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Conflict between Russia and its Neighbors since 1992: The Cases of Belarus and Ukraine

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ABSTRACT

Russia's recent aggressions against Georgia and Ukraine have sparked intense discussions among journalists, scholars, and policymakers. However, these debates have not produced a universally accepted, theoretically grounded and empirically reliable explanation for the recurrence of conflict between Russia and its post-Soviet neighbors. While many studies have dealt with the causes of great power expansionism and the security policies of less powerful states, no theory has yet been developed to capture the intrinsically interactive nature underlying conflict behavior of unequal neighbors. To make a first step into this direction, this paper develops and tests two competing positions on variance in conflict between unequal neighbors: Autocratic Imperialism and Geopolitics. The paper develops these two positions by first conceptualizing unequal neighbors as a theoretically distinct form of state dyad, and, second, applying on unequal neighbors existing paradigms of international relations theory. The paper then derives hypotheses from these positions, which it then tests by using structured and focused comparison as well as congruence analysis on two cases of unequal neighbors: Russia and Belarus as well as Russia and Ukraine, both from 1992 to 2014. The paper finds that both positions fail these tests, albeit Autocratic Imperialism more so than Geopolitics. The concluding discussion of the conceptual and empirical problems that each position encountered yields some important hints towards the construction of a middle-range theory that would explain the conflict behavior of unequal neighbors in a more valid and reliable way.

Keywords: Peace and Conflict; Coercive Statecraft; International Relations Theory; Belarus; Russia; Ukraine; Regional Hegemony

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INTRODUCTION

Since the war in Ukraine started, experts and policymakers have fiercely debated the causes of the crisis. With its nuclear arsenal, its formidable conventional military forces, and its high stake in the European energy market, Russia is a force to be reckoned with. The crisis has caused fear of devastating conflict with Russia in the small NATO and EU member states bordering it. This presses upon policymakers and scholars the following question: "What are the main causes of conflict between Russia and its post-Soviet neighbors?"

Put into more abstract and theoretical terms, this question reads "What are the main causes of conflict between unequal neighbors?" This requires a few definitions. Unequal neighbors are any two states whose relations are marked by two features. First, between them, there is a wide gap in their material power resources (people, wealth, technology, industry, and military forces).¹ Second, due to their geographical proximity, their affairs and interests, including their vital ones, are closely interlinked.² Interstate conflicts are united historical cases in which the threat, display or use of force by one state is explicitly directed towards the government, official representatives, official forces, property or territory of another state.³ Examples of particularly severe conflict between unequal neighbors include the Russo-Ukrainian conflict since 2014 as well as Austria-Hungary's invasion of Serbia in 1914.

There are two main bodies of scholarly work relevant for the sources of conflict between unequal neighbors. First, a long tradition of studies has sought to establish how weak states try to achieve security in a world dominated by great powers.⁴ The theoretical underpinnings and empirical findings of this research

¹ Baldwin, "Power and International Relations."

² Even in today's globalized world, geographical proximity is reliably one of the strongest correlates of trade volumes, capital investment, migration flows, and interstate conflict. See e.g. Bremer, "Dangerous Dyads"; Kepaptsoglou, Karlaftis, and Tsamboulas, "The Gravity Model Specification for Modeling International Trade Flows and Free Trade Agreement Effects."

³ This definition is borrowed from the Correlates of War project, which restricts conflict solely to militarized disputes. See Jones, Bremer, and Singer, "Militarized Interstate Disputes, 1816–1992."

⁴ For a historical overview of weak or small state studies, see Neumann and Gstöhl, "Introduction," 9–16. See especially Fox, *The Power of Small States*; Vital, *The Inequality of States*; Vital, *The Survival of Small States*; David, "The Analysis of Small Power Politics"; Mathisen, *The Functions of Small States in the Strategies of the Great Powers*; Singer, *Weak States in a World of Powers*; Handel, *Weak States in the*

tradition are variegated and not necessarily cumulative or even coherent, variously stressing norm entrepreneurship, alliance patterns and domestic features. Second, there is a long and fruitful exploration of the sources of great power expansionism, which brought us the two main variations of structural realism. Offensive realists argue that such expansionism is a rational and effective choice of great powers to best pursue their security and interests, as the international system is anarchic and generally induces and rewards power-maximizing behavior.⁵ Defensive realists argue that such expansionism is not conducive to a great power's interests and hence, when it occurs, mainly fueled by the narrow interests of domestic elites that can manipulate their subjects into going along.⁶ Elias Götz has recently surveyed the various explanations of the Ukraine Crisis and built on structural realist theory to develop a more precise account of the specific sources of Russia's assertiveness in its "Near Abroad".⁷

While these studies provide valuable insight, they fail to answer the question at hand in two respects. First, by solely focusing on either small states' security seeking or great power assertion, they fail to theorize about the role of interaction and the conditions under which such states choose strategies that bring them to clash in dangerous, costly, and risky conflict - solutions that can almost axiomatically be assumed to feature less net utility for either side than hypothetical negotiated bargains over the issue, even when accounting for the great power's superior capabilities.⁸ As I will show later, small neighbors indeed often acquiesce to external pressure – and great powers often choose not to apply it. Second, due to this lack of explicit theory, there are also no systematic and methodologically

International System; Lindell and Persson, "The Paradox of Weak State Power"; Knudsen, "Of Lambs and Lions"; Knudsen, "Did Accommodation Work?"; Papadakis and Starr, "Opportunity, Willingness, and Small States."

⁵ Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*; Labs, "Beyond Victory"; Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 2001; Layne, *The Peace of Illusions*.

⁶ Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*; Van Evera, *Causes of War*; Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics*.

⁷ Götz, "It's Geopolitics, Stupid"; Götz, "Russia, the West, and the Ukraine Crisis"; Götz, "Putin, the State, and War." See also Valeriano and Maness, *Russia's Coercive Diplomacy*.

⁸ Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War." For conceptualizations of intrinsic and rising value of conflict itself, see Kirshner, "Rationalist Explanations for War?"; Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics."

sophisticated empirical studies on the matter. Consequently, the sources of conflict between Russia and its post-Soviet neighbors remain poorly understood.

To address these two research gaps, this paper proceeds as follows. In the first section, it develops two positions on the causes of conflict between powerful states and their small neighbors. These positions correspond to the two oldest and best specified paradigms in international relations theory and are also roughly congruent with the two most prominent positions in the public debate on Russian aggression. The second section discusses case selection and methods. In the third section, values on the dependent variable are established by outlining forms and patterns of conflict between Russia and, respectively, Belarus and Ukraine. The fourth section conducts a test using structured and focused comparison. The fifth (penultimate) section conducts a second test using congruence analysis. The sixth and last section discusses the results and outlines implications for future research.

1. THEORIES AND HYPOTHESES

I deduced from the existing theoretical literature two positions that seem most promising for explaining conflict onset between unequal neighbors.⁹ I will now outline them in turn and provide hypotheses. As they roughly map on the two most prominent positions in the recent public debate on Russian conduct, I term them in accordance to their core claims – Autocratic Imperialism and Geopolitics.

The first position I call *Autocratic Imperialism*.¹⁰ Its core claim is that conflict between unequal neighbors is mainly driven by the ideology and economic interests of the great power's ruling class, which can, under certain circumstances, be so incompatible with those of its small neighbors that conflict breaks out. The

⁹ Arguably the most prominent faultline in both the academic and public debate has been between self-ascribed liberals and self-ascribed realists. This is prominently represented in the exchange between John Mearsheimer and the former US ambassador to Russia, Michael McFaul, see Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault"; McFaul, Sestanovich, and Mearsheimer, "Faulty Powers." These positions are hence the logical starting point for the task at hand. Constructivism was not included as it is, in comparison to liberalism and realism, arguably less specified on issues of conflict outbreak and less ready to be operationalized and systematically tested. Neoliberal institutionalism was not included as it does not claim immediate applicability to interstate conflict onset. Other views, academic and not, have been excluded because they have less adherents.

¹⁰ This position was derived from a combination of Andrew Moravcsik's three variants of liberal theory (ideational, economic and republican), see Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously"; Moravcsik, "The New Liberalism"; Narizny, "On Systemic Paradigms and Domestic Politics."

position proposes that the main actors in international relations are risk-averse and rational individuals with variegated economic and ideational interests. These individuals aggregate their preferences in larger groups to pursue them more effectively. The domestic institutions of a state determine which of these groups get to translate their preferences into state behavior. Democracies decentralize, separate, and check power, which gives the general population a much higher influence on the behavior of their state than do autocracies, where smaller groups determine policy. Furthermore, in democracies, the costs of state policy are borne by those that can affect them, whereas autocratic elites can externalize costs to the disenfranchised population. Hence, autocracies should pursue more narrow goals and be more risk-acceptant and aggressive in pursuing them in comparison to democracies.

What would this view entail for the post-Soviet space? In the wider literature, the two most important motives of the Russian elite are usually identified as economic rent-seeking and the culturally or historically conditioned belief that Russia can and should dominate its “near abroad”.¹¹ If this stipulated Russian pursuit of rents and ideological primacy clashes with rent-seeking interests and/or ideologically motivated claims to autonomy of the small neighbor’s elite, tensions should rise and ultimately result in the use of force. If the small neighbor is an autocracy, resistance, and hence conflict propensity, should be higher, as the leaders of autocracies can externalize the costs of conflict to their population and can distribute the benefits of conflict to a much smaller group. This gives us the following three hypotheses:

1. Conflict should be greater the more extractable rents (like natural resources, transit pipelines, profitable factories) Russia’s small neighbor commands.
2. Conflict should be greater if, first, the small neighbor’s history and culture is closely interlinked with that of Russia and, second, the small neighbor’s elite prefers autonomy and independence for cultural or patriotic reasons.

¹¹ Cf. Kuchins and Zevelev, “Russia’s Contested National Identity and Foreign Policy”; Dawisha, *Putin’s Kleptocracy*; Sergunin, *Explaining Russian Foreign Policy Behavior*.

3. Conflict should be greater the more autocratic Russia and its small neighbor are.

The second position I call *Geopolitics*.¹² Its core claim is that conflict is mainly driven by two stipulated interlinked tendencies. First, when they can, weaker states try to escape vulnerability to coercion by powerful neighbors. Second, powerful states, when they can, seek to (re-)assert political leverage over weaker neighbors. The position proposes that the main actors in international relations are states that act in a more or less unitary and rational manner and uniformly seek to ensure their survival in an environment marked by danger, imperfect information and scarcity. Consequently, states try to maximize their international military power and influence to remain secure and effectively pursue their interests, whatever they may be. As interests are concentrated in a state's neighborhood, great powers consequently seek regional spheres of influence, while their small neighbors try to align with external great powers to gain protection. This mutual quest for security will increase conflict between the unequal neighbors, as the great power will try to wedge emerging alliances and reestablish control over the small neighbor, whereas the small neighbor will push back, especially when it has some power resources of its own or can realistically hope for external help. Such struggles should be muted if the great power experiences severe domestic disunity, like internal strife or state failure, as it has less capabilities that it can invest for dominating its neighborhood.¹³ Geopolitics hence gives us the following hypotheses.

4. Conflict should be greater the more powerful the small neighbor is.
5. Conflict should be greater the more the small neighbor aligns with powerful states other than Russia.
6. Conflict should be greater the more internally consolidated the Russian state and regime is.

¹² This theory combines security-driven offensive realism and scarcity-driven offensive realism, see Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 2014; Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power*. Some argue that it applies for realism in general, see Götz, "It's Geopolitics, Stupid."

¹³ Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power*.

2. CASES AND METHODS

The case studies investigate two relations between unequal neighbors over the same extended time period (1992 to 2014). A longer time period maximizes within-case observations and allows for investigation of issues of path dependency, endogeneity, and interaction, which are crucial features of the candidate positions. Investigating only a few case studies makes it possible to fully exploit the comparative advantage of case study methods – empirical and analytical “thickness”.¹⁴ Investigating and comparing two cases is analytically much more valuable than a single case study, as measurement of values can be conducted not just by reference to the vague notion of “normal conditions”,¹⁵ but rather comparatively between the cases. Of course, investigating more than two cases would provide even more analytical leverage,¹⁶ but the added marginal value of each additional case declines sharply, while the time, effort, and space demanded by it remain constant. I hence focus on two cases. Holding constant the time-period and the great power across the two cases eliminates many potential sources of error stemming from varying background conditions.¹⁷

To maximize analytical leverage, the two cases to be selected should vary greatly in the frequency and intensity of conflict while being as similar as possible. This makes it possible to isolate and identify candidate causes. To identify the most conflictual dyad, I compared all instances of *military* conflict, which is arguably the most severe form of conflict in international politics, between Russia and its post-Soviet neighbors in figure 1. Of all its small neighbors, Russia is most frequently involved in military conflict with Georgia and Ukraine. However, conflict is much more intense with Ukraine. The Russo-Georgian War of 2008, which lasted a few days, consumed the lives of several hundred people, but the war in Ukraine has been going on for years now and, by the end of 2017, fatalities have far exceeded

¹⁴ Blatter and Blume, “In Search of Co-Variance, Causal Mechanisms or Congruence?”

¹⁵ Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science*, 58–59.

¹⁶ King, Keohane, and Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry*.

¹⁷ Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science*, 51–52, 84–86.

10,000.¹⁸ Russia-Ukraine clearly emerges as the most conflictual dyad and is hence selected as the first case.

Figure 1: Distribution, timing and severity of militarized conflict onset years between Russia and other post-Soviet states 1991-2014

#	Country name	Year	Severity
1	Azerbaijan	1992	(4) Use of force
2		1999	(4) Use of force
3		2002	(1) No militarized action
4	Estonia	1992	(4) Use of force
5	Georgia	1992	(4) Use of force
6		1997	(1) No militarized action
7		1999	(3) Threat of force
8		2001	(3) Threat of force
9		2003	(1) No militarized action*
10		2004	(4) Use of force
11		2005	(4) Use of force
12		2007	(4) Use of force
13	Latvia	1994	(1) No militarized action
14		1998	(1) No militarized action
15	Lithuania	1995	(1) No militarized action
16	Moldova	1992	(4) Use of force
17		1993	(1) No militarized action
18	Ukraine	1992	(1) No militarized action
19		1994	(4) Use of force
20		1996	(1) No militarized action
21		2005	(3) Threat of force
22		2008	(1) No militarized action
23		2014	(5) War
No militarized conflicts between Russia and, respectively, Armenia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan.			
* Georgia and Russia experienced two MID of severity 1 in this year; note that the Russo-Georgian War is considered here as part of a dispute that started in 2007.			
Sources: Data for 1992 to 2010 is from the Militarized Interstate Disputes (MID) dataset (version 4.1) compiled by the Correlates of War Project. ¹⁹ To this I added the outbreak of the War in Ukraine since 2014.			

Choosing Russo-Belarusian relations as the second case allows us to eliminate additional variance in background conditions as Belarus and Ukraine were, at the point of independence, very similar to each other if compared to any other two

¹⁸ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner, for Human Rights, and UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine (15 August to 15 November 2017),” 9.

¹⁹ Palmer et al., “The MID4 Dataset, 2002–2010”; Ghosn, Palmer, and Bremer, “The MID3 Data Set, 1993–2001”; Jones, Bremer, and Singer, “Militarized Interstate Disputes, 1816–1992.”

states in the post-Soviet sphere.²⁰ Within each of these countries, opposition to Soviet power had been comparatively weak and historical experiences of the constituent regions differed greatly. Both countries had very close economic, intergovernmental and social links to Russia, while links to the West were few and weak. At the point of interdependence, the share of EU trade in Ukraine and Belarus was small (10 and 32 percent respectively), while that with Russia was high (72.9 and 62.6), both countries highly relied on Russia for the provision of natural gas (79 and 98) and oil (100 and 100). Russia also had bases and military troops stationed in Belarus and Ukraine. The historical legacy and culture of both countries was strongly interwoven with that of Russia, as is evinced by the importance that nationalist narratives on either side placed on the interconnected histories of the Kievan Rus', the Grand Duchy of Moscow, and White Ruthenia. Both Belarus and Ukraine were part of Tsarist and later Soviet Russia, with only short flares of independence in-between. Both countries featured significant Russian minorities (22.1 and 13.2 percent of the overall population) and a high fluency in Russian by titular nationality (59.5 and 60.4).

The two cases also meet all of Stephen van Evera's seven conditions for selecting cases for testing theories.²¹ As I will show below, data for them is relatively abundant, they feature extreme values and large variance on most of the independent variables, the theories make diverging predictions about them, they resemble current policy-problem cases (indeed, they represent the direct past of the current problems), are well suited for replication, and allow for new forms of tests, as conducted here.

3. DEPENDENT VARIABLE – PATTERNS OF CONFLICT

Conflict was measured by aggregating militarized interstate disputes, trade and energy sanctions, and hostile political and/or diplomatic measures between the states. Figure 2 shows an overview of the various instances of force and the respective data sources.

²⁰ Here and in the following, see Tolstrup, *Russia vs. the EU*, 53–54, 65.

²¹ Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science*, 77–88.

Figure 2: Conflict between Russia and Belarus / Russia and Ukraine, 1992-2014

Conflict between Russia and Belarus	
February 2004	Citing broken agreements on the privatization of the Belarusian company Beltransgas and gas theft from the transit pipeline, Gazprom suspends gas supplies to Belarus for 24 hours.
December 2006	Gas confrontation with Gazprom.
January 2007	Dispute on the division of oil export rents between Belarus and Russia; Transneft suspends oil shipments to or through Belarus, briefly interrupting oil supplies to Poland and other points further west.
June 2010	Belarusian president Lukashenko threatens to cut off Russian gas transit to Western Europe, speaks of a looming "gas war".
July 2010	Russian media campaign against Lukashenko.
January 2011	Three-week suspension of oil supplies to Belarus while a price agreement is negotiated with Russian suppliers.
May 2012	New tensions with Russia as Belarus is accused of exporting oil products as solvents and lubricants to avoid paying Russia its due share of export taxes.
Conflict between Russia and Ukraine	
1992	Militarized dispute*.
Winter 1993-4	Disruption in supplies of Russian gas and oil lead to an energy crisis and freezing home temperatures in Ukraine.
1993-1997	Russia imposes economic and energy sanctions against Ukraine over the issue of control of the Black Sea Fleet and Soviet nuclear weapons. The costs of the sanctions to Ukraine amount to about seven percent of its gross national product.
1994	Use of military force (standoff over Russian-seized Black Sea Fleet ship with expensive equipment).
1996	Militarized dispute (claiming airspace violations, Russian fighter jets force Ukrainian commercially chartered warplane to land).
2000-2004	Minor trade sanctions between Russia and Ukraine.
2003	Diplomatic spat as Russia starts to build dike towards the contested Tuzla island in the Kerch strait.
2005	Threat of military force (on May 23, a Russian marine unit attempts to land troops near Feodosiya, Crimea and is repelled by Ukrainian border troops).
December 2005	Gas supply confrontation with Russia.
January 2006	Three-day suspension of gas supplies.
2008	Militarized dispute (Russian warship in Sevastopol fires missile landing in Ukrainian territory).
December 2008	Gas supply confrontation with Russia.
January 2009	14-day suspension of gas supplies by Russia stops all Russian supplies to Bulgaria, Romania, Macedonia, Serbia, BiH, and Croatia.
January 19, 2009	Supplies are restored as an agreement sharply raising prices and eliminating RosUkrEnergo's role is signed.
January 2013	Citing "take-or-pay" clauses in its contract, Gazprom demands Ukraine pay 7 bn. USD fine for contracted gas not taken in 2012.
2014, ongoing	Russia subverts and annexes Crimea using military forces; Russia supports, empowers, and directly aids separatists in Eastern and Southern Ukraine; cyber attacks from Russian servers target Ukrainian state institutions; Ukraine uses military and paramilitary forces to regain separatist regions in Eastern and Southern Ukraine; both countries impose economic sanctions on each other and accuse each other of gross breaches of international law and severe human rights violations.
*No further information available from the Correlates of War Dataset.	
Data for energy disputes and coercion, as well as on the 2010 media campaign against Lukashenko taken from Balmaceda 2013, esp. 281-283; Lukashenko's 2010 policies are based on a Reuters report; militarized interstate disputes from the Correlates of War dataset, version 4.1; economic sanctions from Hufbauer 2007 and the TIES dataset; on the Tuzla incident, see Woronowycz 2003; Russian cyber coercion from Manness and Valeriano 2015. A good starting point for the events of 2014 is Wilson 2014. ²²	

²² Jones, Bremer, and Singer, "Militarized Interstate Disputes, 1816-1992"; Balmaceda, *The Politics of Energy Dependency*; "UPDATE 3-Belarus Cuts Russia Gas Transit, Says Gas War Looms"; Roman Woronowycz, "Dispute over Tuzla Changes Ukraine's Stance toward Russia"; Valeriano and Maness, *Russia's Coercive Diplomacy*, 85-107; Wilson, *Ukraine Crisis*; Hufbauer, *Economic Sanctions Reconsidered*; Morgan, Bapat, and Kobayashi, "Threat and Imposition of Economic Sanctions 1945-2005."

4. STRUCTURED AND FOCUSED COMPARISON

The first method employed is structured and focused comparison. Here, I code independent and dependent variables as specified by the two positions, taking full advantage of the analytical thickness of case studies to use more sophisticated, contextualized, and precise indicators than would be possible in a statistical analysis of a larger sample. I then apply the respective hypotheses to the different values on the independent variables and derive aggregated predictions for conflict intensity. I then check whether these predictions match with the actual conflict levels. Within the cases, the values of the dependent and independent variables vary over time, which is why I split up the two cases in five observations, respectively, to account for such variations and avoid too big a measurement error. Thresholds for coding are determined by comparing value intensities across observations. For example, the hybrid war between Russia and Ukraine is the most intense instance of conflict across the observations, meriting the conflict intensity “high”. The observations on Russia and Belarus in the 1990s are the most pacific, with barely any conflict occurring, which results in a coding of “low” conflict intensity. The exact values are presented in figures 7 and 8.

Conflict: As illustrated in figure 2, Russo-Ukrainian relations were marked by military threats, economic sanctions, and sharp and alarmist rhetoric when Ukraine was ruled by Leonid Kravchuk and well into the first tenure of his successor, Leonid Kuchma (conflict level medium). Threats and sanctions dampened somewhat from 1997 on (low-medium), but rose sharply again under the presidency of Viktor Yushchenko from 2005 until 2009 (medium), only to again tone down under the newly elected Yanukovych from 2010 on (low-medium). Relations worsened again with hostile rhetoric, threats as well as sharp energy and trade embargoes in 2013, culminating in Russia’s military annexation of Crimea and (hybrid) warfare between the two countries in Ukraine’s east from 2014 on (high). In sharp contrast to Ukraine, Belarus experienced no conflict with Russia in the 1990s apart from some minor energy disputes (low). There were some diplomatic and energy-related spats from 2002 on, but they never exceeded even the most peaceful periods in Russo-Ukrainian relations (low-medium).

Extractable Resources: To measure this variable, I compared the average GDP per capita and the differentials of gas prices and transit fees to market prices for both small neighbors. First, the most important and readily comparable indicator for the relative wealth of nations is GDP per capita. Here, Belarus and Ukraine start out roughly equal in the early to mid-1990s (2253 and 2167 Dollars by the rate of 2010), but Belarusian growth and continuing Ukrainian economic perils quickly create a widening gap, where GDP per capita in Belarus is one-and-a-half that in Ukraine (2809 to 1818 in 2000).²³ The gap remains somewhat stable during the early and mid-2000s and widens further in the late 2000s, with Belarusian average wealth being double the size that of Ukraine (4165 and 2746 in 2005, 6030 and 2965 in 2010, 6400 and 2829 in 2015). Apart from differentials in gas and oil prices and transit fees (see below), this widening gap seems to stem mostly from the varying degrees to which Belarus and Ukraine inherited profitable enterprises from the faltering Soviet economy. Here, Belarus appears to have had an edge from the start.²⁴

Second, a more precise, yet also less encompassing indicator for extractable resources is represented by oil and gas prices and transit fees, as both Ukraine and Belarus have traditionally relied heavily on below-market priced Russian fossil fuels. Furthermore, both act as transit countries towards Western Europe. This double-edged interdependence creates plenty of possibilities for conflict. Potentially extractable rents are represented in differentials in prices for Ukrainian and Belarusian prices for domestic consumption when compared to those in Western Europe and differentials in transit fees when compared between Belarus and Ukraine. Figure 3 shows that relative prices were equal, steady, and heavily subsidized for both countries throughout the 1990s (see comparison to the border price in Germany). From the early 2000s on, Belarus enjoyed a much more favorable pricing than Ukraine, even though Ukraine has a bigger market to attract alternative suppliers and some domestic fuels for compensation. For example, when comparing gas transit fees and gas price differentials between Russian export prices and market prices relative to population, Belarus' per-capita value of

²³ World Bank, World Development Indicators, 2017.

²⁴ Wilson, *Belarus*, esp. 237-254.

potential rent pools in the gas area was 1534 USD from 2001 to 2006, whereas it only amounted to 633 USD for Ukraine, less than half of the Belarusian price pool.²⁵ While there is a macro-trend of the pricing in both domestic markets to converge with that of Western Europe from the mid-2000s on, the differentials are persistently wider for Belarus and even widen again from time to time.

Belarus, due to its formidable post-Soviet industrial base, its many extractive schemes towards Russia, its much larger energy discounts, and its strategy of circumventing Russian custom fees, features more extractable resources for Russia than Ukraine throughout the whole period under investigation. Hence, Ukraine’s extractable resources are coded “low” throughout the whole period. As the gap in extractable wealth grows even larger from the mid-2000s on, when Belarusian wealth grows much quicker than that of Ukraine while energy prices and transit fees become even less profitable for Ukraine, Belarus’ extractable resources are coded “medium” before 2007 and “high” thereafter.

Figure 3: Pricing of Gazprom’s gas to Belarus and Ukraine in USD/tcm, 1991 and 2005-2012

	Price in Ukraine	Price in Belarus	Border price in Germany	Rel. Price in Ukraine	Rel. Price in Belarus
1991	.25	.25	108.3	.00	.00
2001	42	30	139.4	.30	.22
2002	42	29.5	96	.44	.31
2003	42	35.6	125.5	.33	.28
2004	50	46.7	135.2	.37	.35
2005	50	55	212.9	.23	.26
2006	95	55	295.6	.32	.19
2007	135	118	293.1	.46	.40
2008	179.5	126.8	472.9	.38	.27
2009	232.4*	151	318.8	.73	.47
2010	252	185	292.4	.86	.63
2011	400	265	381.5	1.05	.69

*estimated; source: Balmaceda 2014, p. 51. Relative prices are percentages of the respective German border price.

Clashing Ideational Preferences: As illustrated in section 2, both Belarus and Ukraine share close historical, linguistic, and cultural ties with Russia. From Russia’s perspective, however, Ukraine is of greater importance, as Kyiv, Crimea, and Sevastopol are deemed particularly important for Russian history and culture.²⁶

²⁵ Balmaceda, *Living the High Life in Minsk*, 11.
²⁶ Here and in the following Kappeler, “Ukraine and Russia.”

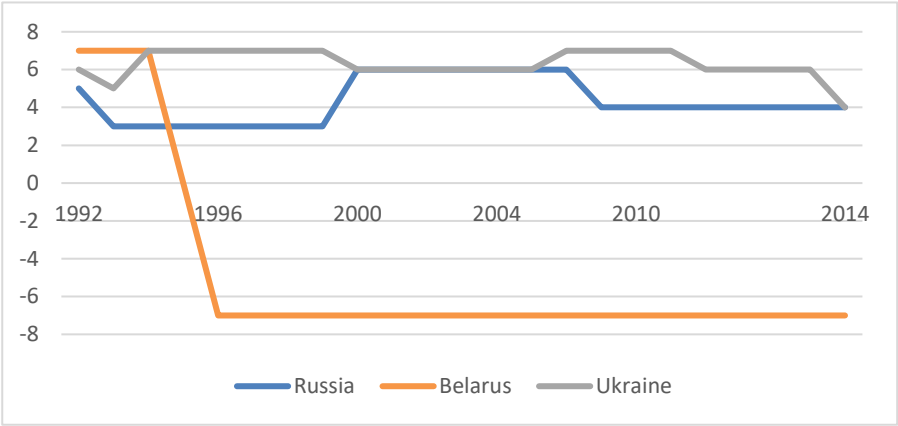
This heightened importance is compounded on the small neighbor's side. In Ukraine, notions of a distinct national identity are much stronger and have played a much more important role in domestic politics than in Belarus.²⁷ Consequently, clashing ideational preferences were coded "medium" for Belarus and "high" for Ukraine.

Autocracy: To measure the degree of autocracy in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine, I used the Polity IV database, which measures autocracy and democracy individually and provides us with a compound measure.²⁸ The conventional threshold codes states with a polity score below -5 as "autocratic", between -5 and 5 as "anocratic", and beyond 6 as "democratic". Most notably, Belarus turns from democratic straight to autocratic right after Lukashenko's seizure of power in 1994 (see figure 4). There are no major changes in the polity scores of Ukraine and Russia. Ukraine is and remains more or less democratic up until 2014. Russia's scores are similarly stable, but, in the aggregate, slightly lower than those of Ukraine. Russia counts as anocratic before 2000 and after 2007, and as just about democratic in the intermediate period. Due to the relative steadiness in its Polity IV scores, Autocratic Imperialism would expect the predatory and reckless tendencies in Russia's elite to be more or less steady as well. However, from 1994 onwards, Belarus should be much more fierce and reckless in its own policies than Ukraine, as it is markedly more autocratic from that point onward. Hence, the "autocracy" variable is coded "high" for Russia-Belarus from 1994 onwards, and "low" for all other observations.

²⁷ Wilson, *Belarus*; Wilson, *The Ukrainians*.

²⁸ Marshall, Jaggers, and Gurr, "Polity IV Project."

Figure 4: Polity IV scores of Belarus, Russia, Ukraine, 1992 to 2014



Power Gap: To measure the relative power gap between Russia and - respectively - Belarus and Ukraine, I compared the relative numbers of active military personnel, main battle tanks, artillery pieces, and combat aircraft as well as the size of military budgets (see figure 5).²⁹ Russia consistently dwarfs its small neighbors throughout the whole period and in all of these categories. However, the gap is persistently and significantly narrower for Ukraine, which has double the value in all of the categories when compared to Belarus, except for its military spending, for which the ratio is even higher. On top of this, Ukraine has more than four times the population size, more than three times the territory and a much more distinct national identity than Belarus. In the extreme contingency of an all-out military clash or an occupation, Ukraine would be a significantly more formidable country than Belarus. Hence, I code the power gap “high” for Ukraine and “low” for Belarus throughout the whole period, meaning that Geopolitics expects the power gap to render the case of Russia-Ukraine more conflictual than Russia-Belarus.

²⁹ Institute for Strategic Studies, The Military Balance, London.

Figure 5: Comparison of Russian, Belarusian, Ukrainian military forces

	Belarus	Ukraine	Russia
1997			
Defense Budget (current million USD)	490	1,400	31,000
Active Military Personnel	81,800	387,400	1,240,000
Main Battle Tanks	1,778	4,063	15,500
Artillery Pieces	1,519	3,764	15,700
Combat Aircraft	230	790	1,855
2005			
Defense Budget (current million USD)	186	1,010	18,800
Active Military Personnel	72,940	187,600	1,037,000
Main Battle Tanks	1,586	3,784	22,800+
Artillery Pieces	1,499	3,705	30,045+
Combat Aircraft	210	444	1,852
2013			
Defense Budget (current million USD)	547	2,050	59,900
Active Military Personnel	48,000	129,950	845,000
Main Battle Tanks	515	1,110	2,800+
Artillery Pieces	1,003	3,351	5,436+
Combat Aircraft	93	211	1,462
*Budgets for 2013 are actually from 2012			
Sources: Military Balance 1997, 2005, 2012, 2013 ³⁰			

External alignment: To measure external alignment, I focused exclusively on the small neighbors' respective NATO policy and alignment. NATO, in contrast to the EU, is explicitly a military organization and includes the United States, the most powerful state in world history. Hence, NATO should be the most important alignment indicator for the Geopolitics position.

An overview of the NATO policies of Belarus and Ukraine are presented in figure 6. Here, Belarus has kept a suspicious and cautious distance throughout the whole period (low). By comparison, Ukraine has exhibited great determination early on to forge ties with NATO. This aspiration was made official in 2002 but only turned into a realistic prospect when it was intensified and responded to by the West when Yushchenko became president (low before 2005, medium thereafter). Yanukovych formally abandoned the goal of NATO membership (low), while the Maidan Coalition brought it back – this time with a much more sympathetic West (high).

³⁰ Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance*.

Figure 6: Policies of Belarus and Ukraine towards NATO, 1992 to 2014

Belarusian Policies towards NATO	
1992	Belarus joins the North Atlantic Cooperation Council.
1995	Belarus joins the NATO Partnership for Peace Program.
1999	Belarus protests against a NATO air raid over Kosovo and halts all cooperation with NATO.
2004	Belarus joins the Partnership for Peace Planning and Review Process.
2010	Belarus takes part in an arrangement to transfer cargo to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan.
Ukrainian Policies towards NATO	
1991	Ukraine joins the North Atlantic Cooperation Council.
1994	Ukraine joins the NATO Partnership for Peace Program, being the first state associated with the Commonwealth of Independent States to do so.
1996	Ukraine contributes soldiers to the NATO-led peacekeeping force in Bosnia-Herzegovina.
1997	NATO and Ukraine form a Distinctive Partnership.
1999	Together with Poland, Ukraine contributes a Battalion to the NATO-led peacekeeping force in Kosovo.
2000	Ukraine hosts a multinational disaster-response exercise.
2002	Ukrainian president Kuchma announces Ukraine's goal of eventual NATO membership.
May 2002	A NATO-Ukraine Action Plan is adopted.
February 2005	Newly elected president of Ukraine, Viktor Yushchenko, is invited to a summit meeting at the NATO headquarters. They express support for his ambitious reform plans and agree to refocus NATO-Ukraine cooperation in line with the new government's priorities.
April 2005	At a NATO-Ukraine Council meeting in Vilnius, an Intensified Dialogue on Ukraine's NATO membership aspirations is launched, including a package of short-term actions to strengthen support for key reforms.
September 2006	During a visit to NATO, newly inaugurated Ukrainian Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich reassures allies of Ukraine's commitment to ongoing cooperation with NATO. However, he states the Ukrainian people are not yet ready to consider possible NATO membership.
June 2007	Ukraine deploys a ship for the first time in support of Operation Active Endeavour, NATO's maritime counter-terrorist operation in the Mediterranean. This is followed by a second deployment in autumn.
April 2008	At the Bucharest NATO summit, Allied leaders agree that Ukraine will become a NATO member.
December 2008	NATO-Ukraine Council foreign ministers agree to enhance opportunities for assisting Ukraine in its efforts to meet membership requirements and to develop an Annual National Programme (ANP).
April 2009	Ukraine signs a land transit agreement for the supply of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan.
February 2010	The new Ukrainian government under President Viktor Yanukovich decides to continue present cooperation with NATO. However, Alliance membership for the country is taken off the agenda.
February 2013	NATO-Ukraine Council defense ministers agree to reinforce NATO-Ukraine cooperation, including in training and exercises; in retraining of former military officers in Ukraine; and in neutralizing radioactive sources from former Soviet military sites. Ukraine becomes the first partner country to contribute to NATO's counter-piracy operation off the coast of Somalia, Operation Ocean Shield.
December 2014	Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko signs into law a bill to cancel the non-bloc status of Ukraine and announces that Ukraine will start a process to achieve the criteria needed for NATO membership and also integrate into the Euro-Atlantic security space. He also indicates that a referendum would be held if his country were to apply for NATO membership.
Data from NATO; https://www.nato.int/cps/ua/natohq/topics_49119.htm# ; https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_37750.htm# ; retrieved December 10, 2017.	

Russian state unity: The 1990s and early 2000s were coded “medium”. During this time, Russia experienced several severe economic crises, political instability, and two fierce civil wars in Chechnya. Starting with the ascendancy of Vladimir Putin to the Presidency at the start of the new millennium, the Russian state and regime increasingly stabilized, meriting a coding of “high” from then on.

Aggregated Predictions: The position’s individual predictions can mutually reinforce or contravene each other. To get to a net-prediction of the respective

position for each observation, I average out the three respective predictions, giving equal weight to each. For example, Ukraine-Russia from 1991 to 1996 has one high, one medium, and one low value on the three Geopolitics hypotheses, which averages out to a prediction of medium level of conflict for Geopolitics. If this process leads to fractions, the prediction is coded for the respective in-between category. For example, Belarus-Russia from 2007 to 2010 has two high and one medium value on the three Autocratic Imperialism hypotheses, which averages out to a prediction of medium-high level of conflict for Autocratic Imperialism.

Coding Matches: I code a unit as a “fail” if the respective theory’s prediction is off by at least one unit. For example, Autocratic Imperialism predicts a low-medium level of conflict for Russia-Ukraine 2013-2017. The actual level is “high”. This represents a divergence of one and a half units. Consequently, the unit is coded a mismatch for Autocratic Imperialism. A unit represents a match if prediction and result align perfectly. For example, Geopolitics predicts low-medium use of force between Russia and Belarus between 2002 and 2006. This also happens to be the actual outcome. Consequently, the unit is coded a match for Geopolitics. If the prediction is off by just half a unit, it is coded a “close” match. For example, Authoritarian Imperialism predicts low-medium use of force between Russia and Ukraine between 1991 and 1996. The actual level is medium, and the unit is coded “close” for Authoritarian Imperialism.

Figure 7: Coding of structured and focused comparison. Actual and predicted levels of conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

Russia – Ukraine	1991-1996	1997-2004	2005-2009	2010-2012	2013-2017
<i>Independent variables</i>					
1. Extractable rents (small neighbor)	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
2. Historical & cultural ties	High	High	High	High	High
3. Autocracy	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
4. Power gap	High	High	High	High	High
5. External alignment (small neighbor)	Low	Low	Medium	Low	High
6. Russian state unity	Medium	Medium	High	High	High
<i>Dependent variable</i>					
Conflict intensity	Medium	Low-Medium	Medium	Low- Medium	High
<i>Predictions and Performance</i>					
Autocratic Imperialism	Low-Medium (close)	Low-Medium (match)	Low-Medium (close)	Low-Medium (match)	Low-Medium (fail)
Geopolitics	Medium (match)	Medium (close)	Medium-High (close)	Medium (close)	High (match)

Figure 8: Coding of structured and focused comparison. Actual and predicted levels of conflict between Russia and Belarus.

Russia – Belarus	1991-1993	1994-2001	2002-2006	2007-2010	2011-2017
<i>Independent variables</i>					
1. Extractable rents (small neighbor)	Medium	Medium	Medium	High	High
2. Historical & cultural ties	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium
3. Autocracy	Low	High	High	High	High
4. Power gap	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
5. External alignment (small neighbor)	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
6. Russian state unity	Medium	Medium	High	High	High
<i>Dependent variable</i>					
Conflict intensity	Low	Low	Low-Medium	Low-Medium	Low-Medium
<i>Predictions and Performance</i>					
Autocratic Imperialism	Low-Medium (close)	Medium-High (fail)	Medium-High (fail)	Medium-High (fail)	Medium-High (fail)
Geopolitics	Low-Medium (close)	Low-Medium (close)	Low-Medium (match)	Low-Medium (match)	Low-Medium (match)

As for the results, Authoritarian Imperialism does not come out well, as five of its ten predictions, the exact half, are mismatched, and only two match perfectly. Tests using structured and focused comparison have strong disconfirming power, since they allow us to identify robust counter-evidence against the sufficiency of a candidate cause to produce an outcome.³¹ Therefore, the failures should weigh heavily, as they represent a clearly failed “hoop test”.³² Furthermore, the matched predictions are not unique, as Geopolitics scores close matches for them. Geopolitics fares much better, since it does not have any mismatches – it passes a rather strong hoop test. However, Geopolitics only gets five predictions perfectly right. In any case, qualitative comparisons have only little confirming power as they usually, and certainly in the cases at hand, only represent a small sample out of the overall population, which makes it impossible to rule out the possibility that the correlation is not simply due to chance.³³ In short, Autocratic Imperialism seems inadequate, whereas Geopolitics matches the conflict patterns well, although not perfectly. Thus far, however, we have only limited evidence to presume that the

³¹ Beach and Pedersen, *Causal Case Study Methods*, 227–68, esp. 257-259.

³² Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science*, 30–34.

³³ Beach and Pedersen, *Causal Case Study Methods*, 227–68, esp. 257-259.

correlations found reflect actual causation. This is a task for within-case methods, such as congruence analysis.

5. CONGRUENCE ANALYSIS

The second round of tests follows the logic of congruence analysis.³⁴ Congruence analysis derives from theory specific predictions on within-case phenomena, such as which actors are crucial, which perceptions and motivations guide them, which structural factors should be present or absent, etc. Consequently, congruence analysis needs rich within-case data, and several competing and well-specified theories for a comparative evaluation of congruence. The cases at hand meet these criteria well. In the following, I will discuss to what extent within-case observations are (in-)congruent with Geopolitics. I do not do the same for Autocratic Imperialism, as it has clearly failed the hoop test in the preceding section. For the purposes of this paper, it suffices to focus on two particular observations that relate to the predicted alignment preferences of Belarus and Ukraine.

First, considering Russia's diminished ability to exercise international force in the 1990s, Geopolitics would expect Belarus to try to seize the opportunity and secure ties to the West, ideally in the form of military protection like NATO. While this prediction applies to Ukraine as well, it should be stronger for Belarus in the 1990s, as Belarus commands much less power of its own with which it could hope to fend off Russia (see figure 5). Considering its timid forces, seeking out Western allies in the 1990s would have made sound geopolitical sense for Belarus, as this would be the best security guarantee for the contingency of Russia resurging in the future. However, as illustrated in figure 6, Belarus' NATO policies in the 1990s can be described as lukewarm at best. The agreements it entered were politically rather inconsequential. Belarus even chose to strongly oppose NATO's Kosovo raids. Conversely, and very much against the predictions of Geopolitics, Belarus pursued an almost aggressive policy of integration with Russia.³⁵ Belarus was quick to join Russia-led institutions, like the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and, more importantly, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Russia's

³⁴ Blatter and Blume, "In Search of Co-Variance, Causal Mechanisms or Congruence?"; Beach and Pedersen, *Causal Case Study Methods*, 269–301.

³⁵ Wilson, *Belarus*, 140–93.

mirror organization to NATO. Belarus even pursued a common “Union State” with Russia during the 1990s. Various experts have brought forth plausible explanations for this behavior, but all of them follow logics different from the Geopolitics position.³⁶ Indeed, Belarus’ behavior in the 1990s runs directly against the theoretical expectation of Geopolitics.³⁷

Second, Geopolitics would expect Ukraine to be continuously searching for external allies. This search for external allies should be more consistent than that of Belarus, as Ukraine commands more power of its own (see figure 5) and should hence not have as many reasons to worry that Russia would violently try to wedge an emerging alliance. Just as with Belarus, however, Ukrainian alignment behavior does at times go against the predictions of Geopolitics.

Congruent with Geopolitics’ predictions, Ukraine has developed ties to Western states and organizations, particularly NATO, much quicker and much more comprehensively than Belarus (see figure 6). Indeed, Ukraine formally announced its NATO ambitions when Kuchma, deemed by many as relatively pro-Russian, was president. Ukraine was also much more hesitant than Belarus to develop institutional ties with Russia. Unlike Belarus, Ukraine never joined the CSTO and never became a formal member of the CIS, even though the latter organization is largely a paper tiger.

Russia, also congruent with the Geopolitics prediction, was highly skeptical and outspokenly hostile to Ukraine’s NATO aspirations.³⁸ When, in the early 2000s, the Kuchma administration announced Ukraine would seek NATO membership, Moscow was strongly displeased and reacted by complicating the gas disputes of the day. Russian reactions were especially hostile when Ukraine, under the newly elected Yushchenko, intensified its efforts to join the alliance. The major gas crises of early 2006 and 2009 coincided with Ukraine’s more forceful NATO aspirations, and Russia explicitly threatened military retaliation should Ukraine secure NATO membership or expel Russian warships from Sevastopol. Georgia, which also

³⁶ For example Wilson, *Belarus*; Balmaceda, *Living the High Life in Minsk*; Tolstrup, *Russia vs. the EU*.

³⁷ Indeed, if anything, Belarus seems to have become *less* compliant to Russian demands from the early 2000s on despite a more consolidated and much more powerful Russia, see Korosteleva, “Belarusian Foreign Policy in a Time of Crisis”; Preiherman, “Belarus’s Asymmetric Relations with Russia.”

³⁸ Here and in the following Donaldson and Noguee, *The Foreign Policy of Russia*, 113, 175, 178, 227–28.

pushed for NATO accession at the time, had its trade sanctioned by Russia in 2008. At the same time, Russia stepped up its support for the separatist polities in Georgia and later fought a war against the Caucasus Republic. Putin, in early 2008, told Bush jr. that “Ukraine is not even a state” – a statement read by many experts as an implicit threat of Russia stirring and supporting similar separatist aspirations in Crimea.

However, Ukrainian behavior from 2010 to 2013 is incongruent with Geopolitics. Having pushed increasingly strongly for NATO integration under the presidencies of Kravchuk, Kuchma, and Yushchenko, Ukraine sharply reverted its course as soon as Viktor Yanukovych became president in 2010.³⁹ In the first year of his presidency, Yanukovych signed a major agreement with Russia at Kharkiv granting Russia leasing rights for the Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol for decades to come, thereby further prolonging and solidifying the presence of tens of thousands of Russian troops on Ukrainian territory. At the same time, Yanukovych officially retracted Ukraine's bid for NATO membership and the *Verkhovna Rada* issued a law that officially cemented Ukraine's “non-aligned” status. Again, while plausible explanations for this behavior have been brought forward, it goes directly against the predictions of Geopolitics, where protection by external states should be the top priority for any small state neighboring a great power.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper explored the degree to which the most prominent positions on the matter can explain variation in conflicts between post-Soviet Russia and its many small neighbors. As there exists no theory specifically designed to explain conflict between unequal neighbors, this paper first conceptualized unequal neighbors as a theoretically distinct form of state dyad. It then used two paradigms of international relations theory to deduce two positions on the use of force between unequal neighbors. These two positions correspond roughly to the two most prominent positions in the public debate around Russia's relations with its small neighbors and have been consequently termed “Autocratic Imperialism” and “Geopolitics”. In order to test the explanatory power of these two positions, I used

³⁹ Here and in the following Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 288.

structured and focused comparison and congruence analysis on two cases. The relations between Ukraine and Russia are the central and crucial case, as they feature the widest variation and most extreme values in the variable of interest. The case of Belarus and Russia was chosen because it is most similar to the central case in terms of background conditions.

Neither position passes both tests. The predictions of Autocratic Imperialism failed to match the actual levels of conflict in half of the observations. Considering that qualitative comparison allows for contextual and highly valid indicators, this result represents a badly failed and fairly significant hoop test. Geopolitics, on the other hand, passed this test, as its predictions correlated more or less well with the actual patterns of the use of force in the two cases. However, some targeted plausibility probes using congruence analysis revealed that some significant within-case observations on expected small neighbor alignment preferences stand in sharp contradiction to Geopolitics' stipulated patterns of behavior. All in all, neither position provides a ready and accurate explanation of variations in conflict between Russia and its small neighbors.

This paper hence presents an important null result. If indeed the deduction of the hypotheses is valid and the testing sound, the two oldest, most established and most readily applicable paradigms of international relations theorizing fail to explain variations in conflict between Russia and its small neighbors. The same applies to the most prominent positions in the public debate on Russia. The response that "sometimes A matters, and sometimes B" is not just intellectually unsatisfying, but seriously flawed, as it leaves open under which conditions these different mechanisms should be triggered.

From these results, several tasks emerge for future research.⁴⁰ First, the connection between hypotheses and theory needs to be explicated and evaluated in a more specific and detailed manner as this paper was able to do in the available space. Second, more testing is desirable to check the robustness and transferability of the results presented here. Such tests should employ statistical approaches to systematically include more cases as well as additional in-depth studies of crucial

⁴⁰ I am in the process of tackling all of them in my current research.

cases using qualitative comparison, congruence analysis, and process-tracing. Third, the first two tasks should be undertaken with a systematic and explicit attempt to formulate a new logically coherent theoretical framework with more explanatory power than that provided by the two positions discussed here. Crucial empirical clues for this task should be most prominent in observations that represent consequential outliers and anomalies for the two positions that have been found wanting in this paper.

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