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## Russian foreign policy and geopolitics in the Post-Soviet space and the Middle East: Tajikistan, Georgia, Ukraine and Syria

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**Edward Hallet Carr**, *The Twenty Years' Crisis 1919 - 1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1941; Reissued with a new preface by Michael Fox Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), xxxix + 233 pp. £30.36/\$39.99, ISBN-13: 978-1349950751; ISBN-10: 1349950750; ISBN 9781349950768 (e-book).

**James J.Coyle**, *Russia's Border Wars and Frozen Conflicts* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), xi + 333 pp. £99.99/\$125, ISBN 978-3-319-52203-6 (Hardcover).

**Tim Epkenhans**, *The Origins of the Civil War in Tajikistan: Nationalism, Islamism, and Violent Conflict in Post-Soviet Space* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), xi + 401 pp., £55.80/\$110.00, ISBN 978-1-4985-3278-5 (Hardcover).

**Richard J. Krickus**, *Russia after Putin* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, 2015), 128 pp. £9.60/\$15.95, ISBN-10: 1584876166, ISBN-13: 978-1584876168 (Paperback).

**Simona E. Merati**, *Muslims in Putin's Russia: Discourse on Identity, Politics, and Security* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), £89.99/\$119.99, ISBN 978-3-319-53519-7 ISBN 978-3-319-53520-3 (eBook), ISBN-10: 3319851721, ISBN-13: 978-3319851723 (paperback).

**Hélène Thibault**, *Transforming Tajikistan: State-building and Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia* (London: IB Tauris: 2018), 288 pp. £72.00/\$39.95, ISBN-13: 978-1784539214, ISBN-10: 178453921X (hardcover).

**Andrei P. Tsygankov** (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Russian Foreign Policy* (London: Routledge, 2018), xiv + 429 pp. £157.72/\$168.61, ISBN-10: 1138690449, ISBN-13: 978-1138690448 (Hardcover).

**Alexey M. Vasilliev**, *Russia's Middle East Policy: From Lenin to Putin* (London: Routledge, 2018), 554pp. £99.74/\$150.48, ISBN: 978-1-315-12182-6 (e book), ISBN: 978-1-138-56360-5 (hard cover)

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The Union of Socialist Soviet Republics (USSR), also called the Soviet Union, was one of the two superpowers during the Cold War, in addition to the United States of America. Perhaps, therefore, it has received mainly negative attention from Western and other politicians, policymakers, analysts, cinema and other media. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the Russian Federation has evolved as the USSR's main successor. However, there has been, and still is, much ambiguity about whether or not the Russian Federation has inherited the USSR's great power status – i.e. as the leader of the other (ideological) block – owing to the fact that the Cold War was often depicted as an ideological conflict. Many political analysts, amongst whom Francis Fukuyama is a prominent one, believed that with the collapse of the Soviet Union a new world order arose.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, neo-liberalism and global capitalism – as the prominent political and economic ideology and practices – are expanding and have replaced state communism in many countries.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, one should be cautious about the cacophony that existed or exists after the Cold War. The ideological cold war may have stopped. However, the geopolitical rivalry has not necessarily stopped in tandem with the ideological one. State communism as a practice or ideology was replaced by capitalism and neo-liberalism, yet the nationalist practice and ideology in Russia and many other Post-Soviet republics did not vanish and became even more prominent. Certainly, the Soviet Union disintegrated into fifteen countries, and most of the Post-Soviet countries suffered from social, economic and financial crises in the 1990s. However, the current realities are different. Since the mid-2000s, Russia is militarily and economically a vibrant power again. Particularly its huge reserves of fossil energy give it an important position economically in global politics.

The Russian Federation (Russia) is the largest country which succeeded the USSR after its collapse and hence, in geopolitical jargon Russia is regarded as the rump state of the former USSR. In many ways, it is the main successor of the USSR. This succession, and inheritance, is certainly true with regard to the military affairs and international legal treaties. However, it is true also in a geopolitical sense. Having grudgingly accepted the Western incorporation of the Baltic states, Russia is resolved to keep the other Post-Soviet states in its geopolitical sphere of influence. Although Russia is no longer called 'the Evil Empire', it still suffers from such negative images even decades after the Cold War. Furthermore, as an heir to the Russian Empire of the Tsarist period, it is often perceived as an imperialist colonial power by, and in, other Post-Soviet countries – even in those which have good relations with Russia. Even though the Russian behaviour in its near abroad may be labelled by outsiders as aggressive, neo-colonial and imperialist, Russia regards itself as an injured country and entitled to safeguard its geopolitical sphere of influence against foreign encroachment, which it perceives, in turn, as aggression. The Russian military interventions in Georgia (2008), Ukraine (2014) and Syria (2011 and more intensely since 2015), and its support for separatism and authoritarian regimes, have received much criticism internationally. Nevertheless, it is very simplistic, and analytically unproductive, to accuse a country of aggression without offering an analytic explanation or at least a plausible narrative that facilitates understanding its political behaviour. Certainly, there are geopolitical visions (i.e. codes, self-images, doctrines and schemes) behind countries' – even behind an aggressor's – political behaviour. For example, it is unlikely that South Africa militarily intervenes in, say, the Philippines or any other country in the Pacific Ocean. However, it is imaginable that the USA intervenes in these countries. Having a naval capacity, or generally a large arsenal of arms, is an important factor in countries' foreign political behaviour in addition to a geopolitical vision, and these two factors often interplay with each other. This review article intends to discuss Russian geopolitical behaviour in several countries in its near abroad and argues that even though Russia tries to preserve its great power status, and pursue its interests from a (neo-)realist perspective, there are certain limitations to it. Moreover, it is important to take into consideration the Russian Federation's geopolitical vision – or self-imagery – in any analysis and understanding of its military interventions in its near abroad.

Russia, in recent decades, has evolved increasingly as an assertive country which pursues its interests regionally and even globally – think for instance about Venezuela – often opposing the Western hegemony:

In December 2016, the Russian president Vladimir Putin ... [approved] a new Foreign Policy Concept for the Russian Federation (2016). The document updates and amends the goals and directions of Russia's foreign policy in response to the changes in U.S. politics and international affairs ... [Similar] to the previous foreign policy documents, the new concept names regional integration within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and cooperation with CIS members as Russia's regional priorities.<sup>3</sup>

The Russian intervention in Syria shows that Russia is resolved to safeguard its geopolitical interest also outside the Post-Soviet space as well as inside it. However, as we will further discuss, its geostrategic behaviour and persuasion of interests may often be rather reactive than active, and does not always serve the primary interest of Russia.

Despite the fact that each case of conflict mentioned in this article has its own history and rationale of eruption, and shows its own peculiarities, they still share certain commonalities and similarities. An interesting question is whether the Russian foreign policy in its near abroad, in the Post-Soviet Space and in the Middle East, is based on certain defined goals and rationales and whether there are consistent patterns visible between Russian policies towards these countries. Another interesting and somewhat bold question, within this context, is whether the events in 'Euromaidan' and elsewhere in Ukraine and the Russian reaction towards them could be related in one way or another to the Syrian Conflict. Even though it needs more qualifications and clarification, yet a cautious confirming answer is possible. The Russian intervention in Syria is not totally irrelevant from the Russian experiences of intervention in the conflicts in the Post-Soviet Space; not only from the most recent one, i.e. the Ukrainian conflict, but also from the Georgian, Chechen and Tajikistani conflicts. Syria is a client state of Russia, and the conflict there is the only case of Russian military intervention outside the Post-Soviet Space after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Therefore, this article tries also to examine whether the Russian policy towards Syria is consistent with, and even premediated by, its geopolitical and security-related experience in the Post-Soviet Space.

The main scope of this article is to review and offer an understanding of the Russian foreign policy, particularly in the military, diplomatic and security spheres, in its near abroad. Hence, Russian relations with those countries are selected in which Russian intervention is the most stressed or theoretically important for the overall understanding of Russian foreign policy and geopolitics. This article tries to give an informed and objective analysis. It does not mean that it does not reject or approve certain arguments. As this article deals with Russian foreign and geopolitical policies, it may shed light on the Russian positions and interest. However, this is not done from a biased position. In fact, this article tries to offer an understanding – and in no way a defence – of Russian foreign policy.<sup>4</sup>

The cases discussed in this review article are the Russian foreign policy, notably with regard to its security and geopolitical interests, towards certain conflict-struck or post-conflict countries in its Post-Soviet near abroad, as well as in relation to Syria where Russia defends its client state in alliance with its regional (instrumental) ally Iran. The cases discussed are Ukraine, Georgia, Tajikistan and Syria. However, there are and have been other cases of conflict in the Post-Soviet Space – as in Southern Kyrgyzstan, Transnistria and Nagorno-Karabakh – which do not constitute the main focus of this article. Currently, in these post-conflict (Southern Kyrgyzstan) or frozen conflict areas (Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria) the status quo prevails and they are not among the main areas of contestation between Russia and the West.<sup>5</sup> Despite not being a former Soviet republic, Syria is also discussed because that country is among the main traditional allies of the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Russia in the Middle East and is currently a main area of conflict where the Russian interests may overlap but also often collide with the American and its allies' interests and policy scopes. As the Syrian Conflict is currently the most fatal one, and

has far-reaching consequences for areas outside the Post-Soviet Space in the Middle East and Europe, it is interesting to examine in what ways the Russian experience in the conflicts in Post-Soviet countries may have influenced its attitude and behaviour in the Syrian Conflict.

Although the conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine show differences, they also show similarities. Although no two conflicts are similar in all aspects and all these conflicts had their own, history, dynamism and rationale, still the experiences gained in one conflict may influence a country's geopolitical (re-)actions in other conflicts, especially when the geopolitical interests at stake are similar (see below). Retrospectively, after the onset of the Syrian and Ukrainian conflicts the Russian reaction in Georgia could be understood better as there are similarities between the Russian tactics and behaviour in all these conflicts. One may even argue that the Russian experiences of the Georgian War (August 2008), Chechen Conflict (1991-early 2000s and low-level insurgency until the present) and the Tajikistani Civil War (1992 -1997) have codetermined Russian behaviour in Ukraine and Syria. Although geostrategic realities may suggest that they are independent of each other, yet the motives behind the Russian interventions originate from similar security and spatial geostrategic interests.<sup>6</sup>

Using recent literature and other relevant sources, this article tries to find patterns in recent Russian foreign policy in its near abroad.<sup>7</sup> In order to do that this article introduces first, briefly, a multi-dimensional theoretical framework for understanding states' geopolitical and foreign policies. Even though this article may also briefly discuss the books mentioned and integrates the facts and insights offered by them, this current article does not intend to be a conventional multiple book discussion but rather an analytical thematic review article. This review article critically reviews and discusses the current mainstream views on the Russian foreign policy and, implementing ethnogeopolitical and critical geopolitical reasonings and analyses, puts question marks after several such claims, in order either to confirm or disprove, and often to qualify them, offering informed and plausible analytical arguments, and sound geopolitical reasonings, using a number of recent works, and other relevant sources.

## Dimensions of foreign and geopolitical policies

The behaviour of states, notably their foreign behaviour, has attracted much attention from scholars of political geography, political history, political science and international relations. States are legal subjects and political actors and have, therefore, social and political agency. However, this does not mean that there are no constraints in their behaviour as their behaviour may be conditioned by many factors and conditions. A simple understanding of the (neo-)realist school of international relations, and particularly when a state is assumed a rational actor, gives the impression that states are free to act without constraints. Accordingly, the larger and more powerful states may encounter no major constraints whereas smaller and weaker states are restricted in their endeavours by many more (and sometimes stubborn) factors and conditions. However, such presuppositions are not completely true, because aside from restrictions that international laws and structural factors and conditions, such as geographical location, demography and territory and available natural and financial resources impose, values and geopolitical codes and doctrines formulated by the state itself often impose restraints and restrictions and therefore guide the foreign policy of states, even that of larger and powerful states. It is appropriate to mention that small countries such as Zimbabwe and North Korea, as well as large states such as India, the former Soviet Union and China were and are loyal to certain values engraved in their foreign policy doctrines, which turned out to be expensive in economic or diplomatic costs, while a more pragmatic foreign policy would have been relatively less expensive and more profitable to their respective states.

It is appropriate to frame states' foreign policy in theoretical concepts which do not only typify policies based on values, but which at the same time are also able to differentiate between

**Table 1.** Dimensions of foreign policy: a quadratic model.

	Pragmatism	Constructions/Codes/Imageries
<b>Initiation/Manipulation</b>	A Rational Actor (Neo-)Realism	B Idealist/(Self-aware) Constructivist
<b>Reaction</b>	C Ad-hoc/Panic (re-)actor	D Defiant/often ideologically Counter-Hegemonic and persistent

different dimensions of such policies. Hence not only objectives and values but also strategies and the sequence of actions are important in this regard, in order to understand the foreign policies of countries. Foreign policy objectives and geopolitical codes – i.e. values and sustained beliefs in one country's foreign policy – as well as structural factors such as one country's demographic or economic weight and geographical location but also its history could guide, and at the same time restrict, pragmatism within its foreign policy. On the other hand, the sequence of (re-)action, and hence the strategies taken, are also important in understanding and analysing that country's foreign policy. Hence, it is useful to analyse foreign policy in a quadratic, bi-dimensional framework: (non-)pragmatism is one dimension and another dimension is the sequence of (re)action (see Table 1).

Traditionally, foreign policy is often analysed in a theoretical framework that distinguishes between two ideal-typical polar opposites: (neo-)realism versus idealism or constructivism. (Neo-)realism often presumes pragmatic policies of states pursuing their national and geopolitical interests as rational actors, whereas Constructivism (or Idealism) presumes rather sustained and pre-constructed actions conditioned by international laws or by other factors, or even by value-driven (altruistic) ideals, or by other premediating conditions, values or guidelines such as mental maps, narratives and geopolitical imageries and codes, which may constrain the formulation of a pragmatic policy and construct the geopolitical and foreign policy of states. However, such a distinction is ideal-typical and often the border between them is blurred in practice.

Glenn H. Snyder in his analytic and informative review article entitled 'Mearsheimer's World – Offensive Realism and the Struggle for Security: A Review Essay' maintains that defensive realism could be regarded as a sub-category of realism.<sup>8</sup> However, it is fair to mention that defensive realism differs radically from the default understanding of realism as a defensive realism presumes that the (re-)actor concerned about its security identifies and defines threats to its interest and develops strategies in order to cope with them. Moreover, there will always be a good share of constructivism in this practice, as the strategies formulated with a defensive realism perspective are inherently reactive, and as the threats ought to be defined and identified before strategies are developed by the respective states and should correspond as much as possible with their primary geopolitical codes and foreign policy values and ultimately also with the respective states' primary interests.<sup>9</sup> Even though there are certain conceptual similarities between them, the relationship between pure realism and defensive and reactive realism remains somehow tense as, in pure realism, a rational actor freely and often despite restraints such as international laws, pursues its own interest rather than be compelled to defend itself, often in an ad-hoc and reactive fashion, against other countries' encroachments. Such a reactive attitude does not leave all options available and often compels the defendant to choose from a few available options. A rational actor perspective certainly matches a pure (neo-)realist perspective, yet has a problematic relationship with a defensive or reactive realism. When a defendant (re-)actor is compelled to re-act hastily, impulsively and ad-hoc, it may even sometimes be called an irrational actor as not all results may benefit its interests.

Another dimension, i.e. the distinction between active initiation versus reaction, could be more appropriate for understanding such policies, as the first actors' action – either initiation, or manipulation or even provocation – often puts the reactive defendant in a difficult and awkward position and compels it to react often in ways that it may no longer pursue its primary interests pragmatically and as a freely acting rational actor.<sup>10</sup>

In his oft-cited and influential work entitled *The Twenty Years' Crisis 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, Edward Hallett Carr persuasively maintains that despite the fact that international relations schools of realism and idealism – an ideal-typical precursor of constructivism – are often regarded as opposites, still display thin and somehow blurred boundaries as their differences are arbitrary in practice.<sup>11</sup> The realist school of international relations presumes that states pursue their national and geopolitical interests almost always and freely, whereas the idealist or constructivist schools maintain that (written and unwritten) laws and rules as well as visions and values embedded in foreign policy discourses (co-)determine states' foreign policies. However, in reality, the definition of identification of national or geopolitical interests is often subject to geopolitical reasoning, agenda-setting and contention between different social strata of a national society and is therefore highly dependent on a prioritization and definition of that state's foreign policy objectives and goals, which are often reflected and mentioned in its discursive policy directives and agendas. A state may claim to pursue its national interests, which may be pragmatic or based upon such values as regard and support for human rights and democracy or the right of all countries to development, or even upon its traditional imperial values. However, such definitions or prioritizations of national or geopolitical interests, as well as national (or imperial) values, depend, in fact, heavily on historical experiences of that state. Therefore, statements about the nature of Russian foreign policy – or of any other country, for that matter – being based on pragmatism, political realism, idealism, imperial self-image and mentality, or even moral obligations to interfere with, and provide security to, other states situated in its geopolitical sphere of influence, may all be true when one discusses and analyses the policies critically and looks at each (re)action or, even statement or claim, from different points of view and perspectives.

Consequently, instead of holding a strict realist vs idealist/constructivist binary perspective, it is more appropriate to implement multi-scale and inclusive critical 'geopolitical reasonings' in analysing states' foreign policy,<sup>12</sup> which do not focus only on geostrategic factors but pay attention also to cultural factors and (historically constructed) values. Such types of geopolitical reasoning and analysis are prevalent in the geographical traditions that consider multi-scale and multi-level analyses, such as subversive geopolitics, ethnogeopolitics and critical geopolitics, whereas the (neo-)classical geopolitics is mainly a state-centred tradition and often overlaps with the (neo-)realist traditions of international relations be it in a more determinist and less voluntarist fashion.<sup>13</sup> Mariya Y. Omelicheva borrows the concept 'construction of ontological claims' from Merje Kuus, and correctly mentions that a critical geopolitical perspective, which considers and synthesizes states' geopolitical discourse to develop a new understanding of changing geopolitical images of nations, is an appropriate approach for analysing foreign policy.<sup>14</sup> As she maintains,

Instead of conceptualizing foreign policy as a product of imperial ideology or competition for power and resources [i.e. a (neo)realist approach], the critical geopolitical approach views it as a social, cultural, discursive, and political practice of 'construction of ontological claims'. These are the so-called 'truths' of global politics constructed, defended, and experienced by the leadership of countries.<sup>15</sup> The examination of Russia's engagement with Central Asia [and elsewhere in its near abroad, for that matter] through the lens of its own beliefs about power, ideology, and the nature of global affairs can enhance our understanding of Moscow's foreign policy in the region.<sup>16</sup>

As geopolitical approaches take into consideration both the sustained beliefs and actual strategies in the analysis of a state's foreign policy, the aforementioned bi-dimensional theoretical model could be a useful tool in such a geopolitical analysis. Although certain states show predominantly a certain behaviour which could be associated with a certain cell – North Korea with the cell D, for instance – it is not a useful strategy to allocate states to these cells (see [Table 1](#)). It is more useful to analyse and reflect upon each case of policy with this bi-dimensional model, as states may implement different policies that may relate to more than one cell, even though certain policies and hence its association with a certain cell may still predominate most of the time.

## Russian foreign policy in its near abroad

As Omelicheva observes, the bulk of commentaries and studies about Russian foreign policy frame it in a (neo-)realist theoretical understanding. Such analyses and discussions often view Russia as an aggressive expansionist and even a (neo-)imperialist actor with little regard for international law and as a state which follows the logics of the international relations school of (neo-)realism, in which political and military power are among the major factors in pursuing a rational actor's national, or even Imperial interests. Reviewing and citing authors such as Paul Kubicek, Annette Bohr, Stephen J. Blank and Alexander Cooley whose views on Russian foreign policy correspond with a (neo-)realist understanding, and even authors such as Andrei P. Tsygankov and Marlene Laurelle whose main view on Russia is an explicitly imperialist one, Mariya Y. Omelicheva maintains that:

The majority of publications on Russia's foreign policy have interpreted its international conduct through a lens of political realism ... Realist commentaries have also appeared under the rubric of classical geopolitics emphasizing the geostrategic importance of [its near abroad] ... Russia has also been cast as an inherently expansionist empire, whose authoritarian political culture and entrenched imperialist outlook have shaped its policies toward its neighbors. Prominent historians studying the relationship of the Russian Empire to the non-Russian borderland underscored the role of its imperial ideology centered on its beliefs in 'virility and power' and recognition by the Western states of Russia's expansionism. Russia's belief in its civilizing mission toward the backward people of the East was also named among the reasons behind Tsarist Russia's policies, and the Soviet institutional, cultural, and ideological frameworks of control ...<sup>17</sup>

However, as she correctly discusses, an imperialistic discourse is itself a constructed discourse and is not inevitably devoid of idealism. In fact, such a view brings together constructivism and realism, for in assessing its goals such a discourse may calculate the power and image of 'Self' in a rather realistic and pragmatic fashion. According to Omelicheva,

In contemporary scholarship, Moscow's imperialist ideology has been linked to diverse ideas and images about a cultural unity of peoples in the post-Soviet territory that Russia is predestined to preserve. Russia's continuing quest to define and strengthen its national identity has given rise to explanations informed by constructivist assumptions. The constructivist conceptions of Russia's foreign policy have highlighted the centrality of the idea of greatpowerness in Russia's understanding of the Self.<sup>18</sup>

Even though the Russian history of imperial expansion and the Soviet Union having a super-power status may undoubtedly have influenced the construction of Russian self-image and its accompanying geopolitical codes and vision,<sup>19</sup> this article argues that the Russian foreign policy and Russian interventions discussed here should not *a priori* and uncritically be regarded as an aggressive and expansionist (neo)imperialist behaviour, for such a unidimensional understanding may deprive us of otherwise sound and multifaceted analyses. Therefore, this article intends to critically discuss, analyse, and possibly deconstruct, such claims by implementing methods of geopolitical reasoning and analyses which consider several factors using a multidimensional geopolitical framework, which distinguishes between active initiation and reaction in foreign policy and geopolitical behaviour (such as the aforementioned model in Table 1). Although this review article does not intend to be a multiple book discussion but rather a thematic review about Russian foreign policy in its near abroad, the books mentioned below, in addition to E. H. Carr's *The Twenty Years' Crisis 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, constitute the main corpus and backbone of the literature in this article.

Alexey M. Vasiliev gives an elaborate discussion of the Soviet and Russian foreign policy towards the Middle East and North Africa in his book entitled *Russia's Middle East Policy: From Lenin to Putin*. It is a large monograph of 554 pages, which could serve also as a reference book and is useful as a source of information for students and scholars of international relations, geopolitics and, above all, history. For the purpose of this current article, the most useful parts of the book are those discussing Russia's policy towards Syria, and its strategic ally in the Syrian Conflict, i.e. Iran.<sup>20</sup> Syria is an ally of both Iran and Russia. Although a discussion of Iranian-



Russian and Iranian-Syrian foreign relations does not fall within the scope of this article, it suffices to mention that even though the Iranian intervention in the Syrian Conflict appeared to be advantageous for the Russian geopolitical interest in Syria, the Russian-Iranian relationship could be labelled as instrumental. In order to describe the nature of Iranian-Russian relationship, Vasiliev uses the section heading 'A good neighbour, but neighbours are not chosen: the Russian Federation and Iran'.<sup>21</sup>

Simona E. Merati's monograph entitled *Muslims in Putin's Russia: Discourse on Identity, Politics, and Security* discusses the relationship between Russia and Islam, both in domestic and international affairs – notably in relation to Russian foreign policy towards its near abroad. She uses discourse analysis of Russian sources as her main method of research. Unlike Tim Epkenhans's study (see below) which uses sources also written in other languages such as Persian and Tajik, Merati's study exclusively uses sources which are written in the Russian language. Nevertheless, this may not constitute a major bias in her study as the bulk of publications in Russia are written in Russian rather than in regional languages. This book's scope is beyond the Russian position towards Islam with regards to its security and geopolitical interests, and also pays due attention to the position of Islam in Russian nation-building. Those parts of Merati's book which are particularly relevant for this article discuss the importance of the Muslim world in the Russian geopolitics of Eurasianism and Russian regional geopolitical interests in the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Middle East, as well as those parts which discuss Islam in relation to Russian security concerns both domestically and in its near abroad.<sup>22</sup>

*Routledge Handbook of Russian Foreign Policy* is the title of a large edited volume, by Andrei P. Tsygankov, about different aspects, directions, and (regional) foci of Russian foreign policy. Like other similar studies about foreign policy, this book's chapters bear a great deal of subjectivity with regard to political issues, which is not necessarily a negative quality as it reflects and sheds light on different issues from different perspectives. Different chapters are written by different authors with diverse convictions and perspectives. Therefore, they have different qualities and merits. Nevertheless, this edited volume is useful as a prominent textbook for scholars and students of Russian foreign policy. The discussed scope and orientations of Russian foreign policy, and the facts and insights offered, in this edited volume are useful, broad and multi-faceted. The most relevant chapters for this article are those dealing with Russian foreign policy in the Post-Soviet Space and the Middle East. These chapters are entitled 'The Middle East' by Philipp Casula and Mark N. Katz, 'The Collective Security Treaty Organization', by Ruth Deyermond, 'The Caucasus' by Maxim A. Suchkov, 'Central and Eastern Europe', by Dmitry Ofitserov-Belskiy and Andrey Sushentsov, and 'Central Asia' by Mariya Y. Omelicheva. As the contributions in this edited volume are well-documented and cite many sources, these cited sources will often be mentioned in this article in order to introduce them to reader.<sup>23</sup>

Two other books entitled *The Origins of the Civil War in Tajikistan: Nationalism, Islamism, and Violent Conflict in Post-Soviet Space*, by Tim Epkenhans and *Transforming Tajikistan: State-building and Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia*, by Hélène Thibault are informative from multiple perspectives and for multiple purposes, and it is fair to say that they, particularly the former, could serve as indispensable volumes within any canon of literature about Tajikistani modern history. Whereas the first is a result of in-depth discourse analyses of written and unwritten sources, the second monograph reviews the prominent literature about Soviet institutional policies on (ethno-)religious identity, particularly in Tajikistan, and in addition reports on Thibault's fieldwork in Tajikistan, an innovative endeavour in political science research.

*Russia after Putin* is the title of Richard Krickus' monograph published by the U.S. Army War College Press and Strategic Studies.<sup>24</sup> Despite the connotation associated with the author's institutional affiliation and publisher, this book cannot fairly be called Russophobic and biased, as a main argument of the author is that the USA should seek cooperation, rather than conflict, with Russia and its allies, Iran and China.<sup>25</sup> Discussing the main Russian foreign policy objectives in its near abroad, Krickus maintains that Russia intends to:

[d]eny former Soviet Republics in the near abroad the opportunity to follow the Baltic Republics into NATO and the EU; Belarus, Georgia, and Ukraine in particular. Instead, incorporate them, as well as the Central Asia[n] states, into economic and security systems dominated by Moscow – e.g., Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and a new Eurasian Economic Union [and, in addition] [j]oin China in a grand strategy to present the Americans with a firewall in every part of Eurasia, and do the same in denying Washington successful attempts to achieve regime change throughout Eurasia and the Greater Middle East. Of course, Moscow will avoid any effort on Beijing's part to treat Russia like a junior partner.<sup>26</sup>

Studying, and reflecting upon, the situation in Russia's near abroad one may conclude that these Russian (and Chinese) goals are correctly mentioned. Nevertheless, the author represents these policies in a reversed sequence, as Russia regards such policies as legitimate reactions and regards Western support for regime changes in its geopolitical sphere of influence as well as the existing and emerging NATO and EU-enlargement as serious encroachments upon, and threats towards, its interests.

James J. Coyle's monograph, *Russia's Border Wars and Frozen Conflicts*, despite its author's self-admitted partisanship (see later), is a conveniently helpful work as it puts the current 'frozen' untermiated separatist conflicts in wider political and legal contexts.<sup>27</sup> Unlike Krickus who tries to be objective, Coyle discusses these conflicts guided primarily by a Western perspective and explicitly expresses his partisanship and holds self-admittedly a Western perspective as he intends to offer policy advice for the West, NATO and US national interests.<sup>28</sup> Coyle explains the separatist conflicts by theories of nationalism which is not very appropriate as these offer insufficient, and very often too one-sided, explanations. Other theoretical perspectives such as neo-realism, constructivism and geopolitical reasonings could be more effective in this respect. Although issues of irredentism alone could be understood by theories of (ethno-)nationalism, such theories do not offer a solid and sufficiently relevant basis for understanding Russian foreign policy in its near abroad. Russian foreign policy can best be understood using critical (ethno-)geopolitical and realist – though not necessarily expansionist – approaches of international relations. The complex ethnopolitical nature of inter-territorial and inter-ethnic relations make an ethnogeopolitical approach a good, and perhaps the best, option.<sup>29</sup>

Coyle's study proceeds more than three years after the Russian incorporation of Crimea and separatist Civil War in Eastern Ukraine and many years after the onset of the Syrian Conflict. Therefore, it is very likely that the author's perspective on these issues have influenced his interpretation and understanding of other cases of conflicts in his book. According to him the West 'legitimately' supported the new post-revolutionary government in Ukraine against the separatists who receive Russian support.<sup>30</sup> Coyle's assumption that Russia is a supporter of separatism, whereas the West is categorically a supporter of states' territorial integrity, is not credible when one reviews the Western support for the independence of Kosovo and generally for the disintegration of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia in the 1990s and early 2000s. Although Coyle's narrative is at times too Russophobic, whereas those of Maxim Suchkov, Dmitry Ofitserov-Belskiy and Andrey Sushenstov tend to represent the Russian position, their conclusions are rather similar: Russia is not pleased with NATO's enlargement's attempts in its near abroad. Even though the strategies of Russia and other Post-Soviet states are not exactly similar in all cases, still a general pattern is visible: Russia wants to be (preferably solely) in charge of provision of security and intermediation in its near abroad, whereas those Post-Soviet states suffering from territorial separatism persist in their right to territorial integrity and regard the separated areas as a part of their own national territories.<sup>31</sup>

Dmitry Ofitserov-Belskiy and Andrey Sushenstov discuss Russian Foreign Policy towards Eastern Europe and Ukraine together in one chapter. This may look odd, as Ukraine similar to Russia, Georgia, and Tajikistan is a Post-Soviet country. However, they justify their choice as they detect an obvious connection between the Russian policy towards Ukraine and the enlargements of NATO and the EU eastwards: '[t]hreatened by loss of vital interest, Moscow had to take drastic measures that cost it in reputational and economic terms'.<sup>32</sup> It is remarkable and telling that

Ofitserov-Belskiy and Sushenstov regard the power transition in 2014 in Ukraine, unlike most Western accounts, a *coup d'état* and not a revolution.

Despite his expansionist view of Russia, Coyle maintains that the Russian recognition of independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia – as well as supporting separatism in Ukraine – occurred as a Russian reaction against NATO's desire to admit Georgia and Ukraine to NATO.<sup>33</sup> Coyle's discourse on, and argumentation about, the Russian-Georgian War of August 2018 reads as Russian punitive reaction to Georgian provocation. Coyle's description of actual skirmishes on the ground concludes that Georgia initiated the hostilities after which Russia reacted.<sup>34</sup> He also maintains that the Georgian initiative to restore its sovereignty over South Ossetia was guided by a false conviction that Georgia would be admitted to NATO. Mikheil N. Saakashvili believed that Georgia's admission to NATO would deter Russia from military intervention, as NATO would support Georgia in its quest against Russia if Russia took military action against Georgia.<sup>35</sup> However the reality was more complex. Even though, his latter statement about Georgian motives behind its quest for NATO membership seems to be, at least partially, true as some Western countries offered Georgia moral and diplomatic support, Coyle's first argument needs qualification as the situation was more complex. In reality, even though Russian soldiers were stationed in South Ossetia and in Abkhazia, those ethno-territorial conflicts predated the Russian-Georgian War of 2008. These were those autonomous ethnic territories that initiated the separatist conflicts, not Russia: South Ossetia announced its secession from Georgia after Georgia announced its unilateral independence from the Soviet Union. Abkhazia, however, tried first to reach a compromise by restoring its pre-1936 status of a union republic on an equal footing, and only associated with Georgia. Later Abkhazia also declared independence. According to Coyle, '[i]n Abkhazia and South Ossetia, however, people identified with their ethnicities and with their language ties. As violence escalated between the populations, Russia intervened militarily on behalf of the minority populations.'<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, it is important to note that most Ossetians in Georgia resided and still reside outside South Ossetia elsewhere in Georgia, while there also exists an Abkhazian minority in Georgia proper outside Abkhazia. There were no separatist escalations outside the autonomous territories, despite the fact that Abkhazians and notably Ossetians were also concentrated in certain other districts outside South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Therefore, theories of (ethno-)nationalism alone cannot satisfactorily explain the separatist conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Analysing ethnic conflicts in the Post-Soviet Space, it is imperative to pay attention to ethno-geopolitical dynamics and structures, most notably the (pre-)existing hierarchical ethnoterritorial federalism and the centrality of Moscow as the Centre and also balancer.<sup>37</sup> The Soviet Nationalities Policy has brought about an ethno-territorial hierarchy. The largest ethnic groups in the former Soviet Union (USSR) possessed, and were titular in, Union Republics (SSRs) – for example, Georgia – whereas smaller ethnic groups were awarded lower-ranked territorial autonomies, either with an Autonomous Oblast (i.e. province) (AO) – like South Ossetia – or with an Autonomous Republic (ASSR) – such as Abkhazia. Moscow was not only the centre of the Russian Federative Socialist Republic but also the centre of the whole Soviet Union. Traditionally, the elites in lower-ranked autonomous territories were allied with Moscow which acted as a balancer and protector against possible excesses of union republics. After the cession of union republics from the Soviet Union – even in certain cases before the total collapse of the Soviet Union – many autonomous territories declared their cessation from the union republics in which they were located, and so did South Ossetia as well, and, after a while, Abkhazia.

Moreover, it is also important to note that the complex ethno-political map of the Caucasus also mattered. South Ossetia was contiguous with North Ossetia and Abkhazians also had ethnic kinfolk in the North Caucasus – the Abazas and Circassian peoples (i.e., the Kabardians, the Cherkess and the Adygheans) – in the Russian Federation. These peoples supported, and lobbied in favour of, their ethnic kin in Georgia. Moreover, Russia regarded itself as entitled and perhaps obliged to intervene as a lot of people in Abkhazia and South Ossetia had obtained Russian

citizenship. Although, Saakashvili, the president of Georgia at that time, may have attempted sincerely to reincorporate the ethnic Abkhazian and South Ossetian societies into Georgia by similar means, Georgian attempts came rather late and had less impact than similar and earlier Russian attempts had already had. Finally, in 2007 Saakashvili established a parallel South Ossetian government, headed by the ethnic Ossetian Dmitry I. Sanakoev. Also, this fact had an impact on the escalation of hostilities as the separatist government clearly did not tolerate any other 'parallel' South Ossetian government. In reality, there were already skirmishes between the (pro-)Georgian forces of Sanakoev and Ossetian separatists days before the Georgian operation of the reconquest of Tskhinvali, the South Ossetian Capital, and the Russian intervention.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, the Russian reaction does not accord totally with a (neo-)realist rational actor strategy, as such a perspective assumes that the political behaviour of an expansionist and (neo-)imperialist rational actor tends usually to be rather of a voluntarist than determinist nature, and presumes a timely planned series of action rather than often rather hasty, impulsive and ad-hoc reactions, the results of which may not necessarily be opportune and propitious for the re-actor's interests. As the rationale behind the Russian interventions in Georgia and Ukraine – similar to its policy towards Chechnya and in general towards its North Caucasian Federal District, and in Tajikistan and Syria – reveal security concerns, they cannot be understood primarily as expansionist, for they were reactions codetermined by the geostrategic security concerns and came only after the initiation of the conflict by other actors. Although a rational actor may also react in a quest to pursue its own interests, still, a strong expansionist imperialist rational actor must conveniently have sufficient power and security of action to act first according to its own interest before it is obligated to react often in ways that may contradict its own geopolitical interests.

Likewise Coyle, and Suchkov as well, discussing the Russian security concerns in the Caucasus, maintains – similar to many Western scholars, analysts and journalists – that the Russian-Georgian War (2008) erupted because of a Russian and Georgian strategic (mis)calculation of a possibly forthcoming Georgian NATO membership.<sup>39</sup> However, Suchkov maintains that Russia's concerns were legitimate and understandable as it was legitimately concerned that the conflicts in the South Caucasus might spill over into the North Caucasus and negatively impact domestic security affairs in that part of the Russian Federation.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, Suchkov believes that Saakashvili's speculative miscalculations that the power transition from Vladimir V. Putin to Dmitry A. Medvedev could offer some chances for Georgia's territorial restoration, may have caused the Georgian government to take timely military action. Contrary to most Western analysts, Suchkov maintains that Russia and Saakashvili had 'fairly close' relations and Russia would not oppose Georgia's territorial restoration if it was done gradually under Russian supervision.<sup>41</sup> The late Georgian president Eduard A. Shevardnadze, the former Soviet Minister of Foreign affairs, was not much loved by the former communists and current (Eurasianist) Russian hardliners. Therefore, it is very likely that Russia was initially not opposed to Saakashvili who led a revolution against Shevardnadze. However, their relations deteriorated increasingly: 'Since August 2004, when Saakashvili carried out a police raid operation in South Ossetia, relations between him and Putin were set on a steady path for a direct confrontation. Both sides exchanged hostile acts – the spy scandal in 2006, the subsequent deportation of Georgians from Russia, and the embargo on Georgian products.'<sup>42</sup> Saakashvili's government had its own schemes of reintegration of the separatist territories and speculated about Western support as it had applied for NATO membership. Additionally, the declaration of independence by Kosovo and its mainly Western recognition had possibly made Saakashvili and his policymakers act in a timely manner – or better said rather hastily – as they may have been worried that the recognition of Kosovo's independence could serve as a precedent for the recognition of independence of other separatist entities elsewhere in the world such as South Ossetia and Abkhazia. These, in addition to the Georgian perception of Russia helping the separatists are plausible reasons that could explain the timing of Georgian military action.

Even being a reactive one, Russia's intervention may still be explicable by a rational actor, and neo-realist understanding – in the broad sense – of Russian foreign policy behaviour after governments with pro-Western and anti-Russian orientations seized the political power in Georgia and Ukraine. The following facts could be possible motives behind the Russian intervention in Georgia and the annexation of Crimea. Even though they are small territories, Abkhazia and South Ossetia still have their own geopolitical value. Abkhazia, and particularly Crimea have rather long coastlines on the Black Sea. As NATO expanded eastwards, Russia felt insecure in its hegemonic position in the Black Sea. Even though the Black Sea may not be geostrategically very important to the West, it is of geopolitical interest to Russia. It is from where Russia can supply its naval base on the Mediterranean Sea in Syria. Syria is in fact the only client state of Russia amidst a predominantly American geopolitical sphere of influence in the Middle East and the only Russian maritime base outside the Post-Soviet Space is located there. Moreover, Russia needed bases to the south of the Greater Caucasus Ridge contiguous to its territory after Georgia closed the last Russian military base in Georgia in 2007 in order to be able to deploy land troops fast and easily in case it needed to intervene to the south of the Greater Caucasus Ridge which is difficult to penetrate and in the Middle East. As the previous and recent Russian wars in the Caucasus, particularly against the Chechen separatists and the Salafi 'Emirate of the Caucasus' (also called Imarat Kavkaz), have shown Russia could easily control the lower hills and plains while it had great difficulties in controlling the areas located in higher altitudes where the rebels often took refuge. South Ossetia is connected to the territory of the Russian territory through the Roki Tunnel which makes the deployment of land troops easier by bypassing the higher altitude areas. A few years later, the Syrian Conflict revealed exactly the importance of such a geopolitical reasoning. During the height of the Syrian Civil War in November 2015 when Turkey shot down a Russian aircraft, a general sense of fear was prevalent in Georgia as many officials and ordinary people were afraid that Russia and Turkey may fight their war in Georgia.<sup>43</sup>

Although the recognition of independence or annexation of separatist territories by Russia could be viewed as pragmatic, it was, nevertheless, a reactive act, and not necessarily favourable for allegedly imperialist or expansionist Russian geopolitical interests from a realist rational actor perspective. From a rational actor perspective, the geopolitical costs of the Russian intervention in Georgia and Ukraine have been greater than its gains. Recognizing these separatist entities as independent does not serve the primary Russian interests. From a rational actor point of view, it would have been more favourable for Russia to keep these conflicts unsolved and hence operate as a mediator and balancer, a position which could offer it much more leverage and influence in Ukraine and Georgia than it now has. Regardless of the fact of who initiated the fighting – either the Georgian troops or the separatists – a Russian intervention was inevitable as Russian soldiers were deployed in the separatist regions in Georgia as peacekeepers. However, witnessing a Western lack of resolve and a hesitant attitude, it is still not very clear why Russia did not totally defeat and replace Saakashvili's government, as its geopolitical gains may have been much greater and its (reputational and diplomatic) costs may not have been larger than the actual Russian intervention had already brought about. In other words: why did Russia recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent, if it could have gained whole Georgia? A clear answer cannot be found as the Western and Russian strategic calculations of that time are not publicly and clearly revealed. Similarly, the annexation of Crimea and the secession of the Lugansk and Donetsk regions are not necessarily in favour of the Russian geopolitical interests as they decrease Russian political leverage and influence in the Ukrainian domestic political arena. Ofitserov-Belskiy and Sushenstov, nevertheless, maintain reactive rationales and state: 'Ukraine turned out to be a weak link in the foreign policy of Russia. Moscow failed to draw it towards its integrational projects. The separation of the two closely connected economies which had been planned with a long-term perspective in mind, was disrupted by the coup d'état in Kyiv in 2014.'<sup>44</sup> It is understandable that the sudden disruption of the Russian-Ukrainian close connection was detrimental to Russian interests. However, it is not certain that a support for separatism

in eastern and southern Ukraine was more favourable for the Russian interests. The population in the southern and eastern parts of Ukraine are largely Russophones and Orthodox Christians and have traditionally been more oriented towards Russia than towards Europe. Secession of some of these traditionally Russian-oriented eastern and southern regions from Ukraine reduces the proportion of traditionally Russian-oriented Ukrainians vis-à-vis the European-oriented Ukrainians of western Ukraine, of whom a significant number are Catholics, and in the overall Ukrainian population, and may antagonize the remaining portion who may have been pro-Russian traditionally but would change their views after the Russian support for separatists. This in turn reduces the number of pro-Russian voters in the Ukrainian electoral demography and hence decreases the overall Russian impact on domestic politics in Ukraine. Russia uses its Islamic organisation in order to absorb and integrate the indigenous Crimean Tatar population into the Russian nation-building practice and discourse. According to Merati, however, such efforts have only had, at best, mixed results until now.<sup>45</sup> All in all, the annexation of Crimea could be favourable to Russia only if it was impossible for Russia to preserve the whole or a large share of Ukraine, notably the entire traditionally Russian-oriented eastern and southern parts of Ukraine, as its sphere of influence. From a rational actor's perspective, it would have been more advantageous for Russia to keep such traditionally Russian-oriented areas inside Ukraine in order to preserve its opportunity to meddle in Ukrainian politics. Therefore, the Russian behaviour in Ukraine, could be interpreted as punitive and yet its 'second best option', and testifies to a Russian perception of vulnerability vis-à-vis, and danger emanating from, the West. It is important to take into account critically the wider ethnogeopolitical context when one analyses the Russian – as well as any other country's – foreign policy as geopolitical interests are much broader than only territorial losses or gains.

Russia has faced fewer challenges from the West in Central Asia compared with what it did in the Baltics, Ukraine and the Caucasus. Western oil companies had initiated some ties with notably Kazakhstan in the 1990s, and after the 9/11 attacks, the USA opened two airbases, one in Uzbekistan and one in Kyrgyzstan, both of which are closed now. Americans were expelled from Qarshi (Karshi)-Khanabad airbase after US-Uzbekistani relations turned sour in 2005 and the US military left Manas airbase in Kyrgyzstan in 2014.

Aside from its rich energy resources, the main Russian geopolitical interests in Central Asia are informed by its security concerns related to the radical and violent Islamist jihadi groups, and drug trafficking from Afghanistan.<sup>46</sup> The central authorities' power in Central Asia is growing increasingly stronger, and certain arguments exist among many observers that the slogan of fights against terrorism is used, in fact, as an excuse to restrict political freedom in those countries. However, the reality is more complicated. It is appropriate to note that even though according to many Western governments it may be difficult to accuse Hizb-ut-Tahrir, an organization which is legal in several Western countries, of active violence, one of its main goals, similar to that of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIL), is to re-establish a caliphate, and that organisation was clandestinely active in Central Asia.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, it is understandable that Central Asian governments would like to see it banned. Even though the term 'jihadi' may sound controversial for, strictly, jihad means struggle for a good cause and does not necessarily include using violence against the significant 'Others', still the term jihadi is used in mainstream (Western) parlance and many Western authors and commentators speak about jihadis, (Islamist jihadists), as well as violent Salafis, or even Islamists. Most authors from Russia, other Post-Soviet countries and Syria, however, tend to use simply Salafis(ts), Wahhabis(ts), takfiris(st) or Salafi/Wahhabi terrorists. A more neutral term used in some circles, particularly in the West, is violent extremism; in this case Islamist violent extremism. Despite the multitude of names (such as violent Islamist jihadi(sts), Wahhabis(ts), takfiri(sts), subversive Islamists, violent militant Sunnis, and violent Salafi(sts)), the context in this review article makes clear which groups it discusses.<sup>48</sup>

The largest Russian military base outside the Russian Federation, the 201st Military Base, is located in Tajikistan.<sup>49</sup> Owing to the Tajikistani Civil War in which Russia supported the

Tajikistani pro-governmental forces against some secular and notably Islamist forces, and Tajikistan's long borders with Afghanistan, Tajikistan has been a main, and arguably the most important, focus of Russian security policy in Central Asia.

The Tajikistani Civil War was the first rather large-scale and obviously partisan Post-Soviet Russian military intervention in its near abroad.<sup>50</sup> The earlier-mentioned Tim Epkenhans's book about the Tajikistani Civil War is excellent research, using a lot of memoirs and archive material, and helps understand the nature of that conflict. This monograph can provide good reading for a broad audience; not only those interested in, and familiar with, Tajikistan but everyone who wants to understand more about the dynamics of civil war. The Russian impact on post-independent Tajikistan suffering from a civil war was felt in many spheres: in the cultural sphere, in the security and intelligence (KGB) spheres, and finally in the political sphere as Russia openly sided diplomatically and militarily with the (pro-) government troops.<sup>51</sup>

According to Epkenhans, the Tajikistani experience of the civil war is regarded as traumatic and spiteful and the authorities in Tajikistan do not encourage any official commemorations of the Tajikistani Civil War and until lately it was somewhat taboo to discuss it overtly.<sup>52</sup> However, Epkenhans observed a change of attitude with that regard in recent years.<sup>53</sup> Although not mentioned explicitly by either Epkenhans or Thibault, perhaps the overt Russian stance on the Syrian Civil War together with some other Post-Soviet countries is a factor in the legitimization of suppressing Islamist opposition and labelling them as violent and terrorists in these countries. Thibault discussed and attended Islamic study and discussion groups associated with the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) in 2011 before the Syrian War. Russia and Uzbekistan intervened rather successfully in the Tajikistani Civil War on behalf of the former elites.<sup>54</sup> While initially a coalition between the former communists and moderate elements from the opposition were tolerated, increasingly and under the banner of counterterrorism more Islamic opposition elements were excluded from the Tajikistani official political arena. Ultimately in 2015 the IRPT was banned and listed as a terrorist organization.<sup>55</sup> Similar trends are visible also in other Post-Soviet states and regions. In a conference in Grozny, Chechnya (2016) organized by the head of Chechen Republic (Glava Chechenskoi Respubliki) i.e. the new title of Chechen regional president) Ramzan A. Kadyrov,<sup>56</sup> Wahhabis and Salafis were excluded from the list of legitimate Sunni Muslim groups.<sup>57</sup> As it was terminated more than two decades ago in the 1990s the Tajikistani Civil War may no longer get much attention from current news and analytical articles. However, this Russian experience, along with that in Chechnya, has probably guided and codetermined the tough Russian stance in Syria. As in Syria, Russia fought a war against conservative Sunni and often violent Islamist militias, often called Wahhabis, in Chechnya and Tajikistan.<sup>58</sup> Russia was a winner in both conflicts, prevented a Chechen secession from Russia, installed a pro-Russian local government there and secured the Tajikistani government that was manned mainly by the former communist elites with a pro-Moscow orientation. Hence, Russia may regard victory in Syria, and even keeping Bashar Assad in power, as very possible and is intent on winning yet another new victory, this time, however, outside the Post-Soviet Space.

The success in Tajikistan was preceded by a failure: the Soviet traumatic experience in Afghanistan. Tajikistan's long borderline with Afghanistan evokes perceptions of danger among Russian security specialists. The Soviet Union failed to keep its client state in power and left Afghanistan, effectively admitting to its defeat by the Islamist Mujahedeen forces. Afghanistan, however, is not only a Russian Vietnam, a source of military humiliation and trauma, but it is also regarded as a contemporary source of real danger as violent jihadi (often called Salafi or Wahhabi) militias such as the Taliban,<sup>59</sup> Al Qaeda and ISIL and drug-traffickers have been, and still are, active in that country.<sup>60</sup>

To coordinate states' efforts in the fight against terrorism, the Russian leadership initiated the CIS Anti-Terrorist Center (ATC) ... with its structural subdivision ... in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. The intensified military and security cooperation of Russia with the former Soviet Union republics was institutionalized in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), whose permanent military base was established in Kant,

Kyrgyzstan, in 2002. The base hosts part of the Collective Rapid Deployment force (CRDF) designed to support collective security of the region. Another CRDF division is staged at the 201st Military Base in Tajikistan... The CSTO has also implemented the annual international counter-narcotics drills Kanal (Channel) and instituted the Collective Rapid-Response Force in 2009 to counter aggression, terrorist attacks, and drug trafficking operations.<sup>61</sup>

Generally, the borderline between Wahhabism, violent jihadism, terrorism, pro-Western revolutionaries, and drug-trafficking is thin and blurred in the Russian and Post-Soviet Central Asian imaginations and understandings.<sup>62</sup> Hence, Islamist (often called Wahhabi) terrorism as well as drug-trafficking are formally proclaimed as the Russian and other Post-Soviet countries' main concerns in Central Asia:

The largest military reconnaissance exercise to date under the auspices of the CSTO took place in Tajikistan in 2016, where about 1,500 servicemen from CSTO member states practiced a scenario of an army of insurgents crossing into Tajikistan from Afghanistan. Although, there is little evidence that any state or non-state group intends to infiltrate Russia or Central Asia, from the Russian standpoint history is filled with uncertainties and changes of intent, particularly in the West. Against the backdrop of NATO and U.S. expansion along Russia's western flank, Russia cannot hope to survive without a good defense in Central Asia.<sup>63</sup>

Even though Omelicheva sees no tangible evidence of such an invasion from Afghanistan, the reality of the Tajikistani Civil War and even the contemporary drug-trafficking practice into the Post-Soviet territory indicate trans boundary movement to, and mainly from, Afghanistan.

The Russian policy towards Central Asia could be understood both by a sense of constructivist – perhaps the best designation of which could be the geopolitical discourse of civilizational Eurasianism – as well as (neo-)realist perspectives of foreign policy. The main concern of the Russian foreign policy behaviour in Central Asia is, however, based on security more than anything else. The security of Russia and Central Asian states is challenged mainly by non-state actors in Central Asia. Although Russia shares the economic markets of Central Asia with China within the realm of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) admitting China's greater economic potential, it regards Central Asian military and security affairs as its imperial prerogatives but also as a moral duty, even though this altruism may be informed mainly by imperial history and geopolitics.

According to Phillipp Casula and Mark N. Katz,

Moscow's military intervention in Syria, beginning in September 2015, marked a sharp break from the much more reluctant, hesitant role that Russia had played in the region after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Not only was this Russia's first post-Soviet military intervention outside the former USSR, but its relative success in shoring up the Assad regime stood in stark contrast to the results that the United States and its allies achieved through military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya.<sup>64</sup>

As the rationales behind the interventions were different, it is not easy to agree with the authors that Russian intervention in Syria has been more successful compared with Western intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, it can be regarded as more successful compared with the Western intervention in Libya where Western intervention has brought about an almost failed state. The Russian active intervention in Syria, indeed, constitutes a breach with its Post-Soviet behaviour as it is Russia's first intervention outside the Post-Soviet Space. Despite the rather successful pro-government Russian and Iranian interventions, the war has not yet ended in Syria. Moreover, the main goal of Russia's intervention has been preventing a regime-change in Syria, whereas the goal of American interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq were regime changes. Although the American state-building upon the ruins of the former state institutions in Iraq and Afghanistan and the provision of security in those countries has not been fully successful, it is not fair to regard the Russian intervention as comparatively more successful than the American interventions as they had different rationales and goals. As their past record testifies, the Americans also have a successful record of keeping client regimes in power. As will be discussed further in this article, the Russian intervention in Syria is guided both by a desire to safeguard its



geopolitical interest as well as a perception of threat from violent jihadi militias informed by its experience in the civil wars in Chechnya and Tajikistan.

Vasiliev reviews and discusses the Soviet and Russian relations with Middle Eastern countries. He maintains that after having been less engaged, Russia again started supporting the Syrian government when Yevgeny M. Primakov became the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs and concludes that now Syria is the only Arab state which has a cordial relationship with Russia.<sup>65</sup> Gone are the times when the Soviet Union was allied with Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt and the Democratic Republic of Yemen. Now Syria is Russia's only client state and geopolitical sphere of influence in the Arab world and Russia seems intent on preserving it assertively, even by aggressive means such as aerial bombardments:

While Russia stood aside in Iraq, supported Western troops in Afghanistan, and abstained from interference in Libya, Russia assumed a much more active stance in Syria, trying to live up to its self-perception as a global power, prevent regime-change in Damascus, and push back both Western influence as well as the influence of terrorism, broadly understood. Finally, the resurgence of political Islam, especially in its militant version (which we will label here 'jihadism'), was perceived by Russia as a threat to be countered. Russian politicians, journalists, and scientists alike particularly blame the West for its rise and – in reminiscence of the plot during the Soviet war in Afghanistan – portray many conflicts in the Middle East as an oversimplified binary opposition between secular regimes and 'jihadist' movements, the latter often seen as being sponsored by the West and the Gulf states.<sup>66</sup>

Casula and Katz maintain that Russia tried to solve the conflict first by diplomatic ways. However, because of ideological differences they had with the Arab states which financed the Syrian opposition, such an option did not seem feasible:

Especially before fall 2015, Russia intensified its diplomatic efforts to bring conflicting parties together, both internally and externally. But Moscow's attempts to convince foreign sponsors of the opposition to ease their support failed. This failure was also a result of Moscow's strained relations with many Gulf States and ultimately contributed to Russia's decision to step in militarily, triggering the largest and most protracted Russian Post-Soviet military intervention outside of the former USSR. The intervention stabilized Damascus's position in the civil war, and led to the recapture of previously lost territory.<sup>67</sup>

The Russian intervention – in fact, the Russian air support to the Syrian government's army and Iranian, Afghanistani (mainly Hazara) and Iraqi voluntary troops under the command of Iranian Revolutionary Guard's Quds force – was instrumental in defeating ISIL and other extremist militias and the Syrian government's recapture of major cities such as Aleppo. Although the efforts by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) were also instrumental in defeating these militias, it is not certain what the outcome would have been without the Russian intervention as Turkey has an uneasy relationship with these forces of which a major component is the Syrian Kurdish *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel* (YPG) (People's Protection Units) party, which Turkey regards as a branch of the *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê* (PKK, Kurdistan Workers' Party) in Syria.

Having experienced the Tajikistani and Chechen conflicts, Russia and Central Asian countries are anxious about the situation in Syria. Notably, foreign jihadists, many of whom had earlier fought in Afghanistan, fought in Chechnya. Merati's conclusions are correct and agree to a large extent with other books, articles and news. Accordingly, the Russian domestic and foreign policy with regard to Islam and security are interdependent, and while traditional indigenous forms of Islam are regarded as a legitimate element within a Eurasian Civilization, exogenous extremist forms of Islam (notably Wahhabism) are regarded as a security threat. Hence fighting such militias in its near abroad is deemed beneficial for security in Russia and other Post-Soviet states, the more so when there are indications and evidence of interrelations between such militias in and outside the Post-Soviet space.<sup>68</sup> Russian policymakers and security specialists are worried about the effects and consequences of Sunni Islamist extremism (often simply named 'Wahhabism' in the Post-Soviet media)<sup>69</sup> for, and in, Post-Soviet countries, and some even claim that there were ISIL fighters among the Ukrainian protestors in Euromaidan, in Kiev, and believe that the West supports Islamist militants in Syria and elsewhere.<sup>70</sup> Russian security officials have

discovered that 'Many citizens from the North Caucasus that had fought in Syria now were helping indigenous jihadists create a Caucasus Caliphate, and they were being joined by foreign terrorists as well.'<sup>71</sup> Therefore, Russian and Central Asian officials are not only cautious about the presence of their nationals among jihadi militants in Syria, but are also anxious about their return home, where they, perhaps with the assistance of foreign fighters, may pursue their own agenda. 'Furthermore, fanatical jihadists are certain to look beyond Syria as such and hope to precipitate a sectarian war throughout the region. For its part, Moscow can expect some of the Chechens, Ingush, Dagestanis, and Ossetians [*sic*]<sup>72</sup> fighting Assad's force in Syria to join their counterparts in the North Caucasus and to carry jihad into Russia proper.'<sup>73</sup> As there are ample indications and evidence that there are fighters in Syria originally from the Russian Federation and other Post-Soviet countries, and as foreign fighters have been fighting in the wars in Chechnya, Tajikistan and Afghanistan, and as the American and certain Arab countries' support for the Afghan Mujahedeen against the communist Afghanistani government was evident, such perceptions and claims are not irrelevant.<sup>74</sup>

Katz and Casula convincingly discuss Russian motives in Syria and their reasoning is informed by correct facts. However, an important geopolitical motive behind Russia's interest in Syria is not mentioned by them. Russia is largely a land-locked country and Syria offers Russia its only foreign maritime base, at the heart of the Middle East, in the middle of the Western geopolitical sphere of influence: 'For Putin, Assad is a loyal ally, a good customer for Russia's military hardware, and at Tartus, Syria has provided the Russian Navy with its only Mediterranean base.'<sup>75</sup> According to Vasiliev, the Russian interest in Syria is less economically motivated and is mainly due to its geo-strategic position on the Mediterranean and concerns about the rise of extremist Islamism in a situation of a vacuum of power after the fall of the Assad government (compare the situation in Libya), as well as the fact that Syria is the only state in the Arab world which shares with Russia anti-American sentiments.<sup>76</sup> As Vasiliev puts it, 'The only Arab country that openly opposed American hegemony was Syria. The US Congress adopted anti-Syrian resolutions. Anti-Syrian rhetoric in Western media was escalating. The situation was pushing Moscow and Damascus toward each other.'<sup>77</sup> The Russian future stance on Syria can only be speculated on. It is very probable that Russia may allow other actors such as the EU and China to participate in the reconstruction and economic life of a post-conflict Syria so long as they recognize Russian political supremacy. This has also been the Russian stance in its Post-Soviet near abroad. As the experiences in Tajikistan and Chechnya demonstrate, Russia may opt for the incorporation of moderate opposition in a post-conflict Syrian governmental structure. However, it is not certain whether Syria and Russia will tolerate Islamist or even conservative Islamic political parties in a post-conflict Syria. Although the Islamic parties in most Muslim Post-Soviet countries, particularly in Tajikistan, are increasingly less tolerated, moderate Islamic movements are tolerated in Russia itself, especially in its Muslim autonomous territories.<sup>78</sup> The government of Ramzan Kadyrov governs Chechnya by Islamic rules while it remains loyal to Moscow. However, as the experience in Tajikistan suggests, the Syrian Conflict itself may be a turning point in the tolerance towards Islamist or conservative Islamic political parties in the Russian geopolitical sphere of influence.

## Conclusion

Russian policy towards its Post-Soviet and Middle Eastern near abroad could be explained by both (neo-)realist and constructivist theoretical understandings. Analysing Russia's intervention in its near abroad, it is important to look also at Russia's own geopolitical imagery: how Russia views the world, notably its near abroad, and Russia's place, role or even mission in it.<sup>79</sup> These geopolitical visions provide Russia with a repertoire or descriptive and prescriptive ideas making certain foreign policies and their outcomes more or less possible.<sup>80</sup>

Reviewing Russian interventions in its near abroad it appears that Russian interventions were reactive decisions many results of which cannot be understood as advantageous from a rational actor perspective. The Russian support for separatism in South Ossetia, Abkhazia and eastern Ukraine, and the annexation of Crimea, do not yield advantageous results for the Russian interests from a rational actor perspective. The Russian military intervention in Syria is informed mainly by security concerns. Even though there are elements of both in each case of Russian intervention in its near abroad, generally it seems that the Russian behaviour outside the Post-Soviet Space is guided primarily by security concerns and neo-realist understandings whereas the Russian interventions in the Post-Soviet Space seem to be guided by its imperial historical experience which bestows upon the Russian geopolitical interests a self-defined layer of moral obligation and combines it with either altruism or expansionism or with both at the same time.

Like any other country, Russia has pursued its national interests in its near abroad. However, the interests were defined to a certain extent by Russian geopolitical visions emanating at least partially from its imperial history, location in the world, and perceptions of threat from abroad. Even though the Russian image in the West still suffers from the Cold War and is often labelled as aggressive and expansionist, it has taken rather reactive and even defensive positions. It has reacted to the NATO and EU enlargement in its (former) geopolitical spheres of influence, which it viewed as an encroachment upon its position and a threat to its security. It has also defended its client regime in Syria firmly as it is suspicious of every regime change and it has a legitimate concern about the Sunni violent jihadi militias many of whom are from, or entertain ties with, the North Caucasus and other places in the Post-Soviet Space. As in Central Asian markets where China enjoys its share next to the Russian political and military supremacy, Russia may tolerate or even encourage Chinese, European, Turkish and Iranian investment, and participation, in the reconstruction of Syria while it preserves its political and military supremacy.

Russia, having witnessed velvet revolutions in its near abroad, would perceive a regime change in Syria as yet another injury to its geopolitical position. As a significant segment of the rebel forces in Syria were violent extremist Sunni militias and many were even from Russia and other Post-Soviet countries, Russia's alertness seems logical and in addition could be reinforced by a moral narrative of counter-terrorism. Russia may make itself unpopular among many Sunnis by supporting an Alevite-headed regime in Syria. However, Russia seems intent on preserving its client regime and accepting the price. Therefore, the Russian position in Syria is not totally defensible from a rational actor perspective other than a reactive one. To begin with, Russia had no role in the emergence of war in Syria. This war is expensive and costs a lot for Russia both in money and in reputation. However, Russia is willing to pay this price for the sake of its security and geostrategic position. In other words, similar to other cases discussed in this article Russia did not choose the primarily most profitable option; however, given the fact that it was confronted with an uneasy situation, Russia reacted in a way that was feasible and that it believed pursued its interests at that moment in time.

It is not easy to predict Russia's future foreign policy behaviour. American unilateralism, and possibly isolationism, may enhance Russia's relations with Europe, particularly (or better said hypothetically) when NATO ceases to exist. However, much depends on Russia's own domestic military, but more so on economic, sources of power. Russia had a pro-Western orientation when Andrei Kozyrev was the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs under President Yeltsin in the early 1990s. However, that brief period had already ended during Boris Yeltsin's administration and Russia took even a more assertive position under the Putin and Medvedev administrations assisted by high energy prices and renovating its military arsenal. It remains difficult to speculate but with the economic rise of Asia, Russia and its allies in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization or Eurasian Union may fulfil a greater role in connecting the European Union with Asia; and, anyhow, it is perceivable that Russia will remain an assertive global power even after Putin and Medvedev retire. After all, geopolitical codes and visions are not totally dependent on

persons but very often on historically rooted perceptions, (sometimes traumatic) experiences, lessons learnt, and imageries evolved over time.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes

1. F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York and London: Free Press, 1992).
2. I rather use the term state communism than socialism, because social democracy is still vibrant in many parts of the world particularly in Europe. In addition, I use this term because despite their credo and self-image of internationalism most former communist states were rather nationalist in both political and economic spheres. Those state communist countries regulated their national economies – for example by five years plans – and were economically introvert and even protectionist. Even though they did have some trade relations with other countries, those were usually countries with a similar ideology and foreign trade did not constitute a main component of their national economic life.
3. M.Y. Omelicheva, 'Central Asia' in A.P. Tsygankov (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Russian Foreign Policy* (London: Routledge, 2018), pp.325
4. An abridged version of this article, with a different scope and for a different audience, was previously published. See Babak Rezvani 'Russian Interventions in the Post-Soviet and Syrian Conflicts', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol.31, No.6 (2019), pp.1376–1380.
5. It can be argued that Russian strategic intervention is less prevalent in Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria and Kyrgyzstan as tensions in those areas are less acute and the international community, particularly the West, is less affected by them as status quo prevails. Indeed, such a statement could be debatable. However, this article does not discuss them also because of other issues such as the length of this article.
6. Tajikistan is discussed mainly because that country, similarly to Syria, is a traditional ally of Russia and, moreover, the Tajikistani Civil War particularly resembles in many respects the Syrian Civil War. Although Tajikistan is within the inner circle of Russian near abroad, i.e. Post-Soviet Space, and Syria outside it, in both countries, Sunni violent jihadi militias and more moderate oppositional militias fought and still fight (in Syria) against a Russian-backed government, and both countries are perceived by Russia as geostrategically important for Russian security.
7. This article, particularly its theoretical section 'Dimensions of Foreign and Geopolitical Policy', overlaps partially with an earlier and shorter one. However, the scope of this current article is broader than the previous one and the conclusions taken are not completely similar. See B. Rezvani, 'Russia and the Georgian and Ukrainian Conflicts: Some Remarks', *Iran and the Caucasus*, Vol.22, No.4 (2018), pp.409–410.
8. For a succinct discussion see the following review article: Glenn H. Snyder, 'Mearsheimer's World—Offensive Realism and the Struggle for Security: A Review Essay', *International Security*, Vol.27, No.1 (2002), pp.149–173.
9. Note that a defensive realist position could be placed both in the cells C as well as in B in Table 1 as it may also refer to the policies that are defensive in nature but are calculated well and adjusted to the respective geopolitical codes, ideals, international laws and other restraints.
10. See also Rezvani, 'Russia and the Georgian and Ukrainian Conflicts', pp.409–10.
11. E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis 1919 - 1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1941; reissued with a new preface by Michael Fox, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
12. G. Ó Tuathail, 'General introduction: Thinking Critically about Geopolitics' in G. Ó Tuathail, S. Dalby, and P. Routledge (eds), *The Geopolitics Reader, Second Edition* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp.1–14.
13. Mark Bassin regards ethnogeopolitics as a civilizational geopolitical discourse advocated by Russian nationalist politicians such as Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. However, this article does not follow such a narrow definition. Ethnogeopolitics has undeniably deep roots in Russia and other Post-Soviet countries. However, Zhirinovskiy's ideas and discourse, often borrowed loosely from Lev Gumilev's ideas, are not necessarily the only school of thought, for an ethnogeopolitical analysis does not equate a priori with a (geo-)political discourse. In this article it is chosen for a disciplinary definition of ethnogeopolitics similar to that of the Association for the Study of EthnoGeoPolitics. See M. Bassin, 'The Emergence of Ethno-Geopolitics in Post-Soviet Russia', *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, Vol.50, No.2 (2009), pp.131–149; V.D. Mamadouh, 'Geopolitics in the Nineties: One Flag, Many Meanings', *GeoJournal*, Vol.46, No.4 (1998), pp.237–253; V. D. Mamadouh, 'Geopolitics in the 2000s'. (Exploring Geopolitics.org, 2009). [http://www.exploringgeopolitics.org/publication\\_mamadouh\\_virginie\\_geopolitics\\_in\\_the\\_2000s\\_geostrategy\\_goeconomics\\_post\\_structuralistic\\_subversive\\_feminist\\_neo\\_marxist\\_political\\_geography/](http://www.exploringgeopolitics.org/publication_mamadouh_virginie_geopolitics_in_the_2000s_geostrategy_goeconomics_post_structuralistic_subversive_feminist_neo_marxist_political_geography/) (accessed 23 March 2015); V. D. Mamadouh and G. J. Dijkink. 'Geopolitics, International Relations and Political Geography: The Politics of Geopolitical Discourse', *Geopolitics*, Vol.11, No.3 (2006)

- pp.349–366; B. Rezvani, (2013). 'EthnoGeoPolitics and its Forum', *Forum of EthnoGeoPolitics*, Vol.1, No.1 (2013), pp.4–6; B. Rezvani, 'Situating Ethnogeopolitics and Reflecting upon its Developments', *Forum of EthnoGeoPolitics*, Vol.6, No.1 (2018), p.8; B. Rezvani, 'Understanding Ethnogeopolitics and its Developments', *Forum of Ethnogeopolitics*, Vol.7, No.1 (2019), pp.23–43; B. Rezvani and M. Ilyasov, *Etnogeopolitika i Forum Etnogeopolitika* [EthnoGeoPolitics and its Forum], *Forum of EthnoGeoPolitics*, Vol.5, No.2 (2017), pp.7–8.
14. M. Kuus, 'Critical Geopolitics', in R. Denmark (ed.), *The International Studies Encyclopedia* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), pp.673–701.
  15. Omelicheva refers here to M.Y. Omelicheva, 'Critical Geopolitics on Russian Foreign Policy: Uncovering the Imagery of Moscow's International Relations', *International Politics*, Vol.53, No.6 (2016), pp.708–726.
  16. Omelicheva, 'Central Asia', pp.326–27.
  17. Omelicheva, 'Central Asia', p.326. The available news and commentary at media outlets confirm her statement. Omelicheva cites authoritative sources such as P. Kubicek, 'Regionalism, Nationalism and Realpolitik in Central Asia', *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol.49, No.4 (1997), pp.637–55; A. Bohr 'Regionalism in Central Asia: New Geopolitics, Old Regional Order', *International Affairs*, Vol.80, No.3, (2004), pp.485–502; S.J. Blank, 'Challenges to Russia in Central Asia', *The Journal of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy*, Vol.3, No.5 (2011), pp.209–21; A. Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). Omelicheva, 'Critical Geopolitics on Russian Foreign Policy'; A.P. Tsygankov, 'Assessing Cultural and Regime-Based Explanations of Russia's Foreign Policy: Authoritarian at Heart and Expansionist by Habit?', *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol.64, No.4 (2012), pp.695–713; M.H. Van Herpen, *Putin's Wars: The Rise of Russia's New Imperialism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014); S.K. Pandey, 'Asia in the Debate on Russian Identity', *International Studies*, Vol.44, No.4 (2007), pp.317–37; M. Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2012); A.L. Clunan, *The Social Construction of Russia's Resurgence: Aspirations, Identity, and Security Interests* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2009); T. Hopf, *Social Construction of Foreign Policy: Identities and Foreign Policies, Moscow, 1955 and 1999* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002); A.P. Tsygankov, 'Moscow's Soft Power Strategy', *Current History*, Vol.112, No.756 (2013), pp.259–264. See also the discussions about Russia/USSR as a *superetnos* or *etnosizmetma* in M. Bassin, 'The Emergence of Ethno-Geopolitics in Post-Soviet Russia', Vol.50, No.2, (2009) pp.131–49 and especially at pp.141–45.
  18. Omelicheva, 'Central Asia', p.326.
  19. See e.g. G.J. Dijkink, *National identity and Geopolitical Visions: Maps of Pride and Pain* (London: Routledge, 1996); M. Bassin, 'The Emergence of Ethno-Geopolitics in Post-Soviet Russia'.
  20. See A. Vasiliev, *Russia's Foreign Policy in the Middle East: From Lenin to Putin* (London: Routledge, 2018), pp.344–72 and 442–514.
  21. Vasiliev, *Russia's Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, p.359.
  22. Simona E. Merati, *Muslims in Putin's Russia: Discourse on Identity, Politics, and Security* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). See especially chapters 5, 6, and 7, pp.99–195.
  23. I have discussed the Russian intervention to an extent in an earlier article. However, due to time limitations, and the state of my study and investigations at that time, I could not discuss several issues. However, as this review article intends to be an integral review article, I need to repeat certain background information which was discussed (more briefly) also in my earlier article, Rezvani, 'Russia and the Georgian and Ukrainian Conflicts'.
  24. R.J. Krickus, *Russia after Putin* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, 2015).
  25. Krickus, *Russia after Putin*, p.86. He compares the stance of the American policymakers towards Iran as similar to that on China, a country that also was in quest of being recognized as an important geopolitical actor decades earlier.
  26. Krickus, *Russia after Putin*, p.21.
  27. J. Coyle, *Russia's Border Wars and Frozen Conflicts* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).
  28. Coyle, *Russia's Border Wars and Frozen Conflicts*, pp.272–73.
  29. For diverse views on ethnogeopolitics see e.g. Bassin, 'The Emergence of Ethno-Geopolitics in Post-Soviet Russia'; A. Dhaka, 'Ethnofederalism and the Ethnogeopolitics of Afghan State', *The IUP Journal of International Relations*, Vol.9, No.3 (2015), pp.35–44; M. Ilyasov, 'Etnogeopolitika: Nauka ili novaya ideologiya?' [Ethnogeopolitics: a science or a new ideology?], *Forum of EthnoGeoPolitics*, Vol.6, No.2 (2018), pp.12–13; T.G. Ponomareva, E.V. Zakharova, and R.G. Danilko, 'Mesto i rol' separatizma v administrativno-territorial'nom razvitii ekonomiki' [The Place and Role of Separatism in the Territorial-Administrative Development of Economy], *Ekonomika in upravlenie* [Economics and Management] 7 (2015), pp.13–20; B. Rezvani, 'EthnoGeoPolitics and its Forum'; B. Rezvani, 'Situating Ethnogeopolitics and Reflecting upon its Developments'; Rezvani and Ilyasov, *Etnohepolitika i Forum Etnogeopolitiki* [EthnoGeoPolitics and its Forum], *Forum of EthnoGeoPolitics*, Vol.5, No.2 (2017), pp.7–8.
  30. Coyle, *Russia's Border Wars and Frozen Conflicts*, pp.60–71.
  31. Coyle, *Russia's Border Wars and Frozen Conflicts*, pp.189–91; Ofitserov-Belskiy and Sushenstov, 'Central and Eastern Europe', pp.286–93; Suchkov 'The Caucasus', pp.320–22.
  32. Ofitserov-Belskiy and Sushenstov, 'Central and Eastern Europe', p.292.

33. Coyle, *Russia's Border Wars and Frozen Conflicts*, pp.189–91.
34. Coyle, *Russia's Border Wars and Frozen Conflicts*, pp.188–93.
35. Coyle, *Russia's Border Wars and Frozen Conflicts*, p.191; see also Suchkov, 'The Caucasus', pp.320–22.
36. Coyle, *Russia's Border Wars and Frozen Conflicts*, p.199.
37. For a schematic illustration see figure 3.2 in B. Rezvani, *Conflict and Peace in Central Eurasia: Towards Explanations and Understandings* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015), p.78; See also B. Rezvani, *Ethno-territorial Conflict and Coexistence in the Caucasus, Central Asia and Fereydan* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), pp.69–91; T. Martin, 'An Affirmative Action Empire: The Soviet Union as the Highest Form of Imperialism', in R.G. Suny and T. Martin (eds), *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp.67–90; I. Bremmer, 'Post Soviet Nationalities Theory: Past, Present, and Future', in I. Bremmer and R. Taras (eds), *New States New Politics; Building the Post-Soviet Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp.3–29; V. Tishkov, 'The Soviet Empire before and after Perestroika', *Theory and Society*, Vol.20, No.5, (1991), pp.603–29.
38. Rezvani, *Conflict and Peace in Central Eurasia: Towards Explanations and Understandings*, pp.166–67.
39. Coyle, *Russia's Border Wars and Frozen Conflicts*, pp.188–93; Suchkov, 'The Caucasus', pp.320–22; see also G.M. Yemelianova, 'Western Academic Discourse on the Post-Soviet de Facto State Phenomenon', *Caucasus Survey*, Vol.3, No.3 (2015), pp.219–38.
40. Suchkov, 'The Caucasus', p.312.
41. Suchkov, 'The Caucasus', p.318; Babak Rezvani maintains: 'A North Ossetian "colleague" (in the broad sense of the word) told me shortly before the August 2008 war that Russia uses Abkhazia and South Ossetia as bargain chips with Saakashvili. He said the fact that the Adjara president Aslan Abashidze, an adversary to Saakashvili, left Adjara for Russia was due to an order from Russia, which was meant as a signal to Saakashvili. According to him, Russia wanted to tell Saakashvili: "Here you have Adjara. Take this as a gift and a sign of goodwill. You will also get back South Ossetia and Abkhazia, if you behave as we want you to." It is difficult to evaluate this statement, but it clearly shows that Russia did not enjoy full Ossetian trust'; quoted from Rezvani, *Conflict and Peace in Central Eurasia: Towards Explanations and Understandings*, p.182, ff.36.
42. Suchkov, 'The Caucasus', p.318.
43. Even a military official (privately and in a personal capacity) informed me about the prevalence of such a fear and Georgian concerns.
44. Ofitserov-Belskiy and Sushenstov, 'Central and Eastern Europe', p.292.
45. Merati, *Muslims in Putin's Russia*, pp.185–93.
46. T. Marketos, 'Eastern Caspian Sea Energy Geopolitics: A Litmus Test for the U.S.–Russia–China Struggle for the Geostrategic Control of Eurasia', *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, Vol.3, No.1, (2009), pp.2–19; Omelicheva, 'Central Asia', p.327.
47. See e.g. H. Thibault, *Transforming Tajikistan: State-building and Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2018), pp.82, 92–96, and 164.
48. See e.g. the discussion in Merati, *Muslims in Putin's Russia*, pp.111–13 and 128. Merati observes some differences between Salafism and Wahhabis. Accordingly, the Russian state and society is more willing to tolerate moderate forms of salafism. However, she admits that the distinction between them in the prevailing discourse is blurred and both are regarded as extremist, subversive and fundamentalist and above all exogenous type of Islam – and hence unfit to the Post-Soviet societies.
49. Omelicheva, 'Central Asia', p.327.
50. Russia has also deployed peace observers in certain Post-Soviet Conflicts, and there are some allegations about a number of Russian soldiers being involved in the Karabakh Conflict. However, the Tajikistani Civil War was the first case that Russia overtly sided with the (former communist) elites against the militias of opposition. The earlier Russian involvement elsewhere in the Post-Soviet Space could not be compared to their role in Tajikistani and notably Chechen conflicts.
51. Epkenhans, *The Origins of the Civil War in Tajikistan*. See especially chapter eight, 'Civil War', pp.277–338; Merati, *Muslims in Putin's Russia*, p.167; Thibault, *Transforming Tajikistan*, pp.63–66.
52. Epkenhans, *The Origins of the Civil War in Tajikistan*, see pp.4–5, and especially chapter eight, 'Civil War', pp.277–238; See also J. Heathershaw, *Post-Conflict Tajikistan: The Politics of Peacebuilding and the Emergence of Legitimate Order* (London: Routledge, 2009); See also the symposium proceeding entitled *Tajribai ta'rixii sulhi Tajikistan: Majmui tezishoi baynalmilali, Dushanbe 26–27 apreli soli 2001* [Tajikistan's Peace Experience: A Collection of Papers of International Symposium, Dushnabe 26–27 April 2001] (in Tajik).
53. Epkenhans, *The Origins of the Civil War in Tajikistan*, p.19.
54. See e.g. Epkenhans, *The Origins of the Civil War in Tajikistan*, pp.288–305; Merati, *Muslims in Putin's Russia*, p.167. Thibault, *Transforming Tajikistan*, pp.63–66.
55. Although my observations in Georgia still reveal a rather firm anti-Russian attitude among the population, the attitude among the Armenian and Tajikistani population was more in favour of Russia and applauded the Russian crackdown on the extremist Islamist militias in Syria. See in this regard also E.J. Lemon, 'Building

- Resilient Secular Citizens: Tajikistan's Response to the Islamic State', *Caucasus Survey*, Vol.4, No.3 (2016), pp.261–81.
56. The head of the Chechen Republic is the new designation (since 2011) for the previously designated president of Chechen Regional government. There are some rumours that Ramzan Kadyrov may resign in order to be promoted to a higher post by Putin in the Kremlin. By 15 January 2020 these rumours had not been confirmed. Already in 2017 there were some reports about Ramzan Kadyrov's readiness to resign.
  57. See *International Conference 'Who are the Ahl al-Sunna?'*, Online available at < <https://chechnyaconference.org/material/chechnya-conference-statement-english.pdf> > (accessed 10 May 2019).
  58. See e.g. B. Rezvani, 'Political Stability, Transition and Conflict: Tajikistan Compared with Georgia', *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.55, No.1 (2019), p.150; Merati, *Muslims in Putin's Russia*, p.128.
  59. The Taliban was originally associated with the Deobandi current in Sunni Islam. However, they are often referred to as Wahhabi, Salafi and Takfiri, as they are similarly very conservative in their interpretations of Islam.
  60. See e.g. Deyermond, 'The Collective Security Treaty Organization', pp.425–26.
  61. Omelicheva, 'Central Asia', p.327; Omelicheva refers the reader here to M. Omelicheva, *Counterterrorism Policies in Central Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2011).
  62. B. V. Dolgov, *Radikalnii islamism v kontekstste obostreniia otnoshenii Zapada i Rossiei* [Radical Islamism in the Context of Strained Relations with the West and Russia], in A. N. Khazanov (ed.), *Vostok mezhdru Zapadom i Rossiei* [East between the West and Russia] (Moscow: IVRAN, 2015), pp.27–33; Merati, *Muslims in Putin's Russia*, pp.122–40.
  63. Omelicheva, 'Central Asia', p.328.
  64. Casula and Katz, 'The Middle East', p.295.
  65. Vasiliev, *Russia's Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, p.386.
  66. Casula and Katz, 'The Middle East', p.298. The authors refer here to *Radikalnii islamism v kontekstste obostreniia otnoshenii Zapada i Rossiei*, pp.27–29 and 32.
  67. Casula and Katz, 'The Middle East', p.302.
  68. See Merati, *Muslims in Putin's Russia*, chapters 7 and 8, especially pp.163–65, 171–80, and 201–203.
  69. See e.g. Epkenhans, *The Origins of the Civil War in Tajikistan*, pp.303–305. See also the discussion in Merati, *Muslims in Putin's Russia*, pp.111–13 and 128.
  70. Dolgov, *Radikalnii islamism v kontekstste obostreniia otnoshenii Zapada i Rossiei*, p.33; B. Rezvani, 'Security and Refugee Crisis in Europe', *Forum of Ethnogeopolitics*, Vol.4, No.1 (2016), pp.5–8; B. Rezvani, 'West, East and the "Middle" East: Critical Notes about the Ukrainian and Syrian Conflicts', *Forum of Ethnogeopolitics*, Vol.3, No.2 (2015), pp.5–8; See also Merati, *Muslims in Putin's Russia*, pp.136–45.
  71. Krickus, *Russia after Putin*, p.42.
  72. Unlike most other North Caucasian peoples who are Sunni Muslims, Ossetians are predominantly Orthodox Christians. In 2004 terrorists related to the Islamist insurgency in Chechnya, took hostages in a school in Beslan, North Ossetia. Many reports wrote that the culprits were from Chechnya, possibly in compliance with foreign fighters; see for instance <https://www.britannica.com/event/Beslan-school-attack> and <http://edition.cnn.com/2004/WORLD/europe/09/17/russia.beslan/index.html>.
  73. Krickus, *Russia after Putin*, p.42.
  74. Vasiliev, *Russia's Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, p.386; B. Rezvani, 'Reflections on the Chechen Conflict: Geopolitics, Timing and Transformations', *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.50, No.6 (2014), pp.870–90; C. Moore, 'Foreign Bodies: Transnational Activism, the Insurgency in the North Caucasus and "Beyond"', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol.27, No.3 (2015), pp.395–415; J. Ratelle, 'A Critical Assessment of the Scholarship on Violent Conflicts in the North Caucasus during the Post-Soviet Period', *Caucasus Survey*, Vol.3, No.1 (2015), pp.1–24; E. Klimenko and N. J. Melvin, 'Decreasing Violence in the North Caucasus: Is an End to the Regional Conflict in sight?' (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2016), available online at: <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/blog/2016/decreasing-violence-north-caucasus-end-regional-conflict-sight> (accessed 23 October 2018); Lemon, 'Building Resilient Secular Citizens'; J. Ratelle, 'North Caucasian Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq: Assessing the Threat of Returnees to the Russian Federation', *Caucasus Survey*, Vol.4, No.3 (2016), pp.218–38; J. Ratelle and L. Broers, 'Introduction: Researching Networked Insurgencies and Foreign Fighters in Eurasia', *Caucasus Survey*, Vol.4, No.3 (2016), pp.187–93; M. Youngman, 'Between Caucasus and Caliphate: The Splintering of the North Caucasus Insurgency', *Caucasus Survey*, Vol.4, No.3 (2016), pp.194–217.
  75. Krickus, *Russia after Putin*, p.83.
  76. Vasiliev, *Russia's Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, pp.384–86.
  77. Vasiliev, *Russia's Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, p.385.
  78. This is consistent with Merati's study; see Merati, *Muslims in Putin's Russia*.
  79. Omelicheva, 'Central Asia', pp.325–27.
  80. Omelicheva, 'Central Asia', pp.325–26.