings. Since the nature of my Playbook is not to determine the long-term reasoning of Russian strategy, then the theory of Grand Strategy, which is the theoretical framework of both pieces, merely forms the end state for the Plays of the Russian Playbook.

For my research, I employ New Institutionalism’s sub-theory of Historical Institutionalism as the theoretical framework as it builds on the notion that formal institutions like the UN, the Kremlin, NATO or the EU and informal institutions such as de facto states, and post-Soviet identities are built on rules, preferences, and structures that guide decisions and actions for shaping changes and specific outcomes\(^\text{11}\). Within new institutionalism, there is debate around what is referred to as the “structure-agency problem”—similar to the chicken and the egg riddle, but between institutions and preference formation— and the way this problem is addressed forms the theory of action within the new institutionalist sub-theories.\(^\text{12}\) How each sub-theory works to solve the structure-agency problem is based on how each variation views individual human behaviours and choices, the way in which decisions are made, the role of ideas and motivations, and when choices become available for theories of action.

**HISTORICAL INSTITUTIONALISM**

New Institutionalism and its three “schools” developed alongside one another in the form of rational choice institutionalism (RCI), sociological institutionalism (SI), and historical institutionalism (HI). Since HI plays the leading role in the process and formation of my research, it is important to understand what the key concepts are and how they form the application of HI within research. Despite the title of “historical institutionalist theory”, HI is not as theoretical as grand theories of IR like Realism or Liberalism. As Fioretos puts it, HI is best thought of as a “theoretical tradition that gives particular attention to a discrete set of substantive themes that are analysed with a distinct combination of analytical concepts and methods” and is often used within the framework of comparative case studies and process-tracing methods.\(^\text{13}\) At its core, HI believes that a combination of circumstances, timing, and a specific sequence of events determine an outcome, such as the processes of political changes, institutional development, and preference formation. This means that events do not occur spontaneously or in isolation, rather, the situation leading up to an event is based on the conditions that have occurred over time along a sequence of events that form constraints or options.

As HI is not constrained by abstract grand theory and is flexible in application and analysis, then variables or conditions that exist which may not fall within traditional theoretical categories are not disregarded. In fact, HI often pulls theoretical and analytical aspects from multiple fields of academia as well as multiple traditional theories of IR. This ability to cross-examine observations from many perspectives or positions allows a more empirically oriented analysis because it focuses more on observations in lieu of abstract theoretical concepts. In fact, HI theorists often claim that the theory’s collaborative nature and openness should be seen as

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its theoretical core; one that can provide substantive answers to questions surrounding complex puzzles without being trapped in theoretical debates or biases.\textsuperscript{14}

**PATH DEPENDENCY THEORY**

What HI may lack in grandeur and abstract theory, it more than makes up for in methodological and structured rigour. In HI, patterns of institutional formation, change, survival, and stability are guided by specific processes and sequences. This is what is known as “path dependence” or “path dependency”. Mahoney’s work on the topic defines path dependence as something that “characterises specifically those historical sequences in which contingent events set into motion institutional patterns or event chains that have deterministic properties”.\textsuperscript{15} Most often, path dependence is used to analyse institutional changes or, to explain divergent outcomes and trajectories in comparative analysis. In both uses, the process is built on the idea that a specific outcome is predicated on a series of sequential stages.\textsuperscript{16} The initial starting point is referred to as the “antecedent historical conditions” (or, historical antecedent conditions) in which an array of options available meet with preferences and a decision or action occurs. The “antecedent historical conditions” form the historical backdrop by framing a clear “start point” inclusive of all previous historical events.

When historical antecedent conditions are met with preferences that prompt action, the decision that is made is what forms the “critical juncture” and is the point in which one option is selected over the additional options available.\textsuperscript{17} For Mahoney, to qualify as a “critical juncture” there are two main features: first, there must be two or more alternatives available, and second, once a decision is made, the ability to return to the initial choice point becomes increasingly difficult. Following a critical juncture, a consequential trajectory is set in motion. The ultimate trajectory is not predetermined, nor does it exclude any variation of events, but it does constrain the subsequent options available. Often times, the impact and consequences of a critical juncture are seen after the fact and a seemingly inconsequential decision may in fact be the critical juncture for path dependency. In fact, Mahoney emphasises that analysis of a critical juncture is not looking at the major elements and instead focusing on the “small events, human agency, or historical peculiarities that lie outside of available theoretical frameworks”.\textsuperscript{18}

Antecedent historical conditions and critical junctures are the main elements forming the “path” part of path dependencies. The “dependency” portion is made up of institutional production/reproduction (structural persistence) and reactive sequences. Institutional production is representative of the formation and establishment of a process and pattern, whether formal or informal. This is replaced with institutional reproduction, meaning the survival and endurance of the institutionalised patterns and processes that occur and are called “structural persistence”. The choices made at a critical juncture set a trajectory in motion through the formation of institutional patterns and processes. The patterns and processes developed (institutional production) continues to exist (institutional reproduction), thereby working towards structural persistence. This is marked by the increased difficulty to return to the initial choice point of a critical juncture because the structural persistence mechanisms push the trajectory; essentially it is a self-reinforcing system and positive feedback loop.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} James Mahoney, ‘Path-Dependent Explanations of Regime Change: Central America in Comparative Perspective’, *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 36/1 (2001), 111-41.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
Alongside but in contrast to structural persistence, reactive sequences occur as a result of blowback from the critical juncture which creates a chain of causally linked events of reactions and counterreactions. As structural persistence is a self-reinforcing positive feedback loop for maintaining patterns and conditions created, the reactive sequences are autonomous processes arranged specifically as a chain of events (sequence) that work to disrupt or transform the patterns structural persistence maintains. The back-and-forth nature of structural persistence versus reactive sequences is what is called “punctuated equilibrium”. When structural persistence is maintained, stability is the result. When reactive sequences disrupt equilibrium, the result creates changes and transformations of patterns and processes. Once the conflict between structural persistence and reactive sequences is in disequilibrium, transformation occurs, and the process returns to equilibrium. The structural persistence mechanism then continues to push the new structure and patterns forward. The result of this transformation is what makes up an “outcome”. This process itself is also a feedback loop and can occur at a micro or macro level, depending on the way in which it is used for analysis. When disequilibrium occurs, the conflict between both sides results in an “outcome” such as institutional change or follow-on reactive sequences. Once the conflict has been solved and reaches the outcome, the continuum of a path dependency returns to punctuated equilibrium and the process stabilises as a feedback loop.

First, second, and third degrees of path dependence refer to the extent to which outcomes result in institutionalised inefficiencies based on the available information at the critical juncture. These degrees are most often used in comparative economic analysis or technological development research but allow for even greater flexibility in the context of my research. First-degree path dependence concerns paths where decisions initially made influence later options but do not result in any implied institutional inefficiencies. Second-degree path dependence occurs when incomplete or inaccurate information influences a decision at the critical juncture and has resulted in institutionalised inefficiencies that are costly or difficult to change (not remediable). In both first and second-degree path dependency, initial decisions made have created the trajectory and path in which they continue forward. Changing trajectory (paths) in the first degree is relatively pointless as minimal or no inefficiencies are implied. In second-degree paths, changing trajectory is costly and difficult but the inefficiencies that arise are not known until later information reveals the desirability of the alternatives; essentially a good choice at the time of decision occurred, but in hindsight, an alternative would have been better, though both offer a level of predictability. The more controversial of the three types, known as the third-degree path dependency, exists under conditions in which the choice made at the critical juncture was the wrong choice compared to the alternatives and results in inefficiencies, but the trajectory can still be changed. What is unique to third-degree path dependence is the “remediability” of it and an inability to predict the outcome.

One variable that exists within a path dependency is a “lock-in”, or, the result of subsequent decisions that are made along a path that enforce path adherence, whether positive or negative, and incentivise increased investment to remain while disincentivising change. A lock-in can be found in all three forms of path dependencies, but the most significant impacts are those which occur in second and third-degree path dependencies. This variable is similar to the concept of “sunken costs” and can be found in economic policies, social welfare systems, and cases of foreign policy entrapment. If an outcome is predictable, typically the first and second-

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21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
degree forms of path dependency are likely to be present. If the outcome is unexpected and can be subject to changes along the path, then it is likely a third-degree path dependency, although some research has also used “path-independency” interchangeably with third-degree path dependence. For HI scholars, path dependency can act as an invaluable model for understanding complex dynamics at the macro-level or recognise variables present in minor patterns and systems at the micro-level. An important note is that just because a path dependency could occur does not mean that it always will occur. Therefore, if Russia’s actions are predictable because the “plays” within the playbook act as a patterned sequence (the cruciality of temporality), then the trajectory of Russian Playbook’s plays leading to pre-crisis and later crisis are also predictable. Even more so, the plays and playbook demonstrate a level of predictability of the outcome but as path dependency also emphasises, structural persistence makes changing the trajectory difficult; fortunately, reactive sequences make changing the trajectory possible. A final note regarding path dependency application in my research is that predictability and reality are not always the same thing. When a prediction does not match the reality of an outcome, the emergence of an unanticipated outcome can occur, regardless of the initial path-dependence expectations. Alongside unanticipated outcomes, ‘contingent variables’ also have either a positive or negative impact on trajectory by acting as decisive moments.25

3.3. Methodological Framework

My research is designed in the framework of a Qualitative Case Study using Process-Tracing as the technique to form a path-dependency blueprint of the Playbook.26 Rather than a specific event in time, the focus and ‘case’ of study is the process and system that makes up the historical antecedent conditions that reinforce the Russian ‘Playbook’. I start by a focus on analysis with an objective of exploring, investigating, and uncovering how the Playbook is structured, how this structure operates, and what major themes are involved in establishing plays in which strategies and plans are linked with resources, methods, decisions, and actions. To do this, I use an abductive approach to form an initial understanding based on existing research and various findings from previous studies, then assess, analyse, and process content to formulate ideas based on patterns, which are examined in Chapter 5 and 6.

I also use an iterative method to process qualitative data via discourse, content, and theme analysis to apply the findings to empirical research and data.27 This can be seen as a “proof of concept” and theory testing. I then present my research through a process of theory-building and system analysis, which is done through an Interpretative method. I first build the blueprint that makes up the “Russian Playbook” by process-tracing, which is then applied to events to display how the Playbook works and why it is so effective in the terms of path dependence. Both the iterative and abductive nature of my design allow flexibility and evolution during process-tracing and analysis. Next, my initial research findings are interpreted to build the plays of the playbook. In the analysis portion, the operationalised theoretical perspectives of HI and path dependence are used to describe the critical elements. See Figure 4 below for the methodological process taken.

27 Ibid.
3.4. Methodological Approach

This research is done through an interpretive Qualitative Case Study through Process Tracing and Content Analysis, formed under HI theory and path dependency.²⁸ The research gap is clear: existing grand theory cannot fully explain the recurring phenomena of Russia’s process and involvement in post-Soviet spaces and disputed territories. My goal is to look at the way in which Russia consistently paves the road to crisis through the Plays of the Playbook to explain why many different regions with varying demographics are faced with nearly identical actions by Russia. My approach to inquiry is broken down into three major sections grouped by aim and shaped by research questions.

Part One: (RQ 1) **What are the essential components of the “Russian Playbook”?** This portion involved significant research to gather the material and data that is relevant to my research such as media coverage, documents, official publications, and texts like Russian Grand Strategy and the Kremlin Playbooks to identify historical antecedent conditions that precipitate critical junctures as they relate frozen conflicts in Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. Next, I compared the processes of each case selected in which Russian actions motived by grand strategy appear to represent the common key decision points (critical junctures), variables (intervening and contingent), across stretches of time (punctuated equilibrium).

Part Two: (RQ 2) **How is the Russian Playbook employed within a geopolitical context?** This portion continues theory-building and pattern analysis while discussing empirically based analysis through path dependency features that make up the “plays” of the Playbook. This

continues from Chapter 5 through Chapter 6 and describes how the methods within a play guide processes and events in-context. This portion contains a majority of the “proof of concept” in which a link between the plays is demonstrated through path dependence. It also includes a large portion of the abductive, iterative, and interpretive elements of my research design by using the same process to explore each play within case events.

Part Three: (RQ 3) **How might indicators of pre-crisis be identified?** This portion of the research is where I focus on discussion from part one and part two to form the conclusion. The emphasis in this portion is bridging events with the Playbook to serve as a tool for future events. Due to the interconnectivity between each chapter, this question is addressed throughout every section, although it is not answered until the conclusion. This section of research also presents an opportunity for the formation of new approaches, theories, and strategies to progress in future and further research.

3.5. **Case Selection**

Starting with the factor of “time” as is inherent in HI, historical context is significant for the case selection process to define historical antecedent conditions. In a perfect scenario, research would include all of the regions to the East of (or behind) the “Iron Curtain” following the end of WWII in 1945 which includes the 15 newly formed republics, de facto states, satellite states and regions within the Former Soviet Union (FSU) known as post-Soviet spaces. To develop what the plays and options of the Playbook look like, a “mostly similar” approach was taken to identify instances in which Russia directly or indirectly (supported, proxy, false flag) influenced a path towards instability, pre-crisis, and crisis leading to an armed invasion (conflict). To identify the existence of potential variables, the selected cases form a constant variable as a post-Soviet state that has pro-Russian de facto, autonomous, or secessionist regimes within its borders.

Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova all fall within the category of post-Soviet with an autonomous region, though only Georgia and Ukraine had large-scale overt invasions by Russia. Additionally, for Georgia’s 2004 conflict and 2008 Russo-Georgian War, the Russian-backed opposition forces were ethnic Ossetian and Abkhazian, not ethnic-Russian minorities like in Moldova and Ukraine. In all three cases though, westernisation and expansion of NATO or the EU continue to act as justification for sustained Russian involvement. Ukraine and Georgia both saw pro-Russian separatists use Russian training, support, supplies and resources to further the separatist causes in the last decade, but Moldova’s Transnistria has seen little conflict since the end of the Transnistrian War in 1992. Figure 5 below describes the role and approach towards each case.

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### Figure 5: Case Methodology & Approach

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<tr>
<th>CASE METHODOLOGY &amp; APPROACH</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Case Methodology</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
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<td>Ukraine</td>
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<td>Moldova</td>
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Created By Justine Westbrook, 2023
4. Literature Review

Swaths of previous research have been conducted on Russia’s conflicts and relations with various states. This research provides an invaluable resource in building the Playbook, particularly research covering 21st-century events. If my Russian Playbook serves as the means to an end, then RAND’s “Russian Grand Strategy” serves as the end to the means. Meticulously discussed in over 200 pages of the research report, Russia’s ultimate strategic framework is dissected and analysed along the elements of the grand strategy which Russia states, and the reflection of these statements against revealed strategy within observations and analysis of its activities.30 Their research uses a theoretical framework of Grand Strategy, which theorises how a nation-state produces security for itself.31 In the context of their research, the grand strategy of a nation-state allows insights into actors, assumptions, security challenges, threats and threat perceptions, and potential actions or reactions that can be expected in response to changes or challenges in the international environment.32 The research by RAND was developed to provide insight to U.S. policymakers as well as the U.S. Army’s planning efforts, and is therefore heavily focused on countering Russian strategy in the longer-term and within a U.S. perspective.

4.1. “RAND’s “Russian Grand Strategy”

The first of the six elements of Russian Grand Strategy stated and revealed is Russia and the Kremlin’s reiteration of a new world order characterised by instability and interstate conflicts presenting internal and external threats is supported by the internal dispositioning of a more flexible and integrated military, legal, and security structure that act in complement during a crisis. The research reports determines that the stated claims and revealed actions are consistent with one another, thereby they claim that this grand strategic claim appears validated. The second element is Russia’s stated “benign leadership role” in the regions bordering their territory is inconsistent with the revealed variations and non-coherence seen in the approaches towards different neighbours. The report highlights the inconsistent levels of influence and coercion that are demonstrated between each neighbouring state but show states that are the most subservient to Russian influence face more subtle and less coercive means, whereas states that lean too far to the West face the most coercive means.33

The third element discussed is also revealed as inconsistent, with the stated strategic element being that Russia should prepare for limited “non-contact” engagements in response to instability and interstate conflicts along its borders. A divergence is seen from the stated strategy in the revealed full-contact engagements in Crimea and the Donbas. Russia’s claim of preparation for limited and non-contact engagements contradicted the doctrinal changes that increased force structures and ground force elements, highlighting the increased perceived threat and preparation for large-scale conflict along Russia’s borders. The fourth element is quite specifically geared towards the U.S. Department of Defense audience, with the claim by Russia that they do not prioritise developing global expeditionary military capabilities. The regional expeditionary forces available at the disposal of Russia are consistent with this claim.

30 Charap et al., Russian Grand Strategy: Rhetoric and Reality. Note: The research was published prior to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. That data was intentionally excluded from the results, though the authors state their findings remain unchanged.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
and the revealed capabilities of Russian forces indicate that rapid regional deployment remains possible, but no strategic logistic (lift) capabilities exist to enable a global expeditionary force.\textsuperscript{34}

The fifth element of Russian grand strategy, which is expectedly inconsistent between stated and revealed is the intent of Russia to “cooperate selectively while limiting Western ambitions, not weaken the West”.\textsuperscript{35} The 2014 annexation of Crimea is highly demonstrative of Russia’s lack of a will to cooperate at any level with the West and the report details the actual highly counter-productive nature of the strategy considering repeated attempts to deliberately weaken the West. The last element of Russian Grand Strategy is stated to be prioritising cooperation with non-Western “new centres of power” in foreign policy engagements. The research report states that this stated shift away from the West towards developing ties outside of Western influence is consistent with the revealed strategy, particularly following the 2014 annexation of Crimea. The report also includes recommendations and implications of Russian Grand Strategy on U.S. National Strategy.

The profoundly detailed examination of Russian Grand Strategy provides valuable information and analysis of both domestic and international activities by Russia. It also lends an important lens for analytical processing because it uncovers the ideological approach to logic, beliefs, perceived threats, and centres of gravity behind Russian policies and doctrine. In the context of my research, these elements of grand strategy form the “goals” and “end state” that further Russian objectives. These goals also form the “why” element of this research and allow my Playbook to focus on operationalising these grand strategic aims.

4.2. The Kremlin Playbook Series

One of the most comprehensive series of works on the topic of Russian strategy and strategic aims is a three-book series called “The Kremlin Playbook” through the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and the Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD).\textsuperscript{36} The first Kremlin Playbook from 2016 is focused on understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe, while the second book from 2019 is a deep-dive into the specific ‘enablers’ of Russian malign influence, and the third book from 2022 called “Keeping the Faith” explores the strategic resurgence of religion in exerting and ensuring Russian influence both domestically and beyond its borders.\textsuperscript{37}

The first “Kremlin Playbook: Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe”, focuses on identifying the varied levels of institutional integration, economic dependency, political influence, and possible routes of influence that Russia utilises to maintain a strong foothold in the Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs).\textsuperscript{38} They label this process the “unvirtuous cycle”, which is essentially the process of Russia’s “cultivation of an opaque network of patronage across the region that it uses to influence and direct decision-making”.\textsuperscript{39} This unvirtuous cycle is based on furthering Russia’s agenda by strengthening the dependence of the state on Russian resources and support, such as significant investments into certain political parties or politicians (corruption), energy and economic dependency, and ensuring that initially, the involvement of Russian businesses and economic ventures appear to be mutually beneficial and non-threatening while also harmless in the political and public eye.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
The starting point noted for the “unvirtuous cycle” is based on either a political or economic front, with a small seed of influence being placed so it can begin to grow and take root, slowly deepening and spreading by exploiting the vulnerabilities in the target nations’ systems, democratic institutions, politics, and the capitalist economy, which “may include actions that could be deliberate and/or unlawful”.\(^{40}\) This leverage is exercised through various means, but there is always an element of non-transparency and exploitation of perceptions through the information environment. As the Kremlin Playbook puts it “the common thread among all categories of drivers is endemic corruption”.\(^{41}\) The findings also note that while Russia extends its reach and furthers strategic objectives through taking a wide-spread networked approach to influence—the unvirtuous cycle—the fact that Russia can maintain the position and exert continued malign influence is enabled through Western complicity in these corrupt activities.\(^{42}\)

The first book concludes with a set of policy recommendations that could be taken to curb Russian malign influence in the CEECs. These recommendations focus heavily on cooperation between institutions like the EU and NATO through intelligence sharing, coordinated efforts between financial crime enforcement and monitoring mechanisms, and through the creation of a high-level task force that can jointly identify, investigate, track, and dismantle illicit activities by Russian-linked networks within the US as well as the EU. Another set of recommendations is focused on the importance of Western cooperation in the CEECs, through institutional cooperation, governmental assistance, and enhanced assistance in national-level anti-corruption policing and monitoring. The overall message in these recommendations is that Russian malign influence can take hold and spread when vulnerabilities can be exploited at the democratic-institutional level; therefore, to slow the spread and avoid a growing network, the West must emphasize building up the institutions that remain vulnerable so these vulnerabilities cannot be exploited so extensively.

The second book in the Kremlinology Playbook series, called “The Kremlin Playbook 2: The Enablers” takes on the herculean task of linking specific networks identified within the unvirtuous cycle’s concept and expanding on the recurring features of the Russia’s malign influence spreading that appear, and, what conditions exist that enable the network and Russia’s furtherance of its influence and goals.\(^{43}\) The book identifies six key features that characterise these enabling mechanisms used to destabilise from within the institutional and governance structures; (1) developed and open economies, (2) sophisticated and opaque business and legal systems pertaining to corporate laws and taxes, (3) large economic cornerstone industries and companies that can be highly lucrative if merged or acquired with a Russian corporation, (4) a system with heavy protection from legal and political attempts to disrupt financial schemes, such as beneficial protectionist corporate laws and structures, (5) a disrupted and ineffective national oversight capability with bureaucratic red tape or overly complex processes, and, (6) economic figureheads with strong ties to political circles that can be used to push favourable policies and receive financial investments from Russia.\(^{44}\) What is important to these enablers, Conley et. al claim, is that these targeted institutions are deeply imbedded into the financial structures of the European Union which allows further Russian malign influence to spread and enable some level of protection against EU financial policies that do not favour Russian objectives. Additionally, these enablers may favour a legal-financial system that protects large

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\(^{40}\) Ibid.

\(^{41}\) Ibid.

\(^{42}\) Ibid.


\(^{44}\) Ibid.
corporate interests over the rule of law as the activities are often illicit, opaque, covert, and built to obscure Russian malign influence.

The authors conclude with recommendations for combating Russian malign influence which includes establishing the framework for transatlantic cooperation in combating financial crimes and money laundering, a more efficient national and EU-level process for addressing weakened structures at the national levels that allow influence to take hold and spread, and a need for the addressing economic stability and security as part of national security, recognising the threat that exists to national security when financial and economic sectors that are susceptible to Russian malign influence, ultimately spreading the influence into policy making and the political structures.\textsuperscript{45}

The third book in the series, “The Kremlin Playbook 3 – Keeping the Faith” takes a different perspective than the previous two books, focusing instead on the use of Russian Orthodoxy and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) as a tool for the Kremlin and Russian oligarchs to use the ideology of the ROC to further the reach of Russian malign influence.\textsuperscript{46} This book’s tool in focus is of ideational and “cross-cutting” efforts as well as domestic Russian dynamics that support the spread and impact of Russian malign influence.\textsuperscript{47} Starting with the development of internal traditionalistic views and dynamics of Russia and the policymakers vis-à-vis the ROC, connections between the agents and structures are explored. Next, the discussion shifts towards domestic ‘strategic conservativism’, the ideological basis to public support and belief crafted by the ROC and the Kremlin, that pushes an anti-West agenda, influences perception of events and actions taken domestically or abroad and reinforces the values and beliefs needed to further Russia’s strategic aims and objectives.\textsuperscript{48} Simply put, religious ideology through the ROC is another tool of spreading Russian malign influence while maintaining domestic stability and support.

The entire series of Kremlinology Playbooks offers invaluable expertise and findings for not only understanding and combating Russian malign influence but also through the demonstration of the multi-faceted approach towards strategic objectives that Russia employs. In this study, these complex tools and methods are referred to as Russia’s “New Generation Warfare”\textsuperscript{49}. Since this series is aimed towards informing and enlightening U.S. and EU policymakers, the goals and findings of the research are somewhat specific to those institutions, which makes generalisability of the findings against non-EU countries is partially remedied in the use of case studies in the third book in which Bosnia and Herzegovina and Georgia represent non-EU members in candidate status.

The series of Kremlin Playbooks offer highly relevant concepts for forming features and characteristics that appear alongside Russian malign influence. My research focuses exclusively on Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, but their findings do inspire inquiry beyond the EU. For example, the appearance of economic/political leverage with exploitation takes root in environments that: exhibit vulnerabilities against effectively combating corruption; have weakened or unstable democratic institutional capacities; have an ineffective legal framework governing money laundering or financial crimes; and have policymakers or political elite that can be corrupted. Additionally, in environments where ideological leverage could be used, it is possible to see that a nation is susceptible to influence through ideology if: the nation blurs lines between church and state, or, has a culture, society, or public belief system that leans towards

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.
traditional and conservative agendas over liberal views. These vulnerabilities do appear in post-Soviet states, however, in de facto states and autonomous regions, these vulnerabilities are ubiquitous.

4.3. **Opposing Viewpoints**

Mankoff’s 2022 report on “Russia’s War in Ukraine”, highlights “identity, history, and conflict” in the Russian invasions of Ukraine in Crimea (2014) and Donbas (2022). Mankoff’s analysis of the interplay between Soviet sentiment, modern Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and identity gives a strong basis for understanding how identity and history have become so deeply entwined in Russian rhetoric; albeit to varied levels of success. The focus on individuals and societies through competing concepts of identity shows how institutionalised patterns, like a Playbook, can form and why events like separatist movements can be exploited by Russia to further its strategic objectives.

Well-known scholar and champion of Offensive Realist Theory, Mearsheimer, and his 2014 article and 2022 op-ed piece explicitly blame the West for the tensions and crisis seen both in Crimea and Donbas. In a somewhat controversial perspective, he discusses how the West was unrelenting in aggressive policies and expansion attempts to “Westernize” Ukraine and force Russia into a position of insecurity. Mearsheimer’s work offers a critical view of the assumption that Russia is merely a power-hungry troublemaker with Soviet-sentimentalist motives and puts the focus on the West as instigators of the ongoing tensions and conflict. This research is a valuable resource because it challenges assumptions of causality when analysing empirical data in the formation of my Playbook. Additionally, this critique further reduces biases in the analysis of presupposed “facts”, which supports better theoretical discussions and well-rounded findings.

In a pattern-focused analysis of Russian interventions beyond their borders, an article by Zofia Studzińska in the Connections academic journal from 2015 emphasizes the lack of a coherent strategy by the West and the international community in response to previous Russian interventions as a key reason that the swift invasion of Crimea occurred without significant repercussions. The author identifies common features throughout recent conflicts in former Soviet Socialist Republics, such as the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, in which familiar ethnolinguistic tensions were fuelled by the Russian state as part of a longer plan to set conditions for intervention against Georgia in Ossetia. The author also highlights the foundation of the 1990 Charter of Paris and the OSCE’s Charter for European Security as integral in forming options of sovereign security policy outside of Russian dependence in post-Soviet states. One of the other key elements noted by the author is the existence of a gradual “Russification” process in Abkhazia and South Ossetia by Russia, coupled with Russian rhetoric asserting their intention to act in their “own sphere of influence” that should have evoked more response on the part of the West, particularly as Russia’s outrage grew louder after Western recognition of Kosovo’s independence. Additionally, the author notes that the West’s lack of holding Russia accountable to the terms allowed confidence in Russia to build.

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49 Jeffrey Mankoff, ‘Russia’s War in Ukraine: Identity, History, and Conflict’, *Europe, Russia, and Eurasia* (Washington, D.C., USA: Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), 2022), 12.

50 Ibid., at 2-12.


54 Ibid.
and failure to take the 2008 Russo-Georgian War as a serious concern for the West was instrumental in paving the way for Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014.

While the concerns of Studzińska are reflected in the discussion and analysis, there is a strong tone of condemnation throughout. This is understandably a personal perspective; however, this makes it difficult to objectively analyse the claims despite such thorough explanations of possible similarities. Additionally, the article contains recurring blame-apportioning which, although useful at times, may lead to selection bias when constructing analysis on other cases used in the work. There is also a note by the author regarding Crimea’s outcome as a result of ‘failed diplomacy’. The author is not alone in making this claim, however, a clear contradiction in the work exists between the claim of Crimea being inevitable alongside the author’s claim that it could have been prevented with successful diplomacy; diplomacy in which the author says should have been along the lines of external (possibly) armed intervention against Russian forces and by wide-spread international punishment of Russia by the U.S. and the West.

55 Ibid.
5. Historical Antecedent Conditions

5.1. History & Preference Formation

While the bulk of this research focuses on post-Soviet analysis, my research has uncovered demonstrable longevity of the Plays within the Playbook, and therefore, of the Playbook itself. One very telling prelude is the story of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of August 1939. The Molotov Ribbentrop Pact was an agreement made between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union agreeing that neither state would take up arms against one another in the event of war. Additionally, a “Secret Protocol” was included which outlined agreed-upon future borders in Northern and Eastern Europe, split between Soviet and German spheres of influence. This “Secret Protocol” was signed on 23 August 1939 but remained hidden until after the end WWII (or, the ‘Great Patriotic War’).

Under the “Secret Protocol” the Soviets would control Eastern Poland, the Baltics, Eastern Finland as well as the Romanian region of ‘Bessarabia’. The invasion of Poland by the Nazis began on 1 September 1939 and continued with the Soviet invasion on 17 September 1939. What is the most interesting part of the Soviet invasion is not the secrecy of the agreement, but that despite early pressure from the UK and France for Poland to allow Soviet forces into Poland to defend against Nazi invasion, Polish officials vehemently refused. Poland believed that once the Red Army entered, they would not leave. On 17 September 1939, the Red Army invaded Poland and it had become clear that, as Poland had predicted, they had no intention of continuing onwards to Germany and out of Poland. A deeply ingrained history of battles against Russian forces had shaped the Polish borders and its people. This invasion of the Red Army was now no different to wars past. As Nazi Germany began their invasion of Poland on the 1st of September, the Soviet Union began their preparations for invading Poland over the following weeks for the Soviet Union’s “Liberation Campaign in Western Belarus and Western Ukraine”. If there is a question about history repeating itself, one should look no further than Poland’s preference to face an imminent Nazi invasion rather than allow the Red Army into their territory. The historical antecedent conditions influenced the decision (critical juncture) to face the Nazi army.

Starting with the official announcement of Germany’s war against Poland, internal preparations within Russia were issued via directives made to extend compulsory military service, increase forces available by bolstering existing military units, a complete reorganisation of ground forces, and prepositioning and relocation of ground forces in preparation for an upcoming deployment. By 7 September, prepositioning of materiel and munitions for deployment and resupply was underway. Then-Soviet Union leader, Joseph Stalin also held a meeting of Communist International (Comintern), emphasizing the war in Poland as a war between capitalist powers seeking world domination and highlighting Poland as a fascist state and oppressor whose destruction and collapse gives an opportunity for the spread of Soviet Socialist systems. By the tenth day, German advances had been more successful than the Soviets anticipated. Telegrams between German and Soviet leaders indicated that the Red Army needs more time to prepare for the deployment of forces, claiming a plan by the

57 NOTE: Although WWII began in 1939 and ended in 1945, the Soviet Union’s “Great Patriotic War” spanned 1941-1945
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
Soviet leadership to take advantage of the German advance in the media. Specifically, Molotov stated in a telegram to the German Ambassador in Moscow that the Soviet government planned to use Nazi advances to demonstrate the collapse of Poland. The collapse of Poland meant Belarusians and Ukrainians were under threat of the Germans, therefore, that threat required aid and support of the Soviet Red Army. Molotov believed that this pretext was needed to make the Soviet intervention plausible in the eyes of the public while also allowing the Soviets to not appear as the aggressor by intervening. On 14 September 1939, the Soviet newspaper Pravda published the collapse of Poland, claiming that one of the main reasons for the collapse of Poland was their oppression of Belarusian and Ukrainian minorities. The news spread across Soviet society as the days progressed with reports of violence against the minorities at the hands of the capitalists at war; portraying minorities heroically rising against an “oppressive regime” and fighting alongside rebels, hoping to prevent the “fascist” German forces from spreading into Western Belarus.

The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact demonstrates a few key points within this research. First, the use of a ‘secret’ pact unbeknownst to the Allies until the Nuremberg Trials of 1945 demonstrates the unavoidable reality of studying conflicts: information is not always available. Some very telling pieces of information may not come to light until long after a conflict has passed if they even do at all. While this is a limitation that has been identified in Chapter 2, it should be emphasised again that the availability and accessibility of information play a role in understanding a conflict. By using a pattern of institutionalised and systematic ‘paths’ and ‘sequences’ that are repeatedly found throughout history, information gaps can be more accurately assessed as they arise in other cases.

Second, these events show how the Polish leadership was already strongly opposed to making any sort of security agreement with the Soviets although an imminent Nazi invasion loomed. Due to a long history of battles and interactions with the Soviets, suspicion and distrust towards the ulterior motives was ingrained and forged through centuries of similar experiences. This would be akin to a “lessons-learned” type of institutional knowledge, and in the context of WWII, the institutionalised ‘rule’ within the Polish leadership was a strong distrust and suspicion of the Soviet Union and Soviet intentions.

Third, by laying these events as a backdrop, it becomes clear that there are many familiar elements and behaviours seen repeatedly in how the Soviet Union and Russia prepares for conflicts. These repeated actions and behaviours (structural persistence, reactive sequences, and punctuated equilibrium) are part of a bigger pattern (path dependence) that began with a decision (critical juncture), initiating the flow of events. In some cases, when there are increasingly fewer choices available along a path, a path-dependency lock-in can occur.

This also demonstrates that under completely different leadership, similar institutionalised ‘rules’ exist which repeatedly continue to appear in different periods of time and under different figureheads. One common explanation for Russia’s continued efforts is that NATO is to blame, however, NATO did not yet exist when the Soviets invaded Poland in 1939 under almost identical actions and narratives later seen in post-Soviet conflicts. Another perspective attempting to explain the events in Ukraine is that it is Putin, but clearly the institutional ‘rules’ predate Putin by generations and so too do the plays we see today. As

63 Schulenburg, ‘The German Ambassador in the Soviet Union (Schulenburg) to the German Foreign Office - Telegram No. 350 of 14 September on Soviet Political Motivation Narrative’, in German Foreign Office (ed.), (Moscow: The AVALON PROJECT, 1939c).
64 Ribbentrop, ‘The Reich Foreign Minister to the German Ambassador in the Soviet Union (Schulenburg) Telegram No. 360 of 15 September on Revised Soviet Narrative’, in German Ambassador to the Soviet Union (ed.), (Berlin: The AVALON PROJECT, 1939).
mentioned before, there is a long history to examine that is beyond the scope of this research. While it is undoubtedly significant to validate and determine the span of time in which the Playbook has existed, it is an effort that must be done in later research. With that, my research timeframe of the following cases focuses mainly on the events following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and end of the Cold War but referring to history to provide context when appropriate.

To ensure the findings are emphasized on preventing future conflicts, each of the cases discussed in this chapter represents past and ongoing conflicts frequently known as “frozen conflicts”.\(^{65}\) Each of these cases have also seen intensified involvement at some time by Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union, and each of them have some form of ‘de facto statehood’ status applied to an autonomous and pro-separatist region. Each of the cases listed are also non-members of the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) but are former Soviet Socialist Republics of the Soviet Union with an unrecognised autonomous region “Under Russian Occupation”\(^ {66}\). Where Chapter 4 formulated the broader structure of the Playbook, this chapter establishes the content of the Russian Playbook’s historical antecedent conditions. This chapter focuses on answering RQ 1 and addressing RQ 2 based on the discussions of post-Soviet de facto regimes and their origins.\(^ {67}\)

5.2. Ukraine: Crimea and Donbas

Crimea’s historically ethnic-Tartar population was no stranger to widespread conflicts against all those who occupied or tried to occupy its territory. When Nazi Germany’s occupation from 1941-1944 had been pushed back by the Red Army, Stalin imposed a mass-imprisonment and forced removal of its inhabitants after claiming the whole region had been Nazi collaborators. Next to occur was the mass removal of Crimean Tartars and the Russification of the Crimean Peninsula by ethnic Russians and Ukrainians to replace the population, followed by the transfer of Crimea from Russia to the Ukrainian SSR by Khrushchev in 1954.\(^ {68}\) The collapse of the Soviet Union had sparked a separatist mindset within Crimea as the newly independent states were just getting on their feet. The ethnic-Russian population had been loyal to Russia throughout the Cold War in part due to the large population placed there early on, but also because of increased fear that Ukrainian independence could spell anti-Russian oppression or persecution for the ethnic-Russian Crimeans. These fears combined with residual loyalty towards Russia emerged in a separatist movement in 1991 to declare Crimea an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic under a Crimean President within the collapsing Soviet Union but preceding Ukraine’s 1991 Independence from the Soviet Union.\(^ {69}\)

Due to Crimea’s geopolitically strategic position in the Black Sea with the port of Sevastopol and its access by a land bridge between both Russia and Ukraine, the geopolitical and strategic value of Crimea cannot be ignored. With the fall of the Soviet Union, the Soviet Naval forces of the Black Sea Fleet were divided under an agreement that allowed Russia’s Naval fleet to retain the base in the port of Sevastopol under a 20-year lease agreement between Ukraine and Russia. While the mid-1990s spelled trouble for ethnic conflicts in the Post-Soviet States, Crimea’s secessionist movement was ultimately deterred with the abolishment of the


\(^{67}\) For a map, see: Figure 6.

\(^{68}\) Ivan Katchanovski, ‘Crimea: People and Territory before and after Annexation’, (Ukraine and Russia: People, Politics, Propaganda and Perspectives: E-International Relations, 2015), 6.

\(^{69}\) Ibid., at 2-4.
unrecognised Presidency of Crimea and any replacement political parties had failed to gain significant support among the regional governments.\textsuperscript{70}

Relative stability between Crimea and Ukraine continued as the majority of ethnic-Russians were steadily met with increased Ukrainian and Tartar populations in the region. Ukraine also remained relatively dependent on Russia in the early 2000s, thanks in part to Russian loyalists in the Kyiv government and deeply integrated economic and energy sectors between the two states. When the 2004 Orange Revolution ushered in pro-Western President Yushchenko, Crimean secessionist movements began to rise again as the pro-Russian candidate who originally was declared the winner (Yanukovych) was heavily backed by Crimeans. Later increases in secessionist sentiment were sparked as the 2004 and 2008 conflicts in Georgia’s secessionist regions led to the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, reinstalling a fear that the ethnic-Russians could face oppression as a result of Ukrainian fears towards possible invasion by Russia. This however did not lead to any significant mobilisation in Crimea, and the 2010 Presidential election won by Crimean-backed Yanukovych assisted in further easing fears as cooperation and integration with Russia grew.\textsuperscript{71} Interestingly, despite having support from Crimea, both the Russian and pro-Russian President of Ukraine did not support the secession of Crimea nor its independence. Instead, both regimes often used Crimea as a tool for furthering their objectives. This allowed Russia’s 20-year lease of the naval base in Sevastopol, originally set to end in 2017, to be extended until 2022 under Yanukovych as part of a deal allowing discounted prices of Russian gas to Ukraine in exchange for the extension on the lease.\textsuperscript{72}

In Ukraine’s Donbas region made up of the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts of Ukraine’s eastern border with Russia, the Donbas War beginning 2014 was part of a known proxy conflict crafted by Russia and conducted by ethnic-Russian separatists seeking independence.\textsuperscript{73} During Ukraine’s 2014 Revolution of Dignity, counter-protesters from these regions were coordinated through Russian resources and support to further destabilise a tense situation unfolding throughout Ukraine. In response to the growing strength of the westernisation movement within Kyiv, both Luhans and Donetsk Oblasts pushed for autonomy and independence from the Ukrainian territory, drafting bills declaring their regions Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR/DNR) and Luhansk People’s Republic (LPR/LNR).\textsuperscript{74}

In response to growing insurgency in the territory, anti-terrorism and anti-insurgency measures were directed towards countering Russia’s proxy war while the destabilising effects of Kyiv’s protests and counter-protests continued to spread, creating ripples throughout Ukraine that Russia monopolised to further overwhelm and exacerbate Ukraine’s governance.\textsuperscript{75} In an all familiar method, Russia’s movement of equipment and support into the insurgency-controlled regions allowed additional chaos to ensue and further disrupted Ukraine’s ability to retain order. As 2014 continued into the summer months, DNR/LNR separatists and Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF) continued to fight for territorial control as Russia poured materiel support into the fight. In May 2014, the OSCE facilitated negotiations between Russia and Ukraine in an effort to peacefully settle the heavy fighting throughout the Donbas as part of the “Trilateral Contact Group for the peaceful settlement of the situation in eastern Ukraine” within OSCE’s Special Monitoring Mission (SMM).\textsuperscript{76} Through the group, a July 2014 week-long ceasefire

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., at 2-3.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., at 3-4.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{75} Bowen, ‘Coercive Diplomacy and the Donbas: Explaining Russian Strategy in Eastern Ukraine’, (.
agreement was reached as part of then-President of Ukraine Poroshenko’s “15 Point Peace Plan”.77

After the week-long ceasefire, fighting in the Donbas continued throughout the remainder of 2014 and into 2015 when a ceasefire agreement in the first Minsk Protocol of September 2014 collapsed as DNR and LNR forces launched offensive operations onto Ukrainian territories.78 This was followed by the Minsk II Protocols, often referred to as the Minsk Agreements, drawn up by Germany’s Merkel and France’s Hollande as part of the OSCE SMM was signed in February 2015. The agreement included unconditional ceasefire terms that allowed for the heavy-arms withdrawal from front lines, establishment of a security zone, and constitutional reform in Ukraine to allow DNR and LNR to receive a specialised status and hold elections.79 While the intent of Minsk II calmed the intense fighting, periods of intermittent skirmishes continued until Russia’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, when separatists fighters merged with Russian forces and launched the large-scale war that remains ongoing as of May 2022.

5.3. Georgia: South Ossetia and Abkhazia

Before the Great Patriotic War, the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast (SOAO) was established within Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) under the Soviet Union and comprised of a majority ethnic-Ossetians with a minority of ethnic-Georgians.80 However, only 11% of Ossetians resided within SOAO and over half resided within the Russian Federation’s territory in the North Ossetian Autonomous Oblast (NOAO), linked to SOAO by the Roki tunnel.81 With the fall of the Soviet Union imminent, a movement towards Georgian nationalism in Tbilisi sparked SOAO declare independence as the South Ossetian Soviet Democratic Republic in 1990.82 In response to the declaration, the ruling Georgian government opposed the legitimacy of such claims by SOAO as independent and nullified their status as an autonomous oblast in 1990, prompting violent conflict between Georgians and South Ossetians.83

Post-Soviet ethnic conflicts began to reignite and sweep across the Caucasus in the years surrounding the collapse of the Soviet Union and Georgia was no exception. With what is collectively known as the “Georgian Wars” from 1989-1992 and comprised of three civil wars, Georgia faced intense conflict that is still not yet solved once and for all.84 Where relative economic stability marked a large part of Soviet Georgia’s history, the fall of the Soviet Union placed the region alongside its Caucasus neighbours facing periods of brutal ethnic conflicts, political instability, and turbulent economic conditions. Waves of ultra-nationalist movements swept Georgia in the late 1980s and unstable political and institutional conditions met with a collapsing Soviet Union, sparking a reignition of ethnic conflicts and attempts to seize power of an unstable regime.85 During the Soviet era, ethnic conflicts fluctuated occasionally although any large-scale conflict was avoided under a strong Soviet regime headed by Moscow coupled

77 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
82 Dembińska, 'Legitimizing the Separatist Cause: Nation-Building in the Eurasian De Facto States', (83 Ibid.
85 Ibid.
with a stable tourist economy that allowed a better standard of living than some areas of the Soviet Union and particularly high within Abkhazia.86

A key moment within the Georgian Wars occurred in March and April of 1989 when Abkhazian mass-protestors mobilised to call for secession from Georgia and join the Soviet Union and were faced with Georgian anti-communist and nationalist protestors in Tbilisi.87 As protesters grew, the Georgian Communist Party officials feared an overthrow and governmental collapse could be on the horizon and requested support from the Soviet Union to restore peace in the national capital. Unfortunately, Soviet rapid intervention in the Georgian crisis resulted in mass violence against the protestors through indiscriminate use of force to disperse the swaths of people. This resulted in the death of men, women, and children and a few hundred protestors injured.88 Similar responses to squash civil unrest by the Soviet Union at the national Communist Party’s behest were quite common within the Soviet era, such in Hungary’s 1956 Revolution or Czechoslovakia’s 1968 Prague Spring. What is interesting in Georgia, however, is that the Soviet intervention to disperse the protestors was immediately swept up by both Soviet and Western media outlets and became heavily publicised, further pushing the Communist regime to lose legitimacy in its wake, opening the floor for more-radicalised movements to move in.

In South Ossetia, the appeal to be uplifted from an autonomous oblast (AO) to an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) was made to the Georgian and Soviet Union’s Supreme Soviets but was denied for fears of possible secession if granted. As Georgia’s national movement rode a wave of popularity, South Ossetia’s request for elevation prompted a large-scale pro-Georgian movement headed towards the region’s capital, Tskhinvali, although Soviet forces stood guard and denied the protestors entry.89 In 1990, the regional leadership proclaimed themselves the South Ossetian Democratic Soviet Republic, a claim again deemed invalid by Tbilisi. This prompted the Georgian government to call a state of emergency, mobilise troops to the region, and impose economic and energy blockades against South Ossetia. Later, following a decrease in fighting between the Georgian forces and militias in South Ossetia, the newly formed Georgian National Guard was ordered to South Ossetia in an attempt to regain favour ahead of Tbilisi’s elections, though this resulted in a 1992 coup removing then-ruling Gamaskhuridze and replacing him with Russian-loyalist Shevardnadze.90

As civil wars continued to bring instability to Georgia’s government in Tbilisi, ongoing conflicts against South Ossetia and Abkhazia under Russian backing went on. The Russian mediated 1992 Sochi Agreement allowed a ceasefire between Georgia and South Ossetia under the Joint Control Commission, creating joint patrols between Georgian-Russian-South Ossetian forces in the region.91 This further assisted in the growing Russian involvement from 1993 to 1994 in Abkhazia, decisively marked by the conflict in Abkhazia where Georgian civilians fled and another 3,000 Russian Peacekeeping troops arrived under CIS mandate under the watch of the OSCE Observer Mission in Georgia in July 1994.92 The conflict is far from settled as of this moment though and the end of the 1990s and early 2000s only continued to see tensions across the region with consistently destabilised political regimes, external pressures, and domestic economic conditions adding to the situation.

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86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
88 Ibid.
89 Ibid.
90 Ibid.
91 Roy Allison, ‘Russia Resurgent? Moscow’s Campaign to „Coerce Georgia to Peace”’, International Affairs, 84/6 (2008), 1145-71.
5.4. Moldova: Transnistria (Pridnestrovia)

Following the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, a portion of Romania included within the agreed “Soviet” sphere of influence—Bessarabia—was ceded to the Soviets. Portions of Bessarabia and modern-day Transnistria were merged into the “Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic” or, Moldavian SSR under the Soviet Union after the Moldavian ASSR fell to Axis forces in 1941 before being recaptured again by the Soviets a few years later in 1944. Following the end of WWII, the Moldavian SSR dealt with large-scale famine as well as religious and political persecution. This sparked anti-Soviet uprisings that were ultimately squashed with executions, arrests, and deportation by the Soviets. As a result, a large portion of the working class was either deported, arrested, had been killed in WWII, or starved in the famine, leaving the Moldavian SSR unable to deliver the production demands of the Soviet Union. This led to a mass immigration of ethnic Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarussian workers (specifically Russian speakers) to fill the labour requirement.

From 1969 to 1971, an underground anti-Soviet political group of young and educated members pushed for a more democratic Moldavia outside of the Soviet Union that was unified with Romania. By December 1971, the “National Patriotic Front”, which called for a democratic split from the Soviet Union, was disbanded, its members jailed and exiled, and the rumblings of anti-Soviet sentiment were once again squashed. The Soviet leaders were adept at sniffing out anti-Soviet revolutions, so Soviet-backed counter-revolution efforts began, starting with the investment into developing infrastructure in the Moldavian SSR in the 1970s and 1980s. In addition to economic efforts, a focus on civil society was enacted through a media campaign focusing on the uniqueness of Moldavian ethnicity and language (identity) and effectively pulling society closer to the Soviet Union while distancing them from their neighbour Romania.

When nationalist movements across the Soviet Socialist Republics began to spread in the late 1980s due to Gorbachev’s policies of glasnost and perestroika, the uniqueness of the Moldavian identity became a centre-hold for nationalist movements. Recognition of the Moldovan language, its adoption as the official language (in lieu of Russian) on 31 August 1989, a return to the pre-Soviet Latin alphabet, and the unification of Romanian and Moldovan languages was seen as a success by some and a threat by others. In 1990, The Moldavian SSR continued to distance themselves from the Soviet Union by adopting a new flag, renaming themselves as The Republic of Moldova, and opening areas of their borders with Romania.

In the early days of the Moldavian SSR, the Moldovan language’s traditionally Latin alphabet was replaced with the Cyrillic alphabet and the Russian language served as the de facto official language, an act which was customary across the Soviet Union and Soviet Socialist Republics. When the Revolutions of 1989 destabilised the Soviet Union, further tensions grew in Moldova between primarily ethnic-Moldovans in favour of leaving the Soviet Union and the strongly pro-communist Russian-speaking ethnic minorities pushing to remain within the Soviet Union. The majority of the Moldavian SSR population was ethnically Moldovan and spoke both Moldovan and Russian, except in the Moldavian SSR’s eastern region of Transnistria, where the majority non-Moldovan immigrants settled during the labour shortages in the years following WWII. In Transnistria, the ethnic-Russians and ethnic-Ukrainians feared persecution and oppression by the ethnic-Moldovans as the Moldavian SSR began to push further away from the Soviet Union towards Romania. These tensions, coupled with ongoing

94 Ibid.
95 Ibid.
destabilisation of socialist regimes spreading across the Soviet Union, ethnic conflicts in Post-Soviet Caucasus, and the imminent possibility of Moldovan-Romanian unity looming overhead resulted in social mobilisation to counter the growing nationalist mobilisation throughout the Moldavian SSR.

Despite guarantees of protection of the Russian language and the ethnic minorities alongside making the Moldovan language the official language, widespread protests and strikes in opposition of the decisions were occurring throughout Transnistria. Union-like work collectives (STKs) were ubiquitous throughout the Soviet Union and represented the most effective method of social mobilisation in Transnistria with the consolidation of individual STKs into a United Work Collective Council (OSTK). The OSTK worked to organise mass strikes and protests in opposition of the Moldavian SSR legislation on language, although the legislation would ultimately remain intact. The sectors of industry that did not oppose the language legislation faced extreme pressure by OSTK with mass strikes, while individuals in Transnistria supporting national movements were sentenced to harsh sentences or death for dubious claims of crime.96

As tensions between the linguistic and ethnic recognition rights continued between Moldovan and Transnistrian groups, the OSTK acted to unify nearly the entire region of Transnistria in an effort to bolster support for the dual recognition of Russian and Moldovan regulations, though Chisinau’s strongly nationalist agenda was unwillingly to meet such demands. In response, the population behind the Transnistrian movement established procedures to formalise governance and separate from Moldova, renaming Transnistria as the Pridnestrovian Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic under the Soviet Union in 1990.97 The Soviet Union continued towards collapse and the region re-declared themselves as the Pridnestrovian Moldovan Republic (PMR) in 1991, prompting intense conflict between Moldova and the PMR in what is known as the Transnistrian War (1990-1992).98 Russian forces located in Transnistria intervened in the conflict alongside PMR against the Moldovan forces in 1992.

The eruption of conflict and subsequent Russian intervention lead to a stalemate and a ceasefire was brokered, allowing the PMR to remain a de facto state while Russian forces continued to monitor and secure the border between the PMR and Moldova. As the tensions eased, the conflict became a “frozen conflict” and has long since been an issue for Moldovan authorities due to the Russian forces, Cobansa ammo depot, and their non-recognition of the PMR. Additionally, the PMR citizens almost exclusively hold dual citizenship under Moldova and Russia and use Russian as the primary language of education and social interaction, despite ethnic Russians accounting for only a portion of the population.99 In fact, the Russian language’s role as the dominant lingua franca of the PMR has become an increasingly concerning issue for Moldova and Romania, calling the continued efforts under the PMR to push a strong pro-Russian mentality what is commonly referred to as Russification.100

96 Ibid.
97 Ibid.
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid.
100 Ibid.
6. Analysis and Discussion

6.1. Legacy or Legitimacy?

The dismantling and subsequent dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s ushered in waves of instability and nationalism across the former Soviet states. While many of the post-Soviet States were already deeply involved in institutional reforms and regime changes, Moscow still saw itself as the heart of the USSR. As the Russian Federation began to rebuild internally after the crumbling of the USSR, the post-Soviet states also began adjusting their trajectories into a future without the Soviet Union. Some states began to lean towards the West and the European Union under nationalist paths while others faced internal instability and ethnic conflicts to redefine territories. The collapse of the Soviet Union forced wide-spread institutional, governance, and regime change on a large-scale within a relatively short time frame. Many post-Soviet states were unprepared for such drastic changes and as the power vacuum opened, new players emerged to challenge one another for influence and control to further legitimise their regimes.

The initial centres of conflict within post-Soviet states focused on ethnic divides, territorial disputes, resource control, and identity politics. This is seen in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts that began in 1988 and have resulted in multiple ceasefires and reignited violent disputes in the Caucuses. Numerous ongoing conflicts ensue as territorial lines continue to be disputed and ethnic groups clash. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is just one example of post-Soviet wars in the Caucuses, de facto sovereignties, and violent clashes that came to fruition as the collapse of the Soviet Union left ambiguity and necessity for stability co-located with nationalism, territorial sovereignty, and old identities.

Although not all disputed regions within the post-Soviet states or Caucuses resulted in violent conflict, violent conflicts that did erupt were always under the justification of the struggle and survival of their identity. Additionally, many of the conflicts in the post-Soviet spaces are found along political and economic motivations in response to destabilisation left in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union and coupled with uncertainty of the future, rapid social changes, and immature institutional regime capabilities required to mitigate conflict. Of course, this belief seems like it is the only obvious explanation for the Post-Soviet Wars as some authors label them, but this explanation only goes so far. The survival of a population, ethnicity, identity, or ‘state’—whether de facto or internationally recognised as sovereign—is ubiquitous throughout history. To this day, wars and violent conflicts continue under this belief. But as the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union began to re-stabilise and regimes became more legitimised, surely the conflicts in post-Soviet states would have stabilised too. However, this is not the case.

Conflicts in the post-Soviet states were not created in the fall of the Soviet Union. These conflicts were gradually and continually shaped throughout historical battles, disputes, wars, and empires across generations. However, during the Soviet era, political and cultural institutions followed the “Soviet system of ethno-federalism” which organised regional territories based on ethnicity and partially eased tensions away from the outbreak of internal wars. Additionally, tensions eased further under the Soviet Socialist regimes which were stable institutions that exercised a strong control over the security apparatus of the state and

101 Zurcher, The Post-Soviet Wars: Rebellion, Ethnic Conflict, and Nationhood in the Caucasus
102 War pursuit in the Caucuses in Chechnya, Georgia, and Nagorno-Karabakh, versus war avoidance in Dagestan and Ajaria. Ibid., at 17-133.
103 Ibid.
104 Ibid.
could rapidly and effectively stifle conflict. Where anti-Soviet or anti-Communist revolutions did emerge, particularly within the Soviet Satellite states the Soviet regime exercised its monopoly over violence to dismantle and dissolve these groups through arrests, deportation, summary executions, imprisonment, and further tightening of political repression. When the nationalist or anti-communist revolutions would gain support or pose a threat to Moscow’s hold on a national government, Soviet forces quickly intervened to violently suppress these movements and return the state to Soviet control. During the Soviet era, individual Soviet Socialist Republics and Satellite leadership was deeply loyal to Moscow by design with political elites placed into positions of power based on their undying commitment to execute the vision of the Communist party and Moscow’s decision makers. The Soviet Union and post-Soviet spaces did of course face revolutions and conflicts, but Moscow’s quick employment of armed force were repeatedly used to maintain Moscow’s grasp of its territories and satellite states. In these conflicts, just like throughout history, the survival of the state and nation were used to justify the decision to act.

Many differences exist between the conflicts that developed within the Soviet era, in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, or ones that continue to develop and reignite today. Despite these differences, there are still quite a few striking similarities between all of those events regardless of the individuals or regimes in control. These similarities fall into a structured process and sequence and have come to shape how present-day Russian leadership prepares to force instability and act along its borders. That is, these processes and options have formed the Russian Playbook and the sequential options and paths employed form the “Plays” within the Russian Playbook; each which has been repeatedly employed to ensure Russia reaches its strategic objectives and aims as part of their grand strategy.

The following three plays chosen for analysis represent significant elements of the Russian Playbook that are the most effective and most instrumental for Moscow’s grand strategy, but they are not the only plays that exist within the Playbook. Additional plays and options undeniably exist, however, an exhaustive list and analysis of each is a herculean effort that must be covered in later research. The three plays below are evident in numerous empirical instances and are often key features of Russia’s efforts abroad. Additionally, these plays demonstrate the effectiveness of the playbook and facilitate answering RQ 2 and addressing RQ 3.

6.2. Play 1: Influence – Structural Persistence

When the end of WWII transitioned into the Cold War, the widely accepted view was that there was a bipolar world order with the U.S. and the Soviet Union at opposite poles. This bipolar world order largely remained throughout the Cold War, but the collapse of the Soviet Union ushered in the Unipolar world order, dominated by the U.S. As time moved forward, NATO, the EU, and the U.S. —grouped together as the West— were at the helm of the so-called Unipolar world order. This Western-dominated unipolar world order constituted a threat to Russia’s survival due to the encroachment of NATO and the EU with their expansions towards the East. To counter the spread of Western influence, Russian foreign policy turned towards balancing the West by seeking influence. To do this, Russia followed the first Play in the Playbook.

Influence through foreign policy is arguably one of the most instrumental elements of modern state legitimacy and power in the international environment. If a state has allies, a state

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can pursue its goals without interference from others. The larger the alliance, the more power there is to ensure national interests can be pursued or secured. For Russia, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) act as institutional capacities and mechanisms to exert influence, ultimately countering Western influence in the institutional members, though to varying degrees of success. When Russian influence in organisation members is not enough to ensure Western influence is kept at bay, more coercive measures are taken to place Russian interests once again at the top of regional affairs. Economic, Political, and Security alliances through multi-national and multi-lateral agreements serve as a very powerful tool for ensuring cooperation between members. In Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, Russian influence is deeply ingrained throughout economic, security, and political sectors.\textsuperscript{107} While these states remain sovereign, the regimes within them are predominantly pro-Russian and are influenced significantly by Russia, therefore they are not in danger of aligning with the West in the eyes of Russia.

But what does Russia do about non-members, states that are unwilling to be allies, or those in danger of siding with the “West”? If a state cannot be enticed into an alliance with Russia to further Russian influence through that state, then Moscow turns towards coercion. Russian influence is often not up to negotiation and a state can either willing become an ally of Russia or unwillingly become a target of coercion. For Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, the EU and NATO are increasingly valuable alternatives to Russia as they better align with their democratic values and facilitate the Westernising movement of the population. Their decision to turn towards the West and away from Russia was only the beginning of a very long and arduous road to potential future membership. Unfortunately, the road towards the West is also a dangerous one when Russia is unwilling to allow a state to embark on it. To assist in tipping the odds in their favour and ensure elected officials remain close to the Kremlin, Russia works on regaining the geopolitical and strategic advantage by employing the Plays of the Playbook.

When it comes to leverage in the form of influence, I have found that Russia typically follows one of two paths. I have named these the offensive influence path and the defensive influence path. In an offensive influence path, the goal is to seek avenues of approach from within a regime or institution and establish Russian influence among state systems that are vulnerable to outside influence but do not hold a majority pro-Russian influence (yet). These states could be starting to establish themselves on the international arena as a relevant actor with developing economies, or these could be states that are going on a path towards institutional development but due to a history of unstable regimes and internal conflicts, frequent coups and corruption exist, and governance is weak or vulnerable. Within Russian Doctrine, these developing or even unstable regimes that offer opportunity for Russian influence are referred to as “New centres of power”.\textsuperscript{108} Part of both the stated and revealed Russian Grand Strategy approaches towards balancing the West include extending this influence and in most cases place Russia at the top of this new hierarchy between allied states. In recent years, offensive influence seeking behaviours on this pathway are exhibited in Russia’s deepened involvement with the group of emerging economic power-players of Brazil, [Russia], India, China, and South Africa known collectively as BRICS.\textsuperscript{109}

Another example of Russia’s offensive influence-seeking pathway is in Africa’s Sahel Region. This unstable but resource-lush regional band spans from the West to East Coasts of Africa and is home to long-standing interethnic conflicts, growing Islamist extremist and

\textsuperscript{107} Charap et al., \textit{Russian Grand Strategy: Rhetoric and Reality.}
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid.
violent extremist organisations, short-lived but corrupt governments, frequent coups, and continual violent regime change. Historically, France was the primary source of influence in the region as the former coloniser of the Western Sahel, but with decolonisation followed by decades of unstable governments falling to corruption and rebellions, France’s position of power became one of foreign policy entrapment. As French influence waned, an increased opposition to French intervention and involvement in the region grew. In part due to domestic French politics and further amplified by the growing presence of violent extremist groups, Russia’s paramilitary forces known as the Wagner Group had become increasingly involved. Russia’s Wagner Group was instrumental in crafting regime change that saw French interventions fail and forced a withdrawal of forces, resulting in the Wagner Group dislodging French influence and replacing it with increased Russian influence in Mali and Burkina Faso.

In defensive influence seeking pathways, Russia takes an entirely different approach. Defensive influence pathways are used when Russia’s extant level of influence is decreasing or is leaning towards the West and could replace Russia’s legacy influence. During the Soviet-Era, Moscow’s influence had become institutionalised within the Soviet Union and Soviet Satellites States. However, as the threat of colour revolutions and the internal instability spelled the beginning of the end of the Soviet Union, Moscow’s influence diminished. The formation of the CIS following the collapse of the USSR allowed Moscow’s retention of influence in most places but rising levels of nationalist movements hoping to shake Russia’s hold on their nation allowed Western values and Western ambitions to counter-influence Russia’s. When Russia begins to lose influence in these places, particularly ones that closely-border Russia or hold geopolitical strategic advantages, Russia employs this play along a defensive influence path.

During the Soviet-era, anti-communist movements in Central-Eastern European Countries in the late 1980s had been instrumental in the fall of communist regimes leading up to the ultimate fall of the Soviet Union. Anti-communist movements that turn into anti-communist revolutions have become collectively referred to as “colour revolutions” and occur globally, seeking to replace or collapse a communist regime. To Russia, Colour Revolutions are an existential threat to Russian National Security. To them, colour revolutions are foreign extremist movements made up of radicals and nationalists under foreign influence, going so far as to say that previous colour revolutions have resulted in tragic consequences, and that “for us this is a lesson and a warning”, later describing them as “destroying traditional Russian religious and moral values”. The message is clear: colour revolutions are a threat to Russia and represent Western influence trying to displace Russia’s role in a multipolar world. Colour revolutions are often out-right stated as a threat to Russia, but in some situations, colour revolutions appear to be equally useful to justify a response or trigger further plans by Moscow. When a colour revolution cannot be prevented, Russia opts for using them to send a message of their own. Of course, the favoured methods of Russia when it comes to implementing a defensive influence play are coercion, intervention in elections, blackmail, and corruption to name a few.

116 Anthony Cordesman, ‘Russia and the „Color Revolution”: A Russian Military View of a World Destabilized by the U.S. and the West (Full Report)’, (online: Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 2014), 110.
UKRAINE

During the 2004 presidential election of Ukraine, Pro-Western candidate Viktor Yushchenko was favoured to win. In the midst of the campaign however, Yushchenko was poisoned with dioxin in an assassination attempt which led to the declaring his opponent Viktor Yanukovych the president. This decision created wide-spread public outrage with accusations of vote-rigging and election fraud, leading to the Orange Revolution.\(^{117}\) Although the accusations surrounding claims of election fraud and the assassination attempt placed Russia under the microscope, Russian involvement has not officially been confirmed. The Orange Revolution did however initiate the Ukrainian Supreme Court to order the election be re-held, resulting in Yushchenko’s victory and 2005 inauguration as the President of Ukraine.\(^{118}\)

In 2012 when Russia was unable to entice Ukraine into preferential tariffs and reduced prices on gas under the Customs Union while then-President Yanukovych pursued the EU’s Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA), Russia began to shift focus. Russia was not willing to let Ukraine go towards the West via the EU so easily. Russia began to pressure Ukraine to step away from a deal with the EU. Statements by Russian officials were not subliminal nor indirect, as seen in August 2013 when Russian Prime Minister Medvedev and Ukrainian Prime Minister Azarov held talks in which Medvedev relayed that Kyiv should abandon talks with the EU because of “legal, organisational, and economic consequences” if Kyiv were to sign an agreement with the EU.\(^{119}\) When the talks yielded minimal results, Russia placed import and trade restrictions on Ukraine hoping to convince Kyiv away from further discussions. In September of 2013, still focused on diverting Kyiv’s talks with the EU, Russian efforts aimed at threatening an economic catastrophe, the collapse of the Ukrainian state, severed ties with Russia and Belarus and, going so far as to warn Ukrainian authorities that an EU deal would nullify the treaty on strategic partnership and friendship between Russia and Ukraine. That meant Russia would consider the bilateral treaty delineating their borders invalid and will no longer guarantee Ukraine’s sovereign status, claiming Russia could intervene if pro-Russian regions were to appeal to Moscow.\(^{120}\)

Russia continued to place import restrictions and tariffs on Ukraine (energy blockade) as the EU talks with Kyiv moved forward. Popular support for the EU agreement within Ukraine held strong despite heavy-handed threats by Moscow. In November 2013 shocking news came as Ukrainian President Yanukovych suddenly changed course, opting not to sign the EU Agreement, and instead turn towards Russia and Belarus under the successor of the Customs Union, the EAU.\(^{121}\) This decision sparked mass outrage and unfolded into Euromaidan protests—also called Maidan Uprising—in which anger towards the government and protests against corruption ensued before being violently met with large-police brutality and Pro-Russian opposition violence. By February 2014, the protests had evolved into the “Revolution of Dignity” that would result in the resignation of Yanukovych as he fled Kyiv.\(^{122}\) As Russian influence dissolved within the political sphere of Ukraine, Russian decision-makers realised they could no longer rely on influence to keep Ukraine within their grip.

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\(^{117}\) Adrian Karatnycky, ‘Ukraine's Orange Revolution’, *Foreign Affairs*, 84/2 (2005), 35.  
\(^{118}\) Ibid.  
\(^{121}\) Charap et al., *Russian Grand Strategy : Rhetoric and Reality*.  
GEORGIA

The 2 November 2003 Georgian parliamentary elections had been under scrutiny of the international environment due to concerns over how “free” these free elections would be. Vying for seats in the parliament, then-President Shevardnadze’s government’s ruling party the Citizens Union of Georgia (CUG) had grown weak and was repeatedly accused of corruption and operating along the lines of a dictatorship as foreign aid had plummeted in the years leading up to the elections. With the ruling CUG party crumbling and independent parties gaining influence, the alleged results of the election showed the CUG party had won a majority of the seats over the opposition party of Saakashvili’s National Front Movement, inciting mass outrage and public discontent. When third-party independent election monitoring counts revealed that the polls actually showed Saakashvili’s party had claimed victory, civil disobedience and anti-government protests emerged. The ruling Shevardnadze government responded in kind. To counter the anti-government protests, pro-government protests in part manned by supporters of Abashidze government in the autonomous region of Adjara continued to back Shevardnadze’s alleged win. As popular public support for regime change refused to accept the illegitimate initial results, Shevardnadze grew increasingly concerned over losing control of the situation. In a last-ditch effort to legitimise the contested results, Shevardnadze’s government opened a session of parliament but shortly after beginning, opposition parties entered during Shevardnadze’s speech bearing roses (Rose Revolution) in their hands, causing Shevardnadze to flee.

Following the Rose Revolution, Russia arranged a meeting of Shevardnadze with the two opposition party leaders—Saakashvili and Zhvania—and the meeting concluded with the resignation of then-President Shevardnadze. This prompted new presidential elections which ushered Saakashvili into office with an inauguration as President of Georgia in January 2004 as well as new parliamentary elections held a few months later. Unfortunately, the resignation of the Shevardnadze government would prompt a crisis among those unwilling to accept the resignation. In what is referred to as the Adjara Crisis, the Second Rose Revolution, or the Mini-Rose Revolution, the Autonomous Republic of Adjara under Aslan Abashidze’s government—who had been the source of mobilising supporters in the pro-government protests in the Rose Revolution—did not accept the newly inaugurated authority under President Saakashvili. In response, demonstrations against the Abashidze regime were met with police brutality which ultimately prompted a further public backlash. While this mini-Rose Revolution spanned nearly 8 months, the involvement of Georgian President Saakashvili in support of the anti-Abashidze protesters resulted in Abashidze’s resignation before fleeing to Moscow.

In Abkhazia’s Tangerine Revolution from October to December 2004, presidential elections resulted in disputed claims to power between Pro-Georgian and Pro-Russian candidates. The pro-Georgian candidate Khajimba was in support of unifying Abkhazia with Georgia in contrast to pro-Russian candidate Bagapsh who was strongly loyal to Moscow and had been part of the government forces behind the “Six-Day War” in 1998 that ignited tensions between Abkhazia and Georgia, resulting in the ethnic cleansing of Georgians in Abkhazia by insurgent forces. The Tangerine Revolution resulted in the naming of Bagapsh as President of Georgia and Khajimba as Vice President, though the results were heavily disputed and seen

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124 Ibid.
125 Ibid.
126 Ibid.
127 Ibid.
128 Caucasus Reporting Service (Crs) ‘War and Peace in the Caucasus’, in Iwpr - Crs (ed.), 100 Selected Article from IWPR’s Caucasus Reporting Service (2005), 263.
as a way to calm the violent protests of supporters backing each candidate to avoid spiralling into a potential civil war.\textsuperscript{129}

\textbf{MOLDOVA}

In response to the Transnistrian War in the early 1990s, a ceasefire brokered by Russia between Moldova and Transnistria in 1992 created a period of relative peace. Although this did not solve the conflict, the ceasefire effectively created the conditions for the active conflict to wind down and become what is known as a “frozen conflict”.\textsuperscript{130} Most often seen in situations where neither side can make substantial gains towards victory but have reached more of a stalemate, a ceasefire brokered by external actors typically results in a conflict having the “pause” button pressed. The issues are not resolved nor are either side willing to concede, but both sides accepted conditions of a ceasefire.\textsuperscript{131} Under the CIS framework, the Joint Control Commission (JCC) was established to monitor the situation in Transnistria.

Russian troops accounted for a significant portion of the peacekeeping contingent and served to maintain the agreements within the ceasefire and secure the demilitarised zone known as the “Dniester Valley Security Zone”.\textsuperscript{132} The JCC originally consisted of approximately 5,000 military personnel but these numbers dwindled down as the ceasefire held, with current remaining numbers reaching up to only a few hundred at times, and up to 1,500 according to various reports.\textsuperscript{133} Part of the reason presence of Russian troops endures despite growing pressure by Moldova to remove them is that Cobansa Ammo Depot—a Soviet munitions stockpile—is located in Transnistria and holds a large volume of old and corroded munitions.\textsuperscript{134} The Cobansa depot is a significant concern for Moldovan authorities due to the potentially hazardous expired munitions, but even more so because the Russian and Transnistrian troops continually block authorities from assessing or examining the depot despite the 1999 agreement by Russia at OSCE’s Istanbul Summit to remove the expired munitions and their troops.\textsuperscript{135}

When Russia did not remove troops based on the justification that Transnistria requested their presence remain, the rotation of troops took on less transparent means with replacement forces covertly arriving to Moldova as “tourists” before entering into Transnistria to replace the forces there.\textsuperscript{136} Considering the significance of Cobansa, the real concern for the external environment is not the possibility of an explosive disaster; it is the utility of Cobansa by Russian decision makers to act as leverage over Moldovan and international authorities. Rather than demolish the depot and safely destroy the munitions, Cobansa remains dangerous to Moldova and therefore remains useful to Russia.

The 1999 OSCE Istanbul Summit agreement by Russia to remove troops went unfulfilled and prompted international concern on the issue. The period of frozen conflict following the 1992 ceasefire and the agreement to reduce troops appeared on the surface to appease the Moldovan and international onlookers, but this feigned cooperation without follow-through
persisted as the EU’s interest in Moldovan development posed a threat to Russian influence. In the proposed 2003 “Kozak Plan” authored by Russia to restructure the Moldovan government and federate Moldova with an equal Transnistrian Republic, Russia sought for Moldova to formally recognize Transnistria as the “Transnistrian Moldavian Republic” in a bid to legitimise the unrecognised pro-Russian separatist region. It also detailed steps for parliamentary restructuring to include Transnistrian seats in legislation and policy, as well as an inclusion of a 20-year Russian military presence in Transnistria was initially endorsed by then-President of Moldova. A few days later, Moldova opted not to sign the agreement claiming it unconstitutional as the streets of Chisinau erupted in anti-governments protests condemning earlier endorsement.

The most interesting element of the Kozak Plan is the fact the Russian leadership was exceptionally driven to ensure that Moldova signed the memorandum and insisted it was not a Russian plan and rather “Chisinau’s Plan”. This drew scepticism from the EU, NATO and OSCE due to the plan’s veiled language, hidden implications, and murky dealings by Russia behind the backs of European and international observers. When the initial endorsement prompted anti-government protests in Chisinau, the decision not to sign it created a mass backlash in Transnistrian and Russian media, denouncing President Voronin and his political responsibility. Here, the Kozak Plan was used to legitimise and solidify Russian influence in Moldova through the use of Transnistria’s frozen conflict as leverage for presence and reach while also weakening ties between Chisinau and the West (i.e., NATO, OSCE, and the EU), who viewed the endorsement and coordination efforts between the parties behind their backs as non-transparent. Where the Kozak Plan failed to push Moldova towards Russia, the EU’s Eastern Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) of 2004 and Eastern Partnership (EaP) of 2009 helped to continue the westernisation of Moldova, much to Russia’s dismay. Settling the Transnistrian Conflict once and for all is a concern for the EU, but Russia’s insistence on retaining troops in the region, at the behest of Transnistrian “authorities” as well as the all-familiar energy dependency of Moldova onto Russia continues to enforce a stalemate-like “frozen conflict” status.

The position of Russian influence paths taken in Moldova is quite different from those taken in Ukraine and Georgia. The notable absence of a Colour Revolution in Moldova is starkly contrasted by Ukraine’s Orange and Georgia’s Rose and Tangerine Revolutions. During their 2015 elections, Moldova experienced mass anti-government protests and widespread civil distrust of the ruling coalition, however, no Colour Revolution came to fruition despite Russian media claims that the West is pushing Moldova into a Colour Revolution. Many believe that a Colour Revolution did not occur because the opposition candidates were equally distrusted as the ruling regime and no more-desirable alternative option existed. Another possible factor highlighted by academics is that because Moldova is one of the poorest nations in Europe and economic stability simply was a higher priority than destabilisation, especially when no more desirable opposition alternatives exist.

6.3. Play 2: Shape and Weaponise – Counter-Reactive Sequences

The primary focus of this play is to build upon and integrate the influence network while establishing desirable conditions across all facets of a nation that allow for Moscow’s goals to

137 Ibid.
138 Ibid.
139 Ibid.
140 Ibid.
142 Ibid.
remain possible. These conditions are sometimes nested within “Russian New Generation Warfare”, “unconventional warfare”, or “new hybrid warfare” however, in the context of my research, I explicitly refrain from using these labels when describing these activities because it creates an unrealistic expectation that they’re unique to Russian strategy, are inherently war-based, or that these activities are in any way some sort of “new” phenomenon. The use of political influence to further strategic objectives is ubiquitous in the international environment and throughout history. What is distinct in the Russian Playbook however is the specific interplay between influence networks, controlling national resources—both within Russia and through puppet regimes—and the slow nature of gradually shaping the operating environment with small moves to not warrant significant backlash.

As other researchers have pointed out, the elaborate network of Russian-influenced agents that operate in a nation have often been in place for years or even decades. This means that pro-Russian agents within a structure have been under Russian influence and act to establish the necessary policies, dependencies, and cooperation agreements that allow Moscow’s agenda to unfold over time. Not only does this allow incremental influence to shape policies towards supporting subsequent pro-Russian policies, but it also allows gradual enough changes that it will does call excessive attention. These preparatory activities allow Russian influence to grow and spread through senior agents that recruit additional individuals within a structure to build a base of support throughout the network in the event the senior agent is removed from power. The method of utilising a senior agent —termed ‘agent-gruppovod’ in Russian doctrine— within a nation to act at Russia’s behest is no new concept, and, given the effectiveness of this method, it is easy to see why this practise still persists after its initial fielding during the Soviet Era.

In addition to securing and sustaining an influential hold on another state’s policies and governance, Moscow’s ability to mask its involvement within such networks allows for a certain level of deniability from international or domestic backlash. To best ensure the agenda of Moscow is masked from prying eyes, the Soviet Era tactic of ‘verbokva na chuzhoi flag’, or, false flag operations, allows a senior agent to recruit individuals and expand the network by misleading the purpose and origin of certain orders or policies. What makes Moscow’s utility of these networks so effective is the level of integration that exists within the internal structures of a state combined with the actual implementation of policies and decisions that further shape subsequent cooperation agreements.

It is also at this stage of Russian influence meets with tangible resources and begin to place a state towards the path-dependency relationship reliant on Russia. These activities can be seen as preparation-oriented both in intent and execution. To retain a focus towards shaping an environment, internal and external influences that contradict Russian objectives or could potentially derail Moscow’s efforts—known as reactive sequences—are quickly and at times controversially extinguished through the use of internal resources of a nation (counter-reactive sequences). For example, when corruption accusations and civil unrest threaten a regime change within a targeted state, the resources of that state are used to counteract the anti-government protests or opposition groups.

It is at this stage that Colour Revolutions return to focus. While many believe that Russia wants to avoid Colour Revolutions at all costs, this belief does not appear to be true when looking at empirical evidence preceding and following such revolutions. As seen in the Orange Revolution and Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine, the Rose Revolution(s) in Georgia, and the

144 Ibid., at 4-7.
145 Ibid., at 5.
Tangerine Revolution in Abkhazia, regime change towards pro-Western governments in lieu of pro-Russian governments could detrimentally derail Russia’s continued influence and continued control over a state. Or these events could serve to portray an image of an unstable and potentially humanitarian situation that threatens the rest of the region. This is when the conditions established during the shaping and preparation phases go from being passively at work to fully weaponised. Anti-government protests and wide-spread civil unrest represent an unstable situation in the eyes of the rest of the world if the narrative is shaped strategically enough. A certain fear is evoked within many when accusations of corruption coupled with foreign financing, institutional distrust, and a lack of transparency around international aid are overlaid with civil unrest and violent clashes.

In Russian strategy, evoking fear is particularly useful for furthering Moscow’s objective when it becomes a tool to convince the masses, i.e., when it becomes weaponised as a justification for later actions. This begs the question; how can an unstable regime abroad evoke fear among outsiders looking in? The simple answer is ‘any way you want it to’. For Moscow, this means making sure the narrative they craft and the story they tell draws on the sources of fear within their people: history, identity, responsibility, and most importantly, survivability.

When it comes to weaponizing fear, identity, and history as a means for carrying out grand strategy very few nations have done it as effectively or as consistently as Russia. During the Soviet Era, waves of immigration from within Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine spread throughout the Soviet Union to fill gaps in the labour market, to seek employment, or, as part of an effort to strategically Russify regions and push a shared identity narrative. In recent years, the efforts of Russification have come into focus as the Moscow-pushed narrative began to accuse the outside world of ‘Russophobia’. ¹⁴⁶

Alongside identity weaponisation and evoking fear, the role of deception or ‘maskirovka’ is deeply tied to the efforts of shaping and weaponizing. The term “maskirovka”, meaning little masquerade, masking, or disguising refers to the act of deception that has become one of the most recognisable features of Russian statecraft. Russian Doctrine as far back as the 1970s includes the use of Strategic Maskirovka as a principle of political and military deception although its origin as a sociocultural phenomenon referring to ulterior motives and disingenuousness is a part of long-standing Russian culture.¹⁴⁷ Many scholars also refer to this as the Gerasimov Doctrine, New Generation Warfare, Hybrid Warfare, and many other catchy phrases that may or may not be domain specific. In the context of this research, all deception techniques and practices are included under the umbrella of deception and “maskirovka”, including things like propaganda, false-flag operations, and simulative peacekeeping. Through our the course of this research, I have found that the title or phrase used to describe Russian maskirovka and deception changes so frequently that simplicity is really the best approach because it is so ubiquitous throughout all facets of Russian relations and actions.

Without sounding too foreboding, it is clear to nearly every researcher on Russian politics, society, conflicts, or history that maskirovka (deception) is one of the most effective and frequently utilised tools at Moscow’s disposal. It is not without note however that Russia is not the only country well-versed in deception, however, as a foundational element of modern statecraft, Russia’s deceptive techniques are probably the most recognisable. Depending on the audience a wide array of options are available to Moscow to employ against either their own population or those beyond on the “outside”. Russian deception efforts may even look like a

mass deployment of forces to a neighbouring country for part of a large-scale military exercise coupled with Moscow’s statements that such a large force mobilisation is purely for a training and exercise scenario and definitely not Russia staging on Ukraine’s borders in preparation for invasion and war.

UKRAINE

Russia’s use of Russophobia as part of the ‘weaponisation of everything’ and deception continues to unfold as the war against Ukraine, not only to initiate occupation but to also justify their actions to the outside world: casus belli. As Ukraine began to face internal destabilisation in 2014 as Western institutions like the EU and NATO were increasing influence and challenging Russian efforts, Moscow’s in-place agent networks had been shaping the environment for years in preparation for this very situation. Russian influence had saturated nearly all sectors of Ukraine’s government and institutions through the infiltration of areas like Ukraine’s nuclear and energy sectors and government-based anti-corruption groups and only further shaped the environment for Russia’s habit to influence-shape/weaponise-lock-in.

As expected, the 2014 Revolution of Dignity which ousted Yanukovych and overthrew the pro-Russian regime sparked Crimean separatist movements to explode. During the months-long protests in Kyiv opposing Yanukovych’s decision to not sign an Agreement with the EU, tensions in pro-Russian territories began to grow. Russia was quickly losing control over the situation and protests only grew when they were violently met with the state’s security apparatus attempting to put the movement to rest. The pocket of ethnic-Russian separatists in Crimea had already been rallied and used to counter the anti-government protests in Kyiv, but when the protests resulted in the ouster of Yanukovych, Russia seized the opportunity to weaponize Crimea in response.

To what extent Russian-backed separatists in Crimea and Donbas were used to counter the anti-government protests in Kyiv in 2014 is disputed, but the very fact that they did at all is what matters. During the 2014 Revolution of Dignity, Russia was quick to broadcast the scenes of violence in Kyiv through the Russian state media, often with the narrative issued by Moscow that Kyiv’s destabilisation and protests were part of a fascist coup and a far-right uprising by a Western-backed Russophobic plot to control the region.148 Moscow pushed the narrative of fascist coups, Russophobia, and Western plotting alongside efforts to convince the public that Crimea’s Port of Sevastopol hosting Russia’s Black Sea Naval Fleet was in imminent danger of being occupied by force and falling under the control of NATO.149 20 February 2014—according to the Russian Ministry of Defence’s Crimean Medal—marks the day that Russian forces moved into Crimea wearing paramilitary clothing without official uniforms or insignias that could identify them as Russian forces.150 On 21 February, Yanukovych flees Kyiv through Crimea and on 22 February and the Ukrainian government announces the resolution for removal of Yanukovych from Presidency following a failure to fulfil duties and inability to abide by constitutional procedures for stepping down.151 The most interesting part of this timeline is that according to Russia, the 22 February resolution prompted a justification for Russia’s later occupation of Crimea due to Ukraine’s allegedly illegal ‘coup’.

151 Ibid.
Following heated conflict in Crimea, Putin announced on 18 March 2014 that a treaty was signed making Crimea part of Russia. The annexation of Crimea prompted international condemnation and disapproval by the international environment, but short of sanctions and slow efforts by the West to provide tangible support to Ukraine, Russia walked away with only minor impacts. Russia had effectively and forcefully invaded and annexed Crimea, violated countless international laws in the process, and had used state media to justify its actions and claim humanitarian intervention. Just one day later as Russian forces seized control over a large portion of Crimea and the port of Sevastopol, Russia began another familiar tactic; issuing passports to ethnic Russians, sometimes referred to as the Soviet method of pasportizatsiya. As the Russian passports continued to be issued, Russian state media began to relay Moscow’s narrative focused on Russia’s role as a protector of its people, growing fears of Ukraine’s collapse, and the growing symptoms of “humanitarian catastrophe in Ukraine”. Nearly identical circumstances occurred preceding Russia’s 2022 invasion of and war against Ukraine.

**GEORGIA**

Interestingly, the 2008 Russo-Georgian war is one of the most difficult conflicts to analyse because the use of mass deception efforts by Russia. Based on three volumes of reports under the Commission of the EU’s Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia (IIFFMCG), the conflict initially appeared to fall on Georgia based on a miscalculated effort to unify Georgian territories, but quickly shifted Russia as the primary aggressor for the conflict. In September 2007, controversy over Saakashvili’s firing of former Prime Minister Okruashvili resulted in widespread protests in Tbilisi calling for early elections and more transparency, though no major violence ensued, thousands of protesters expressed discontent for Saakashvili’s regime. Although Okruashvili was ousted from his position based on accusations of corruption, money laundering and abuse of office, his regime-critical media comments forced him into exile and prompted rumours that his charges were actually efforts by Saakashvili to get rid of the most-likely candidate to replace him were early elections actually held. These protests occurred around the time of Saakashvili’s speech to the UN which condemned Russia’s increasing activity in the autonomous regions as well as increased cooperation between Tbilisi and Abkhazia to establish transportation infrastructure between the two.

In November 2007, a resurgence of anti-Saakashvili protests overtook Tbilisi, pushing the government to institute a state of emergency and media-blackout following concerns that a recently aired Okruashvili statements was feeding the opposition. The protesters met with riot police, resulting in injuries for both the police and the protestors. Inconsistent accounts of the events and wide-spread confusion pushed Saakashvili to agree to negotiations for early elections, prompting opposition parties to order the end of the protests. Although Saakashvili agreed to negotiations in an effort to restabilise Georgia, his comments accused Russia of orchestrating the wide-spread civil unrest. He claimed suspicion over the speed in which the protests were mobilised, questionable tactical proficiency of the most-violent protesters, and

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155 Rick Fawn and Robert Nalbandov, ‘The Difficulties of Knowing the Start of War in the Information Age: Russia, Georgia and the War over South Ossetia, August 2008’, European Security, 21/1 (2012), 57-89.

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the appearance of pro-Russian media outlets to capture the anti-government movement in Tbilisi as indications that Moscow was behind the attempts to remove his regime from power, citing evidence that opposition party members were seen cooperating with Russian diplomats and Russian intelligence services.\footnote{Saakashvili, 'Statement of President Saakashvili on the Protests', (Tbilisi, Georgia: Civil Georgia, 2007).} Despite such claims, widespread anti-government sentiment remained as accusations were levelled against Saakashvili’s government for excessive brutality and violence against the protesters. In response, Saakashvili resigned while the international environment disputed Saakashvili’s comments regarding the role of Russia.

\textbf{MOLDOVA}

In Georgia and Moldova, Russian efforts to weaponise identity have been intermittently effective at times but have not garnered nearly as much strength as the efforts against Ukraine. What has proven exceptionally successful for Russia in Georgia is deception and maskirovka operations. Where Ukraine saw mass identity weaponisation, Georgia saw mass deception and some identity escalation, though only indirectly through Russian-backed Abkhazia and South Ossetia. One reason Moldova appears to have features of both identity weaponisation (like Ukraine) and deception (like Georgia) is that Russian influence in Moldova has recently increased in Gagauzia, the pro-Russian Turkic Orthodox autonomous region. The more Russia becomes invested in Ukraine and utilises significant resources to further its efforts, the fewer resources remain available to also maintain large-scale shaping and deception operations outside of Ukraine.

Under strong ties with Romania, Moldovan efforts to westernise and become more economically stable became an oft-cited point for policies towards Russia in the PMR. In part believed to be the PMR looking to follow the momentum of the DNR/LNR request for recognition in Moscow pre-war, PMR President Krasnoselsky became increasingly vocal about ambitions for PMR’s “fate” as a part of the Russian Federation. Naturally, this sparked mass fear within Moldovan and Romanian Media, which was quickly used by the PMR and Russia as an example of Russophobia.\footnote{Zadeskey, 'Transnistria: The History Behind the Russian-Backed Region'.} Even more fear-inducing for the West was in early 2022 when Belarussian President Lukashenko publicised an attempt to demonstrate support for Russia that “inadvertently” included maps and visuals of the PMR’s role as a staging and launching point for Russia against Ukraine. While the incident is widely thought to be an inadvertent fumble by a clumsy Lukashenko, the Russian use of maskirovka means we cannot know for certain if it was truly a mistake or a crafty method of projecting strength to the international world and creating even more uncertainty to overwhelm international responses, though I personally lean towards the latter.

As it stands in May 2023, Russian forces have not yet used the PMR to launch flanking assaults against Ukraine, but, using the PMR to distract and overwhelm Moldova and Romania has been quite effective in reminding Moldova that until the Russian forces leave and the PMR is unified with Moldova, the possibility of it happening remains. This also means that it is likely Russia will remove the troops from the region any time soon, particularly since the PMR has since called for additional “peacekeeping” troops.\footnote{Ibid.} The longer PMR can remain in a frozen conflict, the more options available to Russia, either through pushing the legitimacy of the de facto state, maintaining in-place forces for a future possibility of annexation under the Russian Federation, or, by using the frozen conflict as a measure to keep NATO membership beyond the reach of Moldova.
PMR’s proximity to Ukraine does have the international forum concerned about Russia using it as a flank for closing in on Southern Ukraine, the logistical complexity to do so is significantly burdensome for any large-scale movement and the corroded munitions in Cobansa Ammo Depot are a risky and potentially pointless reason for bringing another country (Moldova) into the fight. This would only further strain Russia’s ability to maintain a chance of negotiations in their favour as Ukraine continues to push the front lines back. Additionally, heavy NATO presence in the Black Sea region in air, sea, and land domains makes the risk for Russia overwhelmingly high in the face of potential response due to inadvertent strikes on unintended targets by war-weary forces with rapidly shrinking stockpiles of degraded munitions and increasingly chaotic domestic conditions. Despite Russia’s grand strategy towards becoming a dominant player in the Black Sea Region, maintaining access and a foothold is more than enough for the time being.

6.4. Play 3: Pre-Crisis/Crisis– Lock-In Effects

In contrast to the other two plays listed, this play serves as a lock-in moment towards a conflict path dependence where Russia takes armed measures beyond indirect proxy support to further their grand strategy. The start of the play emerges within pre-crisis conditions that shift towards crisis conditions as a result of the lock-in effects towards conflict. Previously, the other plays occurred below the threshold of awareness and often appear to trigger minimal repercussions beyond sanctions or professing condemnation. In Georgia, the lock-in occurred following the relative acceptance in the international environment over the 2004 crises and Russia’s growing involvement in the region. In Moldova, this lock-in moment as a play has not yet appeared. In fact, it may never be used in Moldova depending on how Russia fares following their war against Ukraine.

Up to this point, the primary role of Russia in the employment of the playbook’s plays is to destabilise and create mass uncertainty to overwhelm decision-makers and force an analysison-paralysis across the West and Russia’s adversaries. By and large, most actions by Russia to create chaos and destabilise the external environment are rather effective because the goal is not to trigger armed conflict from the first two plays. Instead, the goal is to remain below the threshold of awareness while creating uncertainty and ambiguity by relying on slow-moving institutional processes that delay or prevent any rapid international responses until it is ‘too late’. This is where HI’s path dependence becomes very pronounced in Georgia and Ukraine. The historical antecedent conditions of both —as a result of the Soviet legacy— and in Ukraine from the mass movement of ethnic Russians during the Soviet era acted as a starting point of path dependence that eventually resulted in the 2008 and 2022 conflicts. It must be emphasised that path dependence is not the same as path-dependent processes, particularly in this instance, as numerous path-dependent processes are inherently involved within the larger path dependence resulting in conflict. Individual micro-level analysis on specific processes is beyond the scope of this paper so only the broader path dependence with conflict lock-in and outcome is discussed even though innumerable micro-processes are indeed a part of the larger continuum.

PATH DEPENDENCY – UKRAINE

The historical antecedent conditions described in Chapter 5 of this paper serve as the starting point of the large-scale conflict path dependence. The first critical juncture is identified as the decision by the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic’s (RSFSR) successor, the Russian Federation, to use the CIS as a method of institutionalised influence in the wake of the USSR’s collapse. With this, options available for post-Soviet states fell into those within the CIS framework. This was particularly clear from the view of the external
environment that viewed former-soviet states in a period of disarray and chaos as a matter for Russia to manage. It further demonstrates why the early period of unstable post-Soviet spaces was often viewed as troublesome by the external environment since unstable situations often create a ripple effect, which was undesirable for the West.

From this moment, Russia’s efforts focused on largely on employing Play 1 in the form of defensive influence-seeking in Ukraine. The more involved Russia become in the post-Soviet spaces, the more institutionalised reproduction could take place as structural persistence. These efforts allowed growing influence networks and interdependencies to become institutionalised within Ukraine over years of structural persistence and institutional reproduction processes. In response to exogenous and endogenous variables, such as NATO expansion, the Revolution of Dignity or EU candidacy, which demonstrate “reactive sequences”, Play 2 was used by Russia against Ukraine via counter-reactive sequences. In the Russian Playbook, structural persistence in the form of institutional reproduction achieved through Play 1’s defensive influence-seeking was more tumultuous in Ukraine than in Georgia. When faced with disequilibrium due to reactive sequences, Play 2 formed the response to such disequilibrium and was employed to restore structural persistence and punctuated equilibrium.

Because structural persistence is built on self-reinforcing processes and positive feedback loops, the ability for external forces to disrupt institutional reproduction in the form of reactive sequences results in punctuated disequilibrium, which is why Play 2 is used to restore symbiosis and equilibrium. The stronger the influence of a reactive sequence, the stronger the response is by Play 2. When stability is threatened and structural persistence of Russian strategy in Ukraine took a turn was with the emergence of intervening variables like deepened EU cooperation, political westernisation, increased NATO partnership activities in Ukraine, and an increasing movement away from Russia and towards nationalism/westernism in Ukrainian politics. This occurred in blips throughout the early 2000s with the Orange Revolution but the shift in Russian-Ukrainian relations drastically changed around 2013/2014. When Russia was unable to stop the Euromaidan revolution from becoming the Revolution of Dignity that become a strong force pushing Westernisation and independence, Russian influence that had previously permeated most of Ukraine’s previous regimes and institutions was now in danger.

In response to Russia’s loss of control to the strong push towards the West as the reactive sequence, the decision to use Play 2 as a tool to turn towards the Donbas and Crimea occurred. Play 2 and path dependent processes at the micro-level occurred in the regions for decades but the nature of its use shifted towards targeted efforts with more specific goals as opposed to the broad uses previously. As the movement towards the West continued, Russia’s Play 2 was used for counter-protests and increased civil unrest as a way to weaken Ukraine’s institutional capacities and overwhelm the government by making them unable to continue fighting on multiple fronts against civil unrest and growing insurgency. The weaker Ukraine was, the easier it would be for Russia to reassert their power over them.

Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 had many implications for the future or Ukraine. In part due to the swift offensive push into Crimea that resulted in Russia’s seizure of the region coupled with the uncertain nature of the fighters’ status sent to seize Crimea, international response was muddled and slow. Based on HI’s theory of path dependence, Crimea served as a contingent variable for Russia. Were Russia to fail in seizing Crimea, they would have likely returned back to a state of punctuated equilibrium and continued to employ Plays 1 and 2 based on the lessons learned while waiting until another and more-opportune moment to reattempt a trial run of what Russian annexation of Ukraine’s territory could look like. However, the nature of contingent variables is that they can either positively or negatively impact the path, and Russia’s ability to annex Crimea had a positive impact for Russia.
Russia’s successful annexation of Crimea, in the form of a contingent variable that went in their favour, resulted in Russia’s path dependence reaching an additional critical juncture along the larger continuum. The options available to Russia at this critical juncture, influenced by the success of their annexation and an unstable situation facing Ukrainian politics, and a relatively minimal response by the international environment—historical antecedent conditions—essentially gave Moscow the “green light” indicating that if Russia seeks to repeat the success of Crimea in the Donbas, the international response may be similar. This was ultimately a miscalculation by Moscow to assume a latency in response or ambivalence of the West, however, the decision at the critical juncture was made to continue the course towards future subsequent strategic objectives within Ukraine’s Donbas.

Marked by a ramping up Russification and shaping efforts to destabilise Ukraine’s ability to resist increased Russian involvement in the Donbas, punctuated equilibrium in which institutional reproduction was self-reinforced through Play 2 in a largely ethnic-Russian region occurred in the Donbas. Structural persistence and a self-reinforcing positive feedback loop unhindered by powerful reactive sequences, coupled with the positive effect of the contingent variable produced a “lock-in” effect. This lock-in effect of Russia’s pathway towards achieving its goal of annexation of DNR/LNR within its grand strategy demonstrates the second-degree path dependence features of a predictable outcome that is not remediable or is costly and unlikely to change; hence the ‘fait accompli’ of Ukraine in 2022. This lock-in effect led to the ultimate 2022 invasion. This means that Play 3 is the process of establishing lock-in and the ‘outcome’ of Play 3 is the transition from subversive and covert methods into a full-scale overt invasion with maximum level of effort serving as the predictable conflict path-dependent outcome.

**PATH DEPENDENCY – GEORGIA**

The historical antecedent conditions described in Chapter 5 in Georgia’s recurring inter-ethnic conflicts served as the starting point for the conflict path dependency lock-in experienced as a result of the early 2000s. Similar to Ukraine, the critical juncture moment in Georgia is noted as the decision by Russia to continue acting as the regional power by maintaining control over the post-Soviet spaces. The collapse of the USSR saw ethnic conflict in the Caucasus like Georgia’s civil wars in the 1990s. With the role of the JCC and position of peace-keeping forces operating within the autonomous regions of Georgia and a fairly pro-Russian regime in Tbilisi placing Georgia under Russia’s thumb, structural persistence allowed Russia to continue employing Play 1. When the Rose, mini-Rose, and Tangerine Revolutions (reactive sequences) threatened to push Georgia’s punctuated equilibrium into disequilibrium, Russia employed Play 2 as counter-reactive sequences to restore stability under the path dependence.

Using the “green light” of 2004 as a contingent variable, Russia began to prepare for increased conditions of pre-crisis and crisis to allow for the eventual 2008 Russo-Georgian war. Unconfirmed Russian involvement in the 2007 protests against Saakashvili forced his resignation in November of 2007. Considering the international attention Saakashvili received condemning Russian activities in the autonomous regions and his push towards establishing stronger ties with Abkhazia, the removal of Saakashvili from power should also be considered a contingent variable. When Saakashvili resigned, the likely belief of Russia was that the widespread opposition movement would then step into power and a pro-Russian Georgian government would be restored. Unfortunately for Moscow, these plans did not come to fruition and the January 2008 early voting resulted in Saakashvili’s re-election.
For Georgia, the pre-crisis conditions are more difficult to identify than those within Ukraine. It appears that following the 1992 Sochi Agreement, Georgia faced consistent pre-crisis conditions that turned to lock-in effects and crisis conditions in 2003-2004. From 2007 to 2008, crisis conditions had rapidly accelerated into crises then conflict conditions in the form of the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. When Russia essentially received the “green-light” after 2004 to continue operating in Georgia’s autonomous regions in support of the secessionist movements, the contingent variable went in Russia’s favour (positive feedback) and placed Georgia on a path-dependence towards crisis and conflict. However, the additional significant contingent variable (removal of Saakashvili) in 2007 did not go in Russia’s favour, only accelerating the lock-in effects along the path towards conflict as the outcome.

Following Saakashvili’s re-election in January 2008, Russo-Georgian tensions had become irreparable. Russian concern over losing influence appears to have led to shooting down 2 Georgian UAVs monitoring Abkhazia in April 2008. In April and May 2008, Russia pushed thousands of forces into the region while still remaining under the 3,000 limit of the peacekeeping framework. In May and June, Russia moved thousands of additional troops to Abkhazia to allegedly repair the rail line, though these forces included combat arms, heavy weaponry, armoured assault, and air defence units. In the annual military exercise held by Russia in the Caucasus, “Kavkaz-2008” occurred from July to August and included the airborne infiltration of VDV forces from distant military districts for simulated training on “relieving peacekeepers” in South Ossetia.

The April 2008 downing of Georgian UAVs and the concern over the forces arriving in Abkhazia and South Ossetia pushed Georgia to respond. Even as Kavkaz-2008 was scheduled to complete on 2 August with the redeployment of Russian forces, upon completion, forces remained near the border. On 6 and 7 August, Russian forces returned to the region while South Ossetia and Georgia exchanged mortar fire in limited assaults. The Russo-Georgian War began with the infiltration of Russian forces through the Roki tunnel connecting North and South Ossetia and resulted in a month-long campaign between Georgia and the Russian, South Ossetian, and Abkhazian forces. The conflict included mass air raids throughout Abkhazia and South Ossetia and extensive deception efforts by Russia to justify seizing control over the territory. On 25 August 2008, Medvedev formally recognised the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia following significant gains in the regions and growing international condemnation verging on a possible response. The Russo-Georgian War demonstrates the second-degree path dependence, as the features of a very predictable outcome (war) were not remediable due to the lock-in effects of Play 3 in 2004 that accelerated in 2007/2008.

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163 Ibid.
7. Conclusion

7.1. Conflict Path Dependence & The Russian Playbook

In the cases of Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, a shared historical legacy under the post-Soviet identity remains a key point for Russian reach by forming the historical antecedent conditions under path dependence. What differs between each case is the emergence of a Colour Revolution or anti-communist westernisation protest, as seen in both Ukraine and Georgia but not Moldova and the duration of punctuated equilibrium experienced, short in Georgia, intermediate Ukraine, but enduring in Moldova. Although Moldova is experiencing relative punctuated equilibrium between periods of structural persistence and reactive sequences, Russia continues to employ Play 1 and Play 2 to maintain equilibrium. In Georgia and Ukraine, following disequilibrium when Play 1’s structural persistence was overpowered by reactive sequences and Play 2’s counter-reactive sequences were unable to restore equilibrium, Play 3 was employed to create lock-in effects. This ultimately created a locked-in path dependence that resulted in conflicts in both countries.

For Georgia, the 2004 conflict and 2008 Russo-Georgian War occurred before a refreezing of the conflict and returning to a state of punctuated equilibrium with Russia’s recognition of the autonomous regions’ independence. In Moldova, Russia’s leverage with Transnistria coupled with strengthened Russian-Gagauzian relations have yet to force a large-scale violent crisis and conflict, indicating that Moldova is also in a period of punctuated equilibrium. Interestingly, the presence of an ethnic-Russian community in external borders has only shown to be a useful tool for attempting legitimacy of Russia’s actions at most but has not proven to be a precondition or even a causal variable for predicting armed conflict. In Moldova and Ukraine, pro-Russian separatists are largely ethnic-Russian minorities as opposed to Georgia’s South Ossetian pro-Russian separatists which are ethnic- Ossetians and Abkhazians. Here, Russia’s interest in Georgia differs from its interest in Ukraine and Moldova’s ethnic-Russian minorities. Despite significant variations in Russia’s motivations or interests, similar actions have been taken across each case in the form of the plays of the Playbook.

Georgia and Ukraine’s historical antecedent conditions that created frozen conflicts and de facto regimes led to Russian preference formation during the collapse of the Soviet Union. The critical juncture was the decision by Russia to continue remaining dominant over Georgia and Ukraine by blocking Westernisation. Through defensive influence seeking, Russia supported vast networks of pro-Russian influence agents to permeate Georgia’s and Ukraine’s institutional policy-making capabilities. In response, reactive sequences seeking to Westernise the two emerged and were met with counter-reactive sequences efforts by Russia to restore their grip over the nation. When the counter-reactive sequences were unable to prevent Westernisation, Russia turned towards creating the pre-crisis conditions for a lock-in effect in which the inevitable outcome is armed conflict. In Moldova, the break-away pro-Russian region of Transnistria has maintained a punctuated equilibrium in which reactive sequences have not overpowered structural persistence.

7.2. Evaluation of Research Outputs

The purpose of this research was to fill an existing gap by providing an HI-informed methodology to identify how Russia operationalises their grand strategy in the form of the Russian Playbook. In Chapter 3, the Playbook’s design is discussed, serving to provide context to RQ 1. In Chapter 5, the historical antecedent conditions of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova are discussed as a reference point for path dependency modelling. In Chapter 6, RQ 2 is the

\[^{165}\] For an illustrated model, see Figure 1.
focus and the analysis portion covering the Plays of the Playbook under the framework of their role in path dependence models. As such, Chapter 6 answers RQ 2 by providing empirical observations of the use of each play. RQ 3 was directed at using the results of RQ 1 and RQ 2 to identify how indicators of pre-crisis can be observed before armed conflict. By identifying the decisive point and contingent variables seen in Play 2 against Ukraine and Georgia, some indicators may be empirically observable, however, this research is not mature enough to scientifically validate those theories. This means that RQ 3 was addressed but has not yet been answered, although future research could serve to answer this question by using additional cases and empirical data.

This research and the outcomes of the Plays and the Russian Playbook are built on the foundation of history and not only validate existing theories, but expand on these theories, and contribute to the knowledge of post-Soviet conflicts. Most notably, this thesis creates new theories, methodologies, and concepts for understanding geopolitical and strategic characteristics that play a role in predicting conflict. The theory of the Russian Playbook as a process and methodology for understanding how conflicts emerge and how to identify pre-conditions of a crisis is a novel concept that will undeniably contribute to a better understanding of Russian strategy as well as inform the international decision makers of the importance of preventing a partner nation from reaching Play 3, where conflict is likely inevitable. My research has created the idea of pre-crisis conditions, serving as a point where external players have an ability to influence and prevent conflict. I have created a new path dependence model in support of this theory. I also created the concept of offensive and defensive influence seeking paths taken by Russia, a new method for assessing post-Soviet influence, and the value of identifying periods of time prior to crisis in which Russia uses actions that fly below the threshold of response. Additionally, I developed the concept that these patterns are not a new or a post-soviet phenomenon and prove to be part of Russia’s statecraft throughout history as far back as pre-WWII and likely much further. Last but not least, I have developed Plays of the Playbook and the Russian Playbook itself.

Each of these contributions represents a completely new theory, methodology, and structured analytical guide to identify and prevent future conflicts perpetrated by Moscow. For Georgia, these conflicts have passed, but at the time of writing this thesis, the conflict is in full swing in Ukraine. While Moldova may be difficult and unlikely to erupt in conflict in the immediate future, the potential of conflict remains, which means the international environment must look for indicators of pre-crisis if we wish to prevent and avoid crisis emergence and conflict. Ukraine has served as a turning point for the study of modern warfare. The international community must learn and rapidly build competency for preventing conflict-lock in. This research is not by any means calling for any pre-emptive aggression. What this research shows is that without aggression, international aid and support can help to increase resilience, transparency, and safeguarding of human rights by supporting a nations’ institutions in support of non-violent change.

7.3. Possibilities for Future Research

One interesting route for future research is based on Play 3 serving as a lock-in effect leading to armed conflict. This could be explored further by the addition of a proposed Play 4 which is the actual armed conflict. Considering the implication of Play 3, the assumption could be made that Play 4 as conflict is the next logical step, characterised by large-scale conflict operations (LSCO) by Russia. However, as Play 3 has only been empirically evident in Ukraine due to significant uncertainties surrounding the Russo-Georgian war, not enough evidence exists to fully validate the concept. As such, Play 4 cannot yet be generalised across other cases due to the lack of objective reporting relating to the Russo-Georgian War, making it difficult to identify consistent features. As much faith as I have in my findings, I do not hope for more
evidence and empirical observances to occur, as that means additional violent conflict and war. What is clear is that both Georgia and Ukraine were along Russia’s continuum of conflict path dependence, experienced overpowering reactive sequences, and had lock-in effects leading to both conflicts.

In contrast, it cannot be said with certainty that Moldova could have a divergent outcome or is just experiencing prolonged punctuated equilibrium and has not yet reached the threshold for Russia’s employment of Play 3. This is a matter for time to demonstrate and for future research to determine. If Play 4 is the conflict, it begs the question of whether or not there are any other possibilities. This could also be an extremely interesting avenue for future research. If Moldova is in a state of punctuated equilibrium, what options are available for creating institutional change other than a lock-in for conflict? In this sense, the path dependence is based on a critical juncture in which disrupting punctuated equilibrium no longer will allow a return to that state and the only path available is some form of change. Another promising route for future research that offers promise for valuable insights is to analyse the demographic disposition of populations across periods of time to identify points in which Russia is poised for war or periods when external nations have demographic advantages. This could provide insight on the timing and employment of Plays as well as provide a forecast for what may be on the horizon.

Word Count: 25,000
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8.3. Figure 3: Mahoney’s Revised Path Dependence Model (2001)

Figure retrieved from: Mahoney, James (2001), 'Path-Dependent Explanations of Regime Change: Central America in Comparative Perspective', Studies in Comparative International Development, 36 (1), 111-41.
8.4. Figure 4: The Process for Developing the Plays within the Russian Playbook
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Created By Justine Westbrook, 2023
8.6. Figure 6: Map of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR)

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