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Benevolent hegemon, neighborhood bully, or regional security provider? Russia's efforts to promote regional integration after the 2013–2014 Ukraine crisis

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ABSTRACT

Russia has tried to use economic incentives and shared historical and cultural legacies to entice post-Soviet states to join its regional integration efforts. The Ukraine crisis exposed the weaknesses of this strategy, forcing Russia to fall back on coercive means to keep Kiev from moving closer to the West. Having realized the limits of its economic and soft power, will Russia now try to coerce post-Soviet states back into its sphere of influence? Fears of such an outcome overestimate Russia's ability to use coercion and underestimate post-Soviet states capacity to resist. Rather than emerging as a regional bully, Russia is trying to push Eurasian integration forward by becoming a regional security provider. The article relates these efforts to the larger literature on regional integration and security hierarchies – bridging the two bodies of theory by arguing that regional leaders can use the provision of security to promote economic integration. Despite initial signs of success, we believe that the new strategy will ultimately fail. Eurasian integration will continue to stagnate as long as Russia's economic and soft power remain weak because Russia will be unable to address the economic and social problems that are at the root of the region's security problems.

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Introduction

Over the last few years, Russia has tried to establish a “soft” hegemony in the post-Soviet region, using economic incentives and Soviet legacies of shared history and culture to entice post-Soviet states to join its regional integration efforts. To further this goal, Moscow has even been willing to take responsibility for the provision of regional collective goods such as security, free trade, energy resources, and financial stability. However, Russia's ability to play the role of benign regional

hegemon has been challenged by the crisis in Ukraine. Russia's efforts to entice Ukraine into its economic and political orbit have backfired, and Moscow now finds itself using military and covert means in order to destabilize the situation in that country and prevent it from moving closer to the West. Moscow's hope is that once the country's turn to the West fails, Ukraine will have no choice but to participate in Russian-led Eurasian integration.

This article will examine the ways in which Russia's approach to regional integration has changed in the wake of the Ukraine crisis. We argue that the Ukrainian crisis has forced Russia to recognize the limits of its ability to use its economic and soft power (as the concept is defined by Joseph Nye) to pursue the regional integration agenda it values so dearly (Nye 2011). However, this does not necessarily mean that Russia is now bent on using hard or coercive means to achieve its goals. It is unlikely that Moscow will adopt the same tactics it has used in Crimea and eastern Ukraine in other parts of the post-Soviet space. The leadership realizes that the costs of doing so are prohibitively high, as its behavior in Ukraine has already raised concerns and fears in other post-Soviet states, forcing the Russian government to reallocate precious economic resources toward calming these fears and reassuring their partners.

Rather than becoming a regional bully, Russia is trying to use the advantage it still holds in military and other hard-power resources to position itself as the region's security hegemon, helping the region's weak authoritarian regimes to deal with internal and external security threats, particularly those rising from the spread of Islamic radicalism represented by ISIS and instability in Afghanistan. In doing so, Russia is pursuing a strategy very much in line with Lake and Morgan (1997) and Lake's (2009) concept of regional security hierarchy. By providing for these states' security, Moscow hopes to gain the loyalty of the region's other states and their participation in its project of regional economic integration. We argue that Russia is thus trying to use its hard power to achieve what are primarily economic or (more precisely) geoeconomic goals.

The shift toward using hard power is neither the result of traditional Russian imperialism reasserting itself (Laqueur 2015; Socor 2014), nor is it primarily motivated by the regime's need to distract public attention away from domestic problems (Stoner and McFaul 2015). Rather, it reflects the dearth of soft and economic power resources available to Russia to pursue the larger goal of regional integration, which Russia's elites see as being a key to maintaining the country's status as a great power in world politics in the years to come.

Russia's more aggressive use of hard-power tactics and its willingness to employ military force in Ukraine, and most recently even outside the post-Soviet space in Syria, has given rise to fears in the West that Russia is a full blown revisionist power bent on overturning the Western-led global order (Giles et al. 2015; Socor 2014). If Russia indeed emerges as revisionist challenger to the Western-led liberal order, the West will also have to share some of the blame. While Russia bears a good deal of the responsibility for escalating the crisis, the West also made

a critical mistake in pushing for Ukraine's Western integration without taking Russia's interests into account (Mearsheimer 2014). In doing so, Western leaders took advantage of Russia's perceived economic and soft-power weaknesses, not recognizing that this would provoke a hard-power response. As a result, Russia has become further estranged from the Western-led order and sees the use of coercive and hard power as the only tools available to it to defend and promote its interests.

Russia's Drive for Post-Soviet Regional Integration

Russia has invested heavily in the process of regional integration of the post-Soviet space. Russia's elites see it as a key to the country's economic development and its survival as a key geopolitical player and "great power" (Krickovic 2014). Despite robust economic growth through much of the 2000s, Russia's economy is still overly dependent on the export of natural resources and hydrocarbons, and this "resource curse" has hampered the development of domestic institutions and the growth of the high-tech industries and private enterprise (Kudrin and Gurvich 2015). Even before Western sanctions and the bottom dropped out of the global oil market in 2014, the Russian Ministry of Economic Development forecast that Russia's percentage of world GDP would decline from its current level of 4% to less than 3% by 2030 (Kuvshinova 2013). Russian leaders believe that Eurasian integration is of key importance for reversing their country's economic and geopolitical decline. From this perspective, Russian-led Eurasian economic integration will create a protected economic space where Russian firms and capital can develop and grow, helping it modernize its economy and become less dependent on Western markets and the exports of natural resources to them. (Chebanov 2010). A larger Eurasian economic space will help Russia compete with the larger economic blocs dominated by the other great powers, including those promoted by the West but also with China (Krickovic 2014). In this way, Russia will lay the necessary economic foundations that will allow it maintain its status as a great power and become one of the poles in a future "multipolar" world order" (Putin 2011).

This new push for integration began in the late 2000s, and it is a significant departure from earlier policies. The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)¹ was initially designated as the main vehicle for regional integration in the 1990s. Leaders and experts in Russia and other post-Soviet states had high hopes that the CIS would one day become the "EU of the East." Yet, integration made little progress under the auspices of the CIS. According to one study, less than 10% of the thousands of documents and resolutions adopted by CIS bodies have actually been ratified by member countries (Moskvin 2007). Regional disintegration and the dissolution of economic and political bonds that had been created in the Soviet and Tsarist periods continued. Intraregional trade as a percentage of total trade of the CIS region fell by almost 40% between 1994 and 2008 (Gurova and Efremova 2010). Russia was

responsible for many of these failures. Despite its pro-integration rhetoric, Russia was not really willing to make the sacrifices and efforts needed to make regional integration work. This was apparent early on when Russia withdrew its support for maintaining the CIS as a ruble zone in 1992. Throughout the first two decades of the post-Soviet period, Russia's leaders were reluctant to take on new foreign policy burdens, fearing that this would detract precious economic resources from domestic reform (Kubicek 2009). As a result, Russian-led regional integration took on a "virtual" character; it was heavy on rhetoric but short on actual substance (Trenin 2011).

Russia had neither the will nor the resources to counter the upsurge of nationalism throughout the former Soviet Union. Instead of accepting regional leadership and pushing integration forward, it conducted a very specific foreign policy toward the former republics, pretending to do business as usual, avoiding conflict and de facto sponsoring their economies (specifically the economies of Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova) through subsidized supplies of energy and natural resources (Bordachev and Skriba 2014). According to one authoritative estimate, Russia has been subsidizing the Ukrainian economy by 5 to 10 billion USD annually since 1991 (Gaddy and Ickes 2014). This policy served to reassure the Kremlin that since Russia subsidized these countries, it still maintained influence in the post-Soviet space. Nevertheless, this policy was self-deceiving; the elites of the neighboring countries gladly took advantage of these economic opportunities and often enriched themselves personally from these arrangements (Sakwa 2015). At the same time, however, they steadfastly defended their sovereignty and resisted Russia's efforts to tie them into Russian-led regional institutions. This was particularly true of Ukraine. In 1991, Ukraine chose to be only a participant, but not a member of the CIS. Ukraine failed to ratify the CIS treaty and instead only accepted associate member status in the organization. It turned down the invitation to join the Russian-led Customs Union (CU) and only accepted observer status in Eurasian Economic Community in 2000.

Russia encountered less resistance to integration in Central Asia. Kazakhstan has always supported Eurasian economic integration and made it a priority of its foreign policy (Sultanov 2015). Other Central Asian states were also interested in integrating with the richer Russian economy. However, Russia did not reciprocate their interest in integration because of these countries' economic weakness (Naumkin and Ivanov 2013). Apart from very active dialog on integration with Kazakhstan, Russia confined itself to promoting political stability and regional security through regional security schemes such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). It only played a limited role in regional economic affairs by providing economic aid and sponsoring regional agreements to address issues such as water scarcity or energy security (2013).

Given its residual military capabilities, Russia found it much easier to establish itself as a regional peacekeeper and conflict manager. At first, Russia reluctantly

embraced this role in response to the growing ethnic and civil conflict throughout the region in the 1990s (Shashenkov 1994). Russia carried out peacekeeping operations in Moldova's Trans-Dniester region and in Georgia's region of South Ossetia in 1992 and then later in Georgia's Abkhazia region and in Tajikistan in 1994. Initially, the primary goal of these operations was to stop violence and prevent anti-Russian political forces from taking power. These goals were later expanded to include preventing military peacekeeping by outside powers and keeping countries such as Georgia or Moldova from joining NATO (because of their unresolved domestic conflicts) (Mankoff 2009). Nevertheless, as was the case with economic integration, Russia adopted a cautious approach to security leadership, and any impulses Russia may have had to use military means to advance regional hegemony were dampened by its concerns about the costs of such a policy and by the adverse effects it could have on the course of internal reform (Lynch 2000).

Russia began to show a renewed commitment toward regional integration after the financial crisis of 2008. The crisis demonstrated the limits of the previous model of economic development based on hydrocarbon exports and shattered hopes that Russia could regain its lost international status by becoming an "energy superpower" (Tsygankov 2013). Since then, Russia has intensified its efforts to promote regional integration. Moscow moved away from the previous strategy, which aimed to bring all of the former Soviet states (excluding the Baltic countries) under the same tight institutional umbrella toward a flexible, multi-layered approach that includes bilateral relations with post-Soviet states as well as smaller multilateral groupings like the Customs Union, the Eurasian Economic Union, and the CSTO (Bratersky 2010). These relationships exclude states such as Georgia and Azerbaijan, which are more interested in integration with powers in the Western bloc, and instead focus on building relations with states like Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, and the Central Asian states, which are more amenable to integration.

The primary institutional vehicle for achieving Russia's goals has been the CU, which was established by Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan in 2009 with the goal of eliminating tariffs and customs controls between their countries and creating a genuine common market and economic space. The CU was transformed into the EEU January 2015, as additional measures were implemented to harmonize legislation among the three markets and set up an arbitration mechanism to settle disputes. With Russia's financial backing the EEU has also established a \$10 billion crisis fund. Belarus drew \$3 billion from the fund in 2012, helping it to meet its international debt obligations and avoid having to go to the International Monetary Fund for assistance. Armenia and Kyrgyzstan joined the EEU in 2015, and Tajikistan has been officially invited to join and is undergoing the ascension process for membership. Armenia was due to sign an association agreement with the EU along with a free trade deal in late 2013, but several months ahead of the agreement's conclusion it instead decided to join the EEU.

In promoting this Eurasian vision, Moscow recognized the declining utility of hard and coercive power in advancing regional integration and instead sought

to advance its project through a mixture of economic incentives and soft power (Tsygankov 2013). Access to Russia's growing domestic markets and Russian finance, as well as discounted energy prices were all used to entice the post-Soviet countries to join. Russia also has considerable soft power in the post-Soviet space. The post-Soviet states all share common cultural legacies as former members of "Soviet Civilization" (Sinyavsky 2015). On the elite level this includes shared political and economic networks rooted in Moscow, where many of the region's elite continue to go to for business and education. Yet, there is also a popular component, exemplified by the ubiquitous presence of Russian pop music, movies, and television series throughout the region. Russia has tried to cultivate this cultural influence through its project of establishing a *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World). The project, which enjoys strong support from the Russian government, is designed to promote the development of a common cultural and linguistic space that will unite the post-Soviet countries based on the shared legacy of Russian language, history, and culture. Modeled on established institutions that other countries have used to promote their soft power, such as Great Britain's British Council and France's Alliance Francaise, the project invests heavily in the promotion of educational and cultural exchanges and the establishment of Russian language education throughout the region (Kudors 2010). In effect, Russia has tried to position itself as a benevolent regional hegemon that can provide regional collective goods, be they in the form of security, access to markets, acting as a lender of last resort in times of crisis, or the preservation of shared cultural legacies.

Ukraine: A Failure of Russian Economic and Soft Power

In the prelude to the 2013 Ukraine crisis, Russia made sustained efforts to use its economic and soft power to bring Ukraine into its Eurasian integration project. These efforts had to compete with those of the European Union to begin the process of Ukraine's European integration via the signing of a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) and an "association agreement" that would begin the country's political and economic transformation according to EU standards. For its part, Moscow offered Kiev preferential access to its market through the Customs Union. Economists close to the Kiev government claimed that membership in the CU could boost Ukraine's GDP by as much as 15% by 2030 (Ivanter et al. 2012). They argued that Eurasian integration promised an immediate improvement in Ukraine's balance of trade and stability of its balance of payments, while a DCFTA with the EU would require major trade liberalization and entail worsening of trade conditions and direct economic losses for Ukraine (Glazev 2013). Russia's economic advocacy also had a coercive element to it. Citing the need to prevent its own markets from the threat of re-export of European goods from Ukraine, Moscow warned that it would cancel preferential trade agreements it had with Ukraine if the country signed the DCFTA. Russia introduced limited trade restrictions in the summer of 2013 to remind Ukraine's political and business leaders just how

dependent the country was on Russian markets (exports to Russia constitute over 30% of Ukrainian exports). According to some estimates, these trade restrictions cost Ukraine as much as \$2.5 billion in lost trade (The Economist 2013).

Moscow was also willing to provide Kiev with much-needed financial aid. Ukraine's financial position was dire, with the country owing nearly USD 60 billion in loans due by July 2015. Few were willing to lend to Ukraine. The EU offered only USD 618 million in aid as part of the association agreement. Russia's decision to buy USD15 billion in Ukrainian bonds was thus a real lifeline to Ukraine's struggling economy. Even the head of the IMF, Christine Lagarde, admitted in April 2014 that Ukraine's economy would have collapsed if it were it not for Russia's purchase of these bonds (Adamczyk 2014). Another economic lever was Ukraine's energy dependence on Russia, with more than half of Ukraine's gas coming from Russia. As part of the financial rescue package deal that President Viktor Yanukovich brokered with the Russians and which ultimately led him to reverse course on the government's plans to sign the association agreement with the EU, Russia agreed to lower gas prices by 30%, which would have saved Kiev almost \$5 billion in 2015 (Bloomberg 2013).

Russia tried to take advantage of its still-considerable soft power in Ukraine, manifest in the two countries' strong historical and cultural ties. These efforts were part of the broader, "Russkiy Mir" project. Russian popular culture had a wide following in Ukraine as did the Russian media, which often disseminated the Kremlin's views on current events – including the issue of Eurasian integration. Moscow also invested heavily in pro-Russian media and cultural organizations and financed NGOs and civil society groups in Ukraine that would support Russia's interests, particularly in Crimea and the eastern portion of the country. These groups were mobilized from time to time to promote the Russian position on controversial issues such as the status of the Russian language and military cooperation with the US and NATO (Bogomolov and Lytvynenko 2012).

Russia enjoyed more subtle and less conspicuous soft-power influence. Ukraine's political and business elites were tied to the post-Soviet "old boy" power networks centered in Moscow. This gave Moscow considerable leverage in terms of the elite's material interests, which were often closely allied with Moscow's. Ukraine's elites also shared a common worldview and political and business culture with their counterparts in Moscow. They often looked to Moscow for guidance. "For many of them Moscow remains the preferred, although not necessarily the only destination for business and leisure, a source of inspiration for new ideas and practices." (Bogomolov and Lytvynenko 2012, 13). Yanukovich wanted to bring state institutions under his centralized control, and he saw Russia's centralized semi-authoritarian system as a model to be emulated. Experts were expected to enter a section on relevant "Russian experience" when writing government policy papers (Bogomolov and Lytvynenko 2012, 3).

Russia's use of soft-power resources and economic incentives seemed to score a significant success when in November 2013 Kiev indefinitely postponed the

signing of the association agreement with the EU – stunning many Western observers who believed that the deal was a foregone conclusion. This prompted one unnamed Russian official to gloat, “It’s like stealing the bride right before the wedding...this is another victory for President Putin in the international arena.” (Vedemosti 2013) This “geopolitical victory” proved to be short-lived. Months of massive pro-EU demonstrations followed as many Ukrainians saw Yanukovych’s decision as selling out the larger national interest to Russia. A sizable number of Ukrainians continued to support close ties with Russia and to reject NATO membership. Yet, Moscow proved unable to attract counter demonstrations in support of Eurasian integration or to stem the tide of public opinion, which was beginning to decisively shift against Yanukovych (Sakwa 2015).

The events that led to Yanukovych’s ouster are still poorly understood and highly contested, with some claiming that it was a popular revolution (Higgins and Kramer 2015) while others see it as an unconstitutional coup organized by a small minority of right-wing militants with the possible connivance of the West (Cohen 2014). Nevertheless, the results, in terms of Russian foreign policy are clear. In the end, all of Russia’s efforts to use economic incentive and soft power to entice Ukraine to join the Eurasian integration project failed. Moscow found itself facing its nightmare scenario – the coming to power of a pro-Western government that was determined to turn Ukraine toward the path of Western integration and possibly even NATO membership.

This turn of events exposed Russia’s lack of soft power as well as its limited ability to use economic inducement to achieve its foreign policy goals – even in its own immediate neighborhood. In fact, Russia’s attempts at using soft power had the opposite effect, mobilizing Ukrainians to resist what they saw as “Russian imperialism.” This failure forced Russia to turn to other, more coercive, hard-power means to achieve its goals. Moscow looked to protect its core strategic and military interest in the country by orchestrating the annexation of Crimea. The Kremlin was also determined to isolate the new government in Kiev and bring it to heel by stirring up ethnic conflict in the east. Toward this goal, it helped to incite domestic malcontents in the Donbas and in Crimea who were bolstered by radical elements from Russia itself. These forces were given generous military aid and support, including the deployment of regular Russian troops, to save them from probable defeat at the hands of the Ukrainian authorities in August 2014.

Eurasian Integration after Ukraine – Russia’s Declining Ability to Use Instruments of Soft Power

Russia’s instruments of economic and soft power are beginning to decline even further in the wake of the Ukraine crisis. Russia’s economy has been battered by Western sanctions and the steep decline in the price of oil. Russian GDP growth was beginning to stagnate even before the crisis; in 2014, GDP grew by less than 1% and the ruble lost almost 60% of its value against the US dollar. GDP declined

by 3.7% in 2015 and most projections expect it to continue to fall through 2016 (Matlack 2016). This economic downturn has reduced Russia's ability to use economic incentives and inducements to promote its Eurasian project. Trade among EEU member states fell by nearly 13% in the first quarter of 2014 compared to the same period in 2013 (Coalson 2014). As a result, Russia has become less attractive as a market for other post-Soviet states. Russian businesses are also less willing to invest in neighboring countries as they face a credit crunch at home. Western financial sanctions make it difficult for them to refinance and reschedule their own debts, much less make new investments abroad (Makhovsky, Solovyov, and Antidze 2015).

Over the late few decades, Russia has become a major destination for migrant labor throughout the post-Soviet space. Russia is the country with the second largest number of immigrants in the world, after the United States. Remittances by guest workers represent a critical source of income for the region's most impoverished countries, accounting for 30% of Kyrgyzstan's and a staggering 52% of Tajikistan's GDP (Hille 2015). Dependence on this source of income has given Russia tremendous political and economic leverage. For example, the government of Tajikistan agreed to extend Russia's right to base troops on its territory to 2042 in exchange for Russia raising the quota for the number of guest workers from Tajikistan that would be allowed to work in Russia. With the economic downturn in Russia and the steep decline in the value of the Russian ruble, many of these migrants are now going home. According to figures from Russia's Federal State Statistics Service, net migration to the country dropped by as much as 10% from January to October 2014 (Kolesnikov and Gabuev 2015). Migrant laborers are also sending back less money to their home countries. In the first quarter of 2015, transfers to Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kirgizstan declined by more than 40% (Mirzayan and Pak 2015). Russia is becoming less attractive as a destination for migrant labor, and Russia may be losing a valuable source of soft-power leverage over these states.

The crisis in Ukraine has also exposed the limited appeal of Russia's soft power – even within the post-Soviet space. Russia's approach to soft power has relied heavily on common cultural legacies. These continue to have a strong presence in the post-Soviet space, although Russian language use has been declining throughout the region since the breakup of the USSR. However, as Nye makes clear in his work on soft power, cultural attractiveness alone is not enough to ensure political influence over another state or to mobilize members of another society to their cause (Nye 2011). A country must also have an attractive economic and political model that others admire and seek to emulate. While some domestic interest groups in post-Soviet states may have close connections to the Russian political and economic establishment, Russia's authoritarian political regime and corrupt oligarchic capitalism have little popular appeal beyond its borders.

Most post-Soviet states have authoritarian political regimes, and this has not significantly hindered Russia's ability to project its influence. The situation was

different in Ukraine, however, where politics is contested and there is a strong tradition of popular activism and protest. Russia was unable to mobilize popular support for its Eurasian project amongst a wider swath of the Ukrainian public (Silayev 2014). Though the EU was unable to offer much in the way of material incentives, the European model of political and economic governance, which Ukraine would be obliged to accept if it signed the agreements with the EU, offered a way out of the morass of cronyism, corruption, and political manipulation that have plagued Ukraine ever since its independence. For those who took to Maidan square to protest the Yanukovich government's decision to back away from the EU, a turn toward the Russian-led Eurasian Union promised to maintain the status quo or – even worse – to increase authoritarianism and open the country to economic predation by Russian oligarchs.

Russian Ethnic Nationalism Rears its Ugly Head

With its ability to use soft power and economic incentives declining, Russia may shift to using hard-power resources – military force and political pressure – in order to push integration forward. Moscow is the dominant military power in the region. While the outright use of military force in the form of invasion may be prohibitively costly in today's world, it has enhanced Russia's ability to engage in unconventional warfare; i.e. covert warfare through local proxies combined with political and economic destabilization (Gvosdev 2014). These hard-power tools were on full display during Moscow's sophisticated operation to annex Crimea and (less effectively) its support of separatists in Ukraine's Donetsk and Lugansk regions. Many post-Soviet states are relatively weak in terms of the domestic legitimacy of their regimes and the stability of national borders and are therefore vulnerable to the kinds of internal security threats that Russia has the ability to provoke and manipulate (Bremmer 2009).

Moscow justified the annexation of Crimea by appealing to Russia's right to defend its ethnic Russian kin throughout the post-Soviet space. Putin made this the central theme of his 18 March 2014 Crimea speech, in which he announced Crimea's "return" to Russia and justified his policies in Ukraine to the nation. The speech can be read as a call to irredentism and a repudiation of the legitimacy of the post-Soviet division of borders. Putin laments that in 1991 "overnight the Russian people became one of the biggest, if not the biggest, ethnic group in the world divided by borders" (Putin 2014). The speech argues that in annexing Ukraine, Russia is correcting a historical wrong and suggests that the Crimean precedent can be repeated in other post-Soviet countries where Russian ethnic minorities face the threat of persecution, such as Kazakhstan and Moldova. According to Vladimir Socor (2014), "This view resembles Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic's thesis about the Serbian nation as a 'divided nation,' entitled by virtue of 'historical injustice' to reclaiming territories from Yugoslavia's former constituent republics."

These policies have caused much concern throughout the post-Soviet space, awakening fears that Russia may try to play out the Crimean scenario in their countries, or at the very least use the threat of doing so as a tool of political blackmail. Official reaction to Russia's Ukraine policy has ranged from outright condemnation and firm support for Ukraine's sovereignty (in the Baltic States, Georgia, and Azerbaijan) to muted criticism and more general appeals for a peaceful political settlement (Uzbekistan and Armenia), to plain silence on the issues (Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan). Even states whose close economic and political ties with Russia have forced them to tacitly accept Moscow's policies (Kazakhstan and Belarus) have found subtle ways to voice their displeasure.

For example, during his annual marathon press conference for representatives of the foreign press in January 2015, Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko rejected the idea that Belarus was part of Moscow's "Russkiy Mir" project and assured his audience that the Belarusian armed forces were now prepared to protect the country's borders "from Brest [on the border with Poland] to Vitebsk [on the border with Russia]." (BELTA 2015) Belarus is the country with the closest ties with Russia. The two are officially part of a "union state" project. The Belarusian population closely identifies with Russia and has been largely sympathetic to Russia's policies in Ukraine. However, results from a national survey conducted by the Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) in December 2014 seem to indicate that Russia's actions in Ukraine have heightened anxieties about Belarusian national sovereignty and eroded support for union with Russia. In this survey, 58.4% of Belarusians they would say "no" to a referendum on unification, up from 31.6% in 2007 and 47% in March 2014 (Korovenkova 2015).

There is also subtle evidence that the threat of Russian irredentism has already begun to affect the bargaining calculus between Russia and Kazakhstan. Russia has been unhappy with the Kazakh government in that it has not offered it the expected level of support on Ukraine. Astana has refrained from directly criticizing Crimea's annexation and Russia's support for separatists in the east and has approached the subject very carefully, stressing the complex historical context under which the crisis has occurred and stressing the need for an end to the violence and a negotiated settlement. Its support has stopped short of formal recognition, and it failed to support the retaliatory sanctions against agricultural products that Russia put in place in response to EU sanctions, a move that has significantly weakened the cohesiveness of the EEU's trade and customs policies. Yet, more troubling for Moscow, it has also sought to hedge against growing Russian influence in Kazakhstan by improving its ties with China and the EU.

When Russia's firebrand ultra-nationalist politician Vladimir Zhirinovskiy called for Kazakhstan and other Central Asian republics to be incorporated into Russia at a public rally in Crimea (significantly attended by Putin himself), Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev reacted decisively, demanding that Russia censure Zhirinovskiy and asserting that Kazakhstan was ready to leave the EEU at any time if it believed its sovereignty was at risk (Tengri News 2014a). Putin answered

with a statement of his own a few days later at an annual “town hall” style meeting with pro-Kremlin university students. Responding to a question by a young student whether a “Ukraine scenario” was possible in Kazakhstan, Putin praised Nazarbayev for his political wisdom and genius in leading a “territory” such as Kazakhstan that had no “history of statehood” (Tengri News 2014b). Though ostensibly complimentary, the statement can be interpreted as an indirect threat to Kazakh sovereignty and a warning of what may follow if Kazakhstan does indeed choose to leave the EEU (Suslov 2015).²

The use of these kinds of coercive tactics comes at a steep price. If Moscow continues to go down this path it will erode the legitimacy of the Eurasian project and foster resistance on the part of subordinate states. There are already some indications that this has begun to happen. Though Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan went forward with plans to establish the EEU in 2015, Russia’s efforts to imbue the new union with political and foreign policy structures was scuttled by Nazarbayev and Lukashenko, who openly rejected further political integration and stressed that integration would only continue on a “purely economic” basis (Lillis 2014). Both countries have also asserted their independence during the Ukraine crisis. Rather than unequivocally backing Russia (their ostensible ally) in its fight against the Ukrainian government, both have hedged against Russian domination by opening up channels of communication and cooperation with Kiev. Kazakhstan recently announced plans to export coal to Ukraine, where most coal mines are now under the control of pro-Russian separatists in the Donbas (Tengri News 2014c).

Moreover, EEU members and candidate countries have taken advantage of the Ukraine crisis to extract costly concessions from Russia in exchange for continued support for integration. On the eve of the EEU treaty signing Belarus successfully pressured Russia to provide it with a USD 2 billion loan and USD 1.5 billion rebate for customs duties it previously paid to Russia for the re-export of Russian oil (Falyakhov 2014). EEU member state Kyrgyzstan is asking for a payment of USD 1 billion to compensate for the losses that higher EEU import tariffs will incur to its re-export of Chinese goods to Russia and other EEU member states. Kazakhstan is putting pressure on Russia to allow it to export its gas to Europe using Russia’s pipeline infrastructure (but without paying Russian export duties) and demanding that it be allowed to restrict exports from Russia to protect its domestic industries – a clear violation of the free trade zone that the EEU is supposed to create (Kommersant 2015). In the end, the use of force and coercion in Ukraine has made it more costly for Russia to continue its regional integration project at a time when its economic resources are diminished. According to Suslov (2015), “The Ukraine crisis has ruined any prospects of real political and economic integration and reduced the EEU project to Russia buying off the loyalty of its allies.”

Positioning Itself as a Regional Security Hegemon and Guarantor of Stability

In the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis, it is tempting to conclude that Moscow is moving toward a more coercive strategy for regional integration in which it will now use the threat of separatism and ethnic conflict and its considerable “asymmetric warfare” capabilities to pressure the smaller post-Soviet states to fall in line. However, such a conclusion fails to capture the true nature of the shift in Russia’s regional leadership strategy. It is true that there have been some voices in Moscow that advocate for a more coercive turn in Russia’s policy toward the former Soviet states (Dugin 2014; Prokhanov 2014). But these voices have been in the minority. The leadership in Moscow has backed away from coercive strategies even in Ukraine. It has distanced itself from the irredentist Novorossiia project and used its influence to clean out the most fervent proponents of this project from the rebel leadership in Donetsk and Lugansk (Dergachev and Krilov 2015). The initial euphoria over Crimea has given way to a more sober assessment of the costs of a more coercive approach – both in terms of the stiff resistance it is likely to meet from the smaller states in the post-Soviet space as well as isolation from the West. Moreover, as has been examined in the above section, the post-Soviet states have actually been able to use Russia’s post-Ukraine international isolation to extract economic concession from Moscow in return for their continued support for integration.

At the same time, there is a growing appreciation in Moscow that Russia’s ability to continue to use economic incentives to ensure these states’ loyalty is now limited by Moscow’s own economic woes. As a result, Russia has begun to shift its policy of regional integration away from economic issues and toward security and hard-power issues, areas where it continues to enjoy a distinct advantage. Russia is not simply trying to use its hard and coercive power to reestablish empire. Rather, Russia’s approach is to establish its influence in these states by taking the lead on regional security issues and by positioning itself as the main guarantor of the security of the region’s regimes against internal and transnational security threats.

The Arab Spring and the rise of ISIS are of grave concern to the leadership in Central Asia and the Caucasus, both indirectly as a result of demonstration effects that may destabilize their own regimes (which are rife with corruption and weak in legitimacy), as well as directly, as jihadists that are currently fighting in the Middle East eventually come home. These problems take on increased importance as the United States winds down its presence in Afghanistan, opening up the prospect of further instability and the Taliban’s return to power. These threats are of growing importance as two of the most significant Central Asian nations, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan, face the prospects of leadership successions due to the advanced age of their authoritarian presidents. Thus far, the region’s leaders have been able to keep the lid on public discontent. But recent events in Tajikistan are a reminder of just how fragile many of these regimes are. On 4 September 2015, the former deputy defense minister led a group of armed Islamic militants

in a failed coup against the country's authoritarian and secular government that left 22 people dead and scores injured (Pamfilova 2015). In May of the same year, Colonel Gulmurod Khalimov, commander of the country's OMON forces (a special police unit used in paramilitary and anti-protest actions), publicly defected to ISIS vowing in an online video that he would return to Tajikistan to establish Sharia law and warned the country's leadership that "we are coming to slaughter you" (Reuters 2015).

In recent months, Russia has stepped up its security commitments throughout the region. It has ramped up troop deployments and military aid to Central Asian states and increased military exercises and training within the framework of the CSTO, the Russian-led regional security body (Ritm Evrazii 2015). The topic of instability in the Middle East and the threat from ISIS were at the forefront of the CSTO's September 2015 meeting in Dushanbe, Tajikistan. At Russia's initiative member states agreed to a number of reforms designed to address the ISIS threat. These included increasing troop levels of the CSTO's rapid reaction force (currently at 4000 troops under Russian command) and providing it with more modern weaponry and equipment, as well as updating the organization's crisis management mechanisms and reforming its charter and other legal documents in order to make them more responsive (Mir24 2015). Despite a direct request from the Kyrgyz government, the CSTO failed to send forces to Kyrgyzstan in May–June 2010 when riots between ethnic Uzbeks and Kyrgyz broke out in the southern part of that country, largely because the legal framework for such an intervention was not in place. These latest changes may be intended to remedy this situation. Russia has also used the CSTO to police cyber space throughout the region. The coordinated efforts of regional security bodies have led to the closure of over 57,000 websites that are deemed to pose a threat to regional stability, including many that are accused of actively recruiting fighters for ISIS (Sputnik News 2015). According to President of Kyrgyzstan, Almazbek Atambayev,

The recruitment of our citizens to participate in the armed conflict on the side of ISIS is particularly troubling, as many have returned to continue their terrorist activities and recruit others to their cause in the countries of the region. (Mir24 2015)

Russia's intervention in Syria can also be understood in this light. By supporting the Assad regime, Moscow is demonstrating its commitment to its Central Asian allies. The leadership of these countries can identify with the Assad regime. Most of them head secular authoritarian regimes that have narrow bases of social support based on clan or tribal affiliations and which face the prospect of active Islamist insurgencies. Many of these regimes do not fully trust the US and fear that any support they may get from Washington will require concessions on their part on democracy and human rights. According to prominent Russian security expert Konstantin Eggert (2015),

Putin wants to demonstrate to the whole world that if you are an ally of the US, as was Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, you will be told at the most critical moment "solve your own problems." But if you are an ally of Russia we will send you warplanes and tanks.

There are signs that Russia's readiness to respond to the region's growing security problems is helping push the integration agenda forward. After prolonged foot-dragging, Kyrgyzstan finally joined the EEU in August 2015. The fact that it did so at a time when Russia's economy is in crisis suggests that growing security concerns played a decisive role in the decision to finally accept membership (Mikheev 2015). EEU member countries have intensified cooperation with Russia (both bilaterally and under the auspices of the CSTO) to thwart the threat from terrorism, holding military exercises as well as increasing intelligence sharing (Korostikov 2015).

Russia has taken advantage of the renewed fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh to boost its influence and position itself as the lead outside mediator in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan (Bryza 2016). Though the two countries are wary that Moscow is using the conflict to promote its regional hegemony, they are also heavily dependent on Russia. Armenia is a member of the CSTO and counts on Russia as a final guarantor of its security. Azerbaijan relies on Russia for a large proportion of its arms sales. Both sides are thus forced to grudgingly accept Russia's regional security leadership, despite their misgivings (Lukyanov 2016).

Russia has been able to play on regional security concerns to push forward security proposals that reflect its more narrow security concerns. CSTO member states have begun serious discussions about forming a regional air defense system (Tass 2015). Such a system would, of course, be of little use against Islamist insurgents, but would in reality serve to counter threats from NATO and the US. Up until now, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan have jealously guarded their sovereignty and independence and stayed out of Russian-led integration efforts. However, as the Islamist threat grows many experts in these countries are now re-evaluating their stance toward Eurasian integration, with the hopes that Russia can protect them against this new threat (Temnikov 2015).

Realizing the limits of its economic resources, Russia has now invited China to participate in its projects of Eurasian economic integration. Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping have signed a memorandum of cooperation between the Eurasian Economic Union and China's Silk Road initiative whereby the two powers would work together to promote the region's economic development. Though many of the details still need to be ironed out, the Russian and Chinese expert communities are hard at work developing concrete proposals for economic cooperation that go beyond traditional areas such as energy and infrastructure and now include high tech, manufacturing, and the development of cross-regional production networks (Bordachev, Likhacheva, and Zhang 2014). Moscow's acceptance of China's growing economic presence in Central Asia represents a dramatic reversal in policy. For years, Moscow resisted Chinese proposals for joint economic cooperation through regional structures such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and instead preferred to push for economic integration through structures such as the CU and EEU, which are controlled by Moscow (Tsygankov 2013). Russia is now resigned to establish a division of labor with China when it comes to

Eurasian integration, whereby Russia takes on the responsibility for security and China for economic development.

Russia has gone from a strategy of trying to use economic incentives and soft power to push forward regional integration to one in which it is looking to use its hard-power resources to achieve the same goals by positioning itself as the main security provider for the region's states. This shift in strategy reflects a realization of the limits of its economic and soft-power resources as well as a newfound confidence in its hard-power capabilities. However, while the means and resources employed to push integration forward may have shifted more to the military and security realm, the fundamental motivations behind the push for Eurasian integration remain geoeconomic: to create an integrated economic space where Russia will be the dominant economic power and thereby advance the larger goal of Russia's economic development and modernization.

Broader significance for the study of regions and regionalism

While the focus has been on contemporary Russia, this study makes several contributions to our broader understanding of regionalism, and in particular, the role that regional powers play in pushing regional integration forward. This issue is one of growing interest in international relations, as emerging powers such as China, Brazil, and Russia have shown a keen interest in pushing forward various regional integration schemes (Acharya 2007; Hurrell 2012). The study of regionalism has traditionally been split into two tracks: the study of regional economic integration and the study of regional security complexes and hierarchies. There is a growing interest in linking and bridging both dimensions of "regioness" and in analyzing the possible patterns of interaction between them (Nolte 2010). This study illustrates the way in which regional powers can use hard power to pursue what are predominantly economic goals. Studies of regional economic integration primarily focus on the ways in which regional powers use their economic dominance or soft power to push forward the regional integration agenda (Flemes 2012). This study shows that even when a regional power's ultimate goal is economic integration, it does not necessarily have to only rely on its economic or soft-power to push forward the integration agenda. Hard-power tools or the provision of security (for example, through the deployment of peacekeeping forces) can also be used as a tool for regional powers that lack economic or soft-power resources.

Russia's new strategy for regional integration is in line with Lake and Morgan (1997) and Lake's (2009) work on regional security hierarchies. According to these studies, dominant states provide order and security, and in turn, make demands on subordinate states, which benefit from the order and therefore come to regard the leadership of the dominant state as legitimate and necessary for the maintenance of order. Dominant states form a kind of "contractual relationship" with subordinates in which protection is exchanged for loyalty.

Key is that both the dominant and subordinate states understand that the dominant state has the right to make certain demands, rooted in its 'special responsibilities' for social order, and the subordinate state has an obligation to comply with those commands if made. (Lake 2009, 38)

As the dominant military power in the region, Russia is attempting to assert its authority by establishing hierarchical relations with the region's smaller states that commit it to providing for their internal security in exchange for their participation in Russian-led regional integration projects. Lake and Morgan (1997) and Lake (2009) focus on the security dimensions of the emerging hierarchical relationship. However, Russia's goals are shaped as much by economic interests as they are by security. Russia is trying to leverage its security leadership to achieve its broader regional economic goals and advance regional economic integration.

The analyses of Lake and Morgan (1997) and Lake (2009) primarily focus on the external security threats that subordinate states face from other states; that is, in providing regional order, the dominant state keeps subordinate regional states from fighting one another. This article also examines the leadership role that powerful regional states can play in protecting states from internal security threats, particularly those that have transnational or global dimension, such as Islamic radicalism. These kinds of threats are arguably more important to developing states that are still undergoing the process of nation and state building and where the legitimacy of domestic political institutions is weak (Ayooob 1995). As such, this is a heretofore ignored dimension of security leadership that may be of particular significance to regional powers that are trying to exercise their authority over developing states. It is these kinds of internal threats, rather than threats from other states, that constitute the most acute threat to many of the post-Soviet countries, whose experiences of state- and nation-building are weak and whose domestic political regimes are poorly institutionalized and highly authoritarian. Here, Russia has a comparative advantage over other possible security sponsors (such as the United States) in that it is much more tolerant of these regime's violations of human rights and anti-democratic practices.³

Conclusion

The crisis in Ukraine exposed Russia's limited ability to use material incentives and soft power to integrate the post-Soviet space under its leadership. As a result, Russian leaders have chosen to rely on the country's still considerable hard power and military capabilities to push integration forward. Russian leaders are fully aware of the pitfall of this strategy, but they chose to pursue it because they see reliance on hard power as the only option now open to them (Bordachev 2015). The alternative would mean giving up the pursuit of regional dominance and the Eurasian integration project, and is not considered to be a viable option. Continued regional dominance and Eurasian integration are regarded as being critical to

Russia's economic revival and its ability to maintain its status as a great power in international politics, and thus worth the risk (Karaganov 2014).

Russia's decision to pursue regional integration by the most effective means that it possesses – the use of hard and military power – has heightened conflict between Russia and the West to the point where many politicians and experts believe that the two sides are in a “new cold war.” It would be easy to place the blame squarely on Russia for this turn of events. But the West – and particularly the architects of the EU's Eastern Policies – also made a critical mistake in pushing for Ukraine's Western integration without taking Russia's interests into account. In doing so, Western leaders took advantage of Russia's soft-power weaknesses, not appreciating that this would provoke a hard-power response. A more farsighted strategy would have also given Russia some stake in Ukraine's future, instead of letting the question of Ukraine's future devolve into a zero-sum contest between East and West. Russia may have been willing to accept Ukraine's European integration if it had also promised some tangible benefits for Russia. German Chancellor Angela Merkel's proposal that the EU and EEU can begin negotiations on a free trade agreement after the Ukraine crisis is settled has piqued the interest of Moscow (Trenin 2014). If such an agreement had been offered from the very beginning, we may have been able to avoid the current crisis entirely. As of now, it may be too little too late.

A Ukrainian strategy that included Russia would also have allowed Russia to develop its economic and soft power so that it would not have to rely on its hard and coercive power to push regional integration forward. Such a Russia could be a factor of regional and global stability. Instead, we now have a Russia that has become estranged from the Western-led world order and which sees the use of coercive and hard power as the only tools available to it to defend and promote its interests.

In the absence of economic and soft power it may be logical for Russia to move to a strategy where it relies on its hard power to push forward its foreign policy goals. However, such a strategy is deeply problematic. Russia may be overestimating the usefulness of its hard-power resources in achieving goals, such as Eurasian integration, which will also require it to effectively exercise economic and soft power if they are to truly be successful. Reliance on hard power can detract from its ability to develop its soft power and economic resources. Investment in the military and the embracing of military commitments on its periphery and beyond places a burden on the Russian economy and creates resentment and fear of Russia among many of the smaller states in the region. Even Russia's ability to successfully play the role of regional security provider will be limited as it does not have the tools to address the economic and social problems that are at the root of the region's internal security problems (Cooley 2012).

According to Andrei Kortunov (2015),

To quote Mark Twain: 'When the only tool you have is a hammer you tend to see the world as being made up of nails.' Because hard power is the only effective tool we have we see it as the solution to all problems.

While Russia and the rest of the world certainly face many new and pressing security challenges, Moscow's preoccupation with the use of hard power may give rise to a skewed world view which exaggerates the degree to which the world is becoming more dangerous and disorderly and overemphasizes the effectiveness of traditional military means in addressing the actual threats that are emerging in an increasingly globalized and interconnected world.

Notes

1. The current full members of the CIS are Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Ukraine and Turkmenistan are only associate members, as they never officially ratified the CIS founding treaty. Georgia withdrew from the organization in 2009 in the aftermath of the 2008 Russo-Georgian war. In 2014, the Ukrainian government announced that it will cut all its ties with the organization and submitted a bill to the Ukrainian parliament to begin the process. However, as of writing, the Ukrainian authorities have not yet made a final decision to leave the CIS.
2. We are indebted to Dmitry Suslov for pointing out the significance of this episode in Russian–Kazakh relations. Suslov (2015).
3. The US also supports authoritarian regimes when it deems it to be in its larger national interests to do so. However, the US criticizes the kind of gross human rights violations that often occur when authoritarian governments repress internal opposition. For example, the US was very vocal in its criticism of Uzbekistan's government after it massacred protester in Andijan in 2005. This prompted Uzbekistan to back away from the security ties it was developing with the US (forcing the closure of a US airbase) and to increase security cooperation with Russia and China.

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