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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Rebordering the 'Russian Space' in the Post-Soviet Era

From Reactive Discourses and Informal Practices to State-Led Strategy

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Abstract

This article examines the roots of the 'reterritorialisation' of Russian national interests, examining the debates about territory and borders that emerged in Russia during the 1990s and early 2000s and their long-term integration into state policy. We argue that the current ethno-nationalist trend in Russian politics reflects the perceptions and strategies of a generation of post-Soviet elites, whose ideas about Russia's territorial and humanitarian boundaries were formulated three decades ago. These ideas have since been integrated into official policies, facilitated by the political success of these institutional entrepreneurs. Employing an original methodology that includes extensive use of Russian-language sources and a prosopographic study of key post-Soviet elites, the essay sheds light on the polyphonic nature of Russian border revisionism. The Congress of Russian Communities (KRO) and its role in the context of the Ukraine war(s) will be used as an illustrative case study.

Keywords: Russian Foreign Policy; Near Abroad; Congress of Russian Communities; Dmitry Rogozin; Borders.

Introduction

Moscow's official discourse shows an ever-growing 'reterritorialisation' of Russian national interests. Contemporary Russian foreign and domestic policies are deeply rooted in prescriptive debates about territory, borders, and their ideal configurations to protect Russian peoples and geopolitical interests. These ideas are intertwined with the resurgence of Russian ethno-nationalism and territorial revisionism. Notably, the violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and internationally recognised borders has been justified by the purported need to restore the "historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians," as articulated in President Putin's 2021 essay and reiterated in his speech on 24 February 2022, which preceded the full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Putin 2021, 2022).[1] The Russian recognition of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics on 21 February 2022, followed by the invasion and subsequent annexation of occupied territories in Zaporizhzhia and Kherson, exemplifies this logic.[2]

These actions were not isolated but embedded in a broader ideological and legal framework, characterised by an insistence on, and peculiar interpretation of, territorial integrity and national unity. For instance, the 2020 constitutional amendments redefined

[1] For an analysis of evolving Russian discourse and policies in Ukraine, see Puleri & Mamaiev (2024).
[2] For a comparative analysis of Russian narratives on Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, see Allison (2014, 2024).

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the Russian Federation as "the legal successor of the Soviet Union on its territory, as well as … outside the territory of the Russian Federation," invoking a "thousand-year history" and a civilisational mission.[3] This orientation was further institutionalised in key foreign policy documents. The 2022 *Concept of Humanitarian Policy Abroad* identifies Russian "compatriots" as bearers of national identity, regardless of their geographic location, and frames their protection as a core state responsibility.[4] Similarly, the latest edition of the *Foreign Policy Concept* sanctions "Russia's special position as a unique state-civilisation and a vast Eurasian and Euro-Pacific power that brings together the Russian people and other peoples belonging to the cultural and civilisational community of the Russian world".[5]

Mainstream analyses often interpret these developments as top-down manipulations by Putin and his inner circle, aimed at managing geopolitical tensions and consolidating domestic power (Kolesnikov 2023). In contrast, we argue that the current reterritorialisation trend in Russian policy-making has deeper roots. It reflects the long-term influence of a broader generation of post-Soviet elites – of which Putin is only one prominent figure – who developed ideas about Russia's territorial and humanitarian borders in already three decades ago. These ideas, initially peripheral and contested, gradually entered official discourse and policy through the political success of their proponents and diffusion within Russia's informal political networks.

By articulating this argument, we make three main contributions to the academic debate. First, we contextualise Russia's foreign policy within history and its domestic debates. As Aliaksei Kazharski (2019) observed, an "examination of identity-construction processes in Russia is crucial if we also want to understand the causes of recent security challenges in Eastern Europe" (p. 7). Second, we contribute to border studies by examining how early post-Soviet elites made sense of Russia's changing boundaries and proposed their further adjustment, within the context of broader reflections on the identity and strategic challenges of a new Russia. Third, we employ a novel methodology, combining Russian and Russian-language sources with a prosopographic analysis of elite trajectories, to trace how initially marginal ideas became institutionalised. By doing so, we will integrate insights from the disciplines of International History and International Relations.

Having these goals in mind, the article proceeds as follows. First, we explain why peripheral actors matter in understanding Russian politics, including its approach to borders. Second, we outline the key themes of the 1990s–2000s debates on Russian identity, interests, and borders, thereby setting the scene for our case study. Third, we examine the case of the Congress of the Russian Communities (*Kongress Russkikh Obshchin* – KRO) – whose ideas, particularly those of Dmitry Rogozin, were gradually absorbed into official policy, contributing to the long-term reterritorialisation of Russian interests. We conclude by reflecting on the implications of our findings and suggesting avenues for future research on Russia's evolving approach to post-Soviet borders.

Why should we care about Russian peripheral actors ?

Understanding the reterritorialisation of Russian politics requires moving beyond the analysis of centralised state institutions and presidential authority. While the pre-1991 Soviet period was characterised by "the overwhelming power of the Russian-centered Soviet

[3] "Konstitutsiia Rossiiskoi Federatsii (s izmeneniiami, vnesennymi v sootvestvii s Federal'nym konstitutsionnym zakonom No. 1-FKZ ot 14.03.2020 g.)," available at: https://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/text/583066. For an analysis of the amendements, see Belov (2021).

[4] "Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 05.09.2022 g. no. 611 'Ob utverdzhenii Konceptsii gumanitarnoi politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii za rubezhom'," available at: http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/48280/page/1.

[5] "Kontseptsiia vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii (utverdzhena Prezidentom Rossiiskoi Federatsii V. V. Putinym 31 marta 2023 g.)," available at: https://www.mid.ru/ru/detail-material-page/1860586/.

state to define, shape, and to bestow identity" (Clowes 2011, p. ix), and the post-2010s have seen a re-consolidation of power around the presidency, the intervening decades were marked by ideological pluralism and institutional fluidity. During the 1990s and early 2000s, the Russian political landscape was shaped not by a monolithic state apparatus, but by a diffuse constellation of actors – political parties, movements, regional leaders, and informal networks – who actively contributed to redefining Russia's identity and ambitions, in both territorial and humanitarian terms (Kazharski 2019, pp. 34-35).

This period of institutional ambiguity and diffusion of power enabled the emergence of what Anton Steen (2003) described as the "Network State," in which informal elite networks functioned as pragmatic arenas for conflict resolution and policy experimentation. Though largely opaque and resistant to democratic oversight, these networks were crucial in coordinating and re-coalescing elite interests at a time of systemic transformation. As Henry E. Hale (2016) observed in his study on patronal politics, in post-Soviet regimes "politics is first and foremost a *struggle among extended networks of personal acquaintances*, not among formal institutions such as 'parties,' 'parliament,' 'firms,' or even 'the presidency' or 'the state'" (p. 29). In other words, power in post-Soviet Russia was exercised less through formal institutions and more through extended networks of personal relationships, with the presidency functioning as a central node for managing these competing interests (id.; see also Hale 2015; Pavlovsky 2016).

This understanding aligns with Kimberly Marten's (2015) argument that Russian foreign policy under Putin is best interpreted through the lens of informal political networks. Marten shows how foreign policy decisions are often shaped not by institutional interests or strategic doctrines, but by the personal networks of elites who use state resources to maintain their own power and distribute rents. These networks, opaque and highly personalised, extend into the foreign policy realm, where they influence decisions through informal channels rather than formal bureaucratic processes. In this light, peripheral actors—those initially outside the formal state apparatus—can gain influence not by institutional legitimacy, but by embedding themselves within these informal networks.

Similarly, Celeste Wallander (2007) introduces the concept of 'transimperialism' to describe how Russia's patrimonial authoritarianism extends into the international sphere. Rather than relying on traditional imperial control or liberal integration, Russia engages in selective, opaque, and elite-driven interactions that replicate domestic patron-client dynamics on a transnational scale. Peripheral actors, such as the KRO, are particularly relevant in this context. Their ability to articulate nationalist narratives and mobilise support for compatriots abroad made them valuable assets in the Kremlin's broader strategy of managing influence in the post-Soviet space without overt annexation – until conditions allowed for more assertive moves, such as in Crimea.

Indeed, the evolution of Russian policy in relation to the so-called 'frozen conflicts' of the post-Soviet era illustrates these dynamics.[6] In the early 1990s, decision-making was often decentralised, with regional leaders, separatist organisations, and former Soviet military officers shaping outcomes on the ground. As Andrei Kazantsev and colleagues (2020) noted:

"The super-presidential republic established in Russia under the 1993 Constitution formally established a very high centralisation of foreign policy decisions. However, in reality the policies of the Yeltsin administration were a product of both public and non-public struggles of various political forces in Moscow ... The political paralysis in Moscow

[6] Here the term 'frozen conflicts' refers to "four conflicts of an ethnic or ethnolinguistic nature that arose out of the collapse of the USSR in the early 1990s", leading to "the emergence of four internationally unrecognized or 'de facto' states: Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Pridnestrov'e...and Nagorno-Karabakh" (Kazantsev *et al.* 2020, p. 142).

meant that many decisions concerning regional conflicts were made not in the nation's capital, but by separatist organisations on the ground … by regional leaders … or by former officers and generals of the Soviet Army who chose which side of the conflict they would support" (p. 147).

Over time, however, the ideas and practices pioneered by these peripheral actors were absorbed into the state's geopolitical strategy, culminating in more cohesive, complex, and assertive policies after 2008. While the nature and content of Russia's claims regarding post-Soviet borders have remained relatively consistent, their form and intensity evolved (Rotaru 2022, p. 98). This is the case of the ideas, discourses and practices around 'biopolitical concerns' promoted by political movements in Russia in the 1990s, which eventually entered the mainstream political discourse and impacted on the state-led geopolitical moves. Crucially, the primary bearers of such claims have changed. In the 1990s, such narratives were advanced not by institutional elites but by conservative opposition figures concerned with humanitarian issues (Rotaru 2020, p. 92; Kazharski 2019, p. 45). Only later, since 2008 — and particularly after 2014, these narratives became key to the official state policy and the legitimisation of foreign interventions.[7] Such shift reflects the verticalisation of power under Putin and the intensification of tensions with the West, as much as the institutionalisation of previously fringe narratives proposed by peripheral actors (Kazantsev *et al*. 2020, pp. 142-147).

Most importantly, "the application of biopolitical tools," such as citizenship policies (or 'passportisation') and the support for organisations claiming humanitarian concerns about 'compatriots,' intersects with geopolitical claims "creat[ing] new terrains for inclusion and exclusion, and new practices of bordering and de-bordering whose logic might not always coincide with national jurisdictions" (Makarychev & Yatsyk 2018, p. 20). In this sense, "geo- and bio-politics are two sides of the same imperial 'coin'" in Russian foreign policy in the post-Soviet area (*id*., p. 7). On the one hand, we may claim "that there is a spectrum of policies that begins with biopolitical 'concerns' about 'compatriots' and, if conditions allow, progresses along a spectrum to geopolitical moves, from incitements of separatism and irredentism to annexations" (*ibid*.). On the other, as it happened over the 2000s with the gradual involvement of representatives of the former conservative opposition concerned with the humanitarian aspects in the state apparatus, "the application of biopolitical instruments leads to the strengthening of the imperial logic in Russian foreign policy" (p. 4).[8]

Thus, the study of peripheral actors is essential to understanding the nature of Russian reterritorialisation. These actors served as incubators of ideological innovation and policy experimentation, influencing the trajectory of Russian foreign policy from the margins. Their gradual integration into the state apparatus testifies to the permeability of Russia's political system and the complex interplay between informal networks and formal institutions in shaping the country's territorial ambitions, cloaked in historical and humanitarian narratives.

[7] In his study, Rotaru (2022) highlights the reiterated use of the humanitarian and genocide arguments, together with the narrative of responsibility to protect ethnic Russians and illegitimacy of 'nazi' and 'fascist' central authorities in the former Soviet republics – which had been advanced in the 1990s by the conservative opposition referring to the cases of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria – in the Russian official discourse since 2008, during the political crises in Georgia and Ukraine.

[8] And, most importantly, such dynamics may help understand why Russian policy in the frozen conflicts of the post-Soviet space "underwent profound changes over time", since "by the 2000s, Moscow's policy had shifted from managing ethno-territorial and ethno-linguistic conflicts on Russia's periphery to geopolitical rivalry with the West" (Kazantsev *et al.* 2020, p. 144).

Russian Region-Making After the Collapse of the Soviet Union

The ideas promoted by peripheral actors such as the KRO did not emerge in an intellectual vacuum. Rather, they were embedded in a broader post-Soviet context marked by intense debate over Russia's identity, its place in the post-Cold War international order, and the meaning of sovereignty and statehood in the aftermath of empire. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, a wide range of political thinkers, policy advisors, and institutional actors engaged in competing efforts to redefine Russia's borders – both physical and symbolic. These debates provided fertile ground for the development of alternative visions of Russian space, including those advanced by nationalist and conservative actors who would later influence state policy.[9]

As Edith W. Clowes (2011) observed, "[w]ith the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 peripheries and borders, both real and symbolic, would become the keys to Russians' thinking about who they are" (pp. ix). In post-Soviet Russia, identity and geography became mutually constitutive: defining where Russia is became essential to defining who a Russian is. As Kazharski (2019, p. 81) puts it, in the case of Russia borders "have been ambiguous not only in terms of geographical space, but also in terms of populations inhabiting them" (*ibid*.). The so-called "migration of borders" (Jašina-Schäfer, 2021, p. 1), which followed the political transition from Soviet to post-Soviet times, also impacted on the emergence of "multiple, partially overlapping and partially competing, approaches to defining membership in the Russian nation" (Kazharski 2019, p. 81), making ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers residing in the former Soviet republics — other than Russia — the subject of an intense process of discursive construction (see Puleri & Mamaiev 2024). Since the early 1990s, the notion of the Russian nation as a 'people divided by borders' (or a 'divided people') started to play a crucial role in the territorial projection of Russian political identity (and ambitions) beyond the borders of the Russian Federation. Conversely, the localisation of Russians abroad helped elites reimagine the social and geographical boundaries of Russia itself. These discourses sought to "suture" Russia's fragmented national identity – territorially, socially, historically, and ethnoculturally – after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Kazharski 2019, p. 72; see also Simonsen 1996).[10]

Notably, rather than adhering to a nation-centered process of identity-building with fixed borders, Russian elites increasingly defined identity through a process of region-building. As Kazharski (2019, p. 8) noted, Russian identity was reimagined as a supranational construct spanning the post-Soviet space, positioned as a civilisational counterpart to the collective West. The regionalisation of Russia's identity can be seen as an attempt to come to terms with the disintegration of the former Russian/Soviet empire, which left behind "a peculiar dependence" – socio-economic, political, cognitive – from the "former imperial territories," which in turn limited "the extent to which the Russian Federation can be seen as a sovereign nation-state, where identity and territoriality are, in principle, congruent" (*id*., pp. 12-13). In other words, it qualified as a copying mechanism for managing the "phantom pains" (SVOP

[9] In this section, we make wide reference to the work of the Council for Foreign and Defence Policy (*Soviet po Vneshnej i Oboronnoj Politike* – SVOP). Founded in 1992 as an independent think tank, originally it aimed at proposing ways to reform (often in a liberal sense) the foreign, security, and economic policies of post-Soviet Russia; while retaining this broad objective, throughout the decades SVOP has closely associated itself with official institutions of power, and particularly the person of Vladimir Putin. In this light, SVOP can serve as an interesting reference for two reasons. On the one hand, its early work is illustrative of the 1990s' lively political debate on Russian interests and role in the world, allowing us to grasp the 'political common sense' that existed beyond the state apparatus. On the other hand, SVOP itself could be seen as a case study of the changing relation between peripheral and central actors in Russia: originally independent from the Kremlin, it was later 'taken over' by central institutions, and transformed into an intellectual powerhouse supporting official state policy.

[10] On the concept of 'suture' in (critical) border studies, see Salter (2012).

1997, p. 12) and sense of impotence caused by the downsizing of Moscow's geopolitical subjectivity. The region constructed by Russia around itself in the 1990s and early 2000s was not merely a strategic buffer; it had "direct relevance to Russia's self-identification, to solving the problem of national subjectivity, and consequently to solving Russia's vital national interests related to the country's revival and development in the 21st century" (SVOP 1996, p. 2).

Two key concepts – 'Near Abroad' and 'Russian World' – emerged in this context and became central to Russia's regionalism and self-identification efforts. The term Near Abroad (*blizhnee zarubezh'e*), originally used in the late Soviet period to describe Eastern European socialist states, was repurposed by Russian officials such as Andrei Kozyrev, Andrei Kokoshin, and Andranik Migranyan to refer to the newly independent post-Soviet republics. Even before it entered common use, this concept revealed the peculiar understanding of post-Soviet borders advanced by the new Russian elite. As Gasan Gusejnov (2005) observed: "Originally, the expression 'Near Abroad' referred to the idea according to which 'the borders of the Russian state after the collapse of the Soviet Union could not yet be considered definitive'" (p. 15). Rooted in the cognitive legacy of Russian imperialism, this notion implied that post-Soviet territories could hardly be separated from Russia itself. It reflected a cognitive and territorial proximity: in the eyes of Russian post-Soviet elites, these states were 'abroad,' but not entirely foreign.

The concept of the Russian World (*russkii mir*) added an ethno-political and civilisational dimension. Defined by Valery Tishkov (2008) as "transnational and transcontinental community united by affiliation to a certain state [Russia] and by loyalty to its culture" (p. 222), the Russian World was imagined as a cultural and linguistic space anchored in Moscow. While Russia is not part of the Near Abroad, it enjoys a twice-special status in the Russian World: first, for the very fact of having crafted a World of its own, which "[b]y no means all states and peoples can generate" (id.); second, and relatedly, Russia's special status within the *russkii mir* is linked with being the very source of the region's cohesion via language and blood. Language, in particular, was seen as "a key cultural asset, which embodies the nation's view of the world. Its history reflects the whole history of national culture" (Osipov 2008, n/p).

The stickiness of features such as language and ethnicity makes the Russian World an ascriptive community – i.e., one whose belonging is not elective, but derives from non-negotiable, innate features.[11] Hence its borders are historically given and extend wherever people bearing such features reside, regardless of their political affiliations and individual aspirations. This view of the Russian World, and Moscow's ultimate role within it, provided the cognitive background to feelings of fear, insecurity, and anxiety manifested by Russian elites since the 1990s in the face of the changing (diminishing) status of Russian language across the post-Soviet space (e.g., Tishkov 2008; for a more recent take, see Araf'ev 2023). Moving from the Russian ideational standpoint, in fact, the shrinking of the area of Russian language would imply a withdrawal of the borders of the *russkii mir*, hence a diminishment of Russia's self-perceived status (or Russian being itself).

Both concepts of Near Abroad and Russian World, albeit with different tones, were tied to a broader imperative: the perceived necessity to maintain authority and control over these territories – i.e., the responsibility to influence their development and the right to do so coercively, if deemed appropriate. Such reasoning was underpinned by two recurrent themes in the Russian politico-strategic debate: the belief in Russia's inherent status as a great power and the idea that sovereignty is hierarchical, hence certain states are more

[11] For an analysis of the evolution and different ideological nuances of the Russian World Concept, see Puleri & Mamaiev 2024.

sovereign than others (Fasola 2024, pp. 43-53). In this view, many post-Soviet states were seen as lacking full sovereignty and thus as legitimate targets of Russian patronage or intervention (SVOP 2007). Faced with the impossibility of restoring the Soviet Union and constrained by domestic instability, Russian elites translated these cognitive imperatives vis-à-vis the post-Soviet space into two strategic goals: first, keeping other (great) powers out and, second, promoting some degree of geopolitical and socio-economic reintegration with Russia (e.g., SVOP 1996, pp. 11-14).

The urgency of these goals was heightened by the permanence and expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) – a theme that quickly monopolised early Russian discussions on international security. In Russian eyes, "the attempt to preserve the viability of the Atlantic Alliance" was the West's main interest (SVOP 1995, p. 1), but this was categorically labelled as an "infringement of Russia's long-term interests … unacceptable" (id.). Two main reasons contributed to such an assessment. First, NATO was seen as a military alliance with an anti-Russian origin. Its continued existence could not but be associated by Moscow with the permanence of Western hostility towards Russia, hence a potential security threat. This could not be ignored: "The formation of a powerful military potential on the borders of the CIS [Commonwealth of Independent States] and directly on Russia's Western border (in the Kaliningrad region) – an instrument of possible political and force pressure an active opposition to the reintegration of the post-Soviet space – is not insignificant" and should be opposed (SVOP 1997, p. 14).

Second, Russian concerns grew bigger as the preservation of the Alliance soon became synonymous with its Eastward expansion, which was perceived as a flagrant attempt to 'take over' the whole of Europe, including countries falling within the Near Abroad and the Russian World. Russian analysts noted that "removing Russia as a major player from this space is objectively one of the most important components of the current US foreign policy strategy" (SVOP 2005, p. 5). Russian analysts expected Washington to back any states or actors within the region, if direct conflict between these and Russia were to break out – anticipating the theory that underpins current Russian discourse on colour revolutions and military conflicts across the post-Soviet space (e.g., German 2020). As a result, the Russians feared "that in the next five to seven years the CIS states will be finally 'dismantled' into zones of interest, each of which will be backed by a respective state/group of states" (SVOP 2005, pp. 5-6).

In response, Russian elites increasingly advocated for the partial reintegration of these regions under Moscow's leadership. Because of Western encroachment in the region, political and security concerns featured high on the list of Russian motives, as testified by frequent reflections on preventing the territories to Russia's West from turning into a "strip of alienation" (*polosa otchuzhdeniia*) (SVOP 1997, p. 13) or ensuring the existence of a "security belt" (*poias bezopasnosti*) (SVOP 2005, p. 4). While economic drivers were present, civilisational arguments were more prominent in Russian reflections. When discussing policies towards the post-Soviet neighbours, Moscow consistently emphasised ethno-cultural linkages and identifies Russian and Russian-speaking peoples abroad as a reason for and enabler of tighter relations. This should not be seen merely in instrumental terms, as the rational exploitation of a loosely defined Russian diaspora for practical political purposes; more importantly, it reflected a belief, deeply held in certain intellectual circles, in Russia's role as a civilisational centre with extraterritorial responsibilities.

In sum, the early post-Soviet approach to region-making was driven not only by strategic calculations but also by ontological anxieties. The concepts of the Near Abroad and the Russian World provided the cognitive scaffolding for Russia's evolving foreign policy, linking identity, territory, and power in ways that continue to shape its actions today.

This conceptual framework provides the necessary backdrop for understanding the political relevance of actors like the KRO in shaping the consolidation of arguments about territorial and humanitarian re-bordering. The KRO emerged in the early 1990s as a peripheral yet ideologically significant force, articulating a vision of Russia as a civilisational centre with a moral and strategic obligation to protect and reunite its dispersed compatriots. The KRO's discourses on cultural unity, historical continuity, and humanitarian responsibility were not isolated expressions of fringe nationalism; rather, they were early manifestations of a broader reterritorialisation logic that would later be adopted and institutionalised by the Russian state. By tracing the trajectory of the KRO and its leaders – particularly Dmitry Rogozin – into the mainstream of Russian politics, we show how region-making was not only a top-down project of statecraft but also a cumulative process shaped by the ideological contributions of peripheral actors. The KRO case thus exemplifies how informal and marginal voices helped reimagine the Russian space in the post-Soviet era, ultimately influencing the state's long-term strategic vision.

The Congress of Russian Communities and its impact on Moscow's regional strategies

The political trajectory of the KRO offers a compelling case study of how fringe nationalist discourses were gradually integrated into the Russian state's official strategy of reterritorialisation. Founded in 1993 as a network of organisations representing 'Russian communities' across the former Soviet republics, the KRO emerged as a vehicle for contesting the post-Soviet territorial order. From its inception, the KRO positioned itself as a 'state-patriotic movement,' distancing itself from the 'red-brown' coalition of conservative and neo-Soviet forces. Its ideological platform, as articulated in the *Manifesto of the Resurrection of Russia* (1994–1996), rejected both Bolshevism and National Socialism as "anti-Russian ideologies," instead promoting a vision of the 'Russian nation' as a historically unified entity unjustly divided by artificial borders:

"Over the centuries, absorbing large and small people [*narody*], the Russian nation [*russkaia natsiia*] united Great Russians, Little Russians, Belarusians, relatively recently formed new Russian ethnic groups, as well as representatives of the indigenous peoples of Russia who consider themselves Russian … But the borders that have divided the nation pose before the state-patriotic movement the task of reuniting the original Russian lands, the Russian nation, the task of recreating Russian statehood in its former power and beauty. WE WERE A UNITED NATION AND WE WILL RETURN TO NATIONAL UNITY. Only by overcoming the division of the Russian nation can we restore the civil dignity of millions of people, revive Russia and protect its priceless culture from destruction." (KRO 1996)

Along these lines, "the restoration of the territorial integrity of the country on the basis of the indivisibility of the Russian state" (*ibid*.) was one of the main goals of the KRO. This vision was not merely rhetorical. As Alan Ingram (2001) noted, the KRO operated less as a political party and more as a federation of cultural centres and associations across the post-Soviet space. By 1994, it had established affiliated organisations in nearly all former Soviet republics (except Turkmenistan) and actively intervened in regional crises, including Crimea (1994) and Transnistria (1995). Domestically, the KRO claimed "a special right to speak on behalf of an excluded part of the Russian nation" (*ibid*., p. 205) – those left outside the borders of the Russian Federation – and was the first political movement to adopt a *Declaration of the Rights of Compatriots* (1994), asserting Russia's responsibility to protect and support ethnic Russians abroad (Ingram 1999, p. 695).

Although the KRO failed to gain parliamentary representation throughout the 1990s, its ideological influence was significant. Ingram (2001) observed that the official government policy on compatriots abroad, adopted just months after the KRO's declaration, bore striking similarities to the latter's proposals, thus reflecting the growing competition among

the moderate line followed by official institutions and the radical discourse promoted by KRO. The state's attempt to counterbalance the KRO's radicalism through the creation of the Assembly of Russian Compatriots in 1995 ultimately failed, underscoring the resonance of the KRO's message and its ability to attract support from within the legislative branch – including figures like Konstantin Zatulin, then chair of the Duma Committee for CIS Affairs and Links with Compatriots, who "lamented the lack of official action" and supported KRO as "the only organisation providing real help" (Ingram 2001, p. 210) for Russians abroad.[12]
While the KRO's early efforts did not immediately translate into policy change, its long-term impact was facilitated by the political ascent of key figures within its network – most notably Dmitry Rogozin. A graduate of Moscow State University and senior Komsomol activist, since the early 1990s Rogozin has emerged as the KRO leader and founder. Already in 1992, Rogozin played an important role in making KRO first an interstate organization networking several centres of political activity in defence of Russian-speaking peoples all over the post-Soviet space, and then a full-fledged Russian sociopolitical movement in 1995, thanks to the alliance with Sergey Glazyev's wing of the Democratic Party of Russia.[13] After the failure in 1995 Duma elections, where the KRO list led by Glazyev, Iurii Skokov and Aleksander Lebed did not manage to reach the electoral threshold, one year later Rogozin worked on the latter's presidential campaign.[14] In late 1990s, he served as the only key leader in KRO — which, while being excluded from the major state institutions in Russia, still worked as an important networking hub for political organizations across the post-Soviet space — before creating in 2003, together with Glazyev, the electoral bloc Rodina: the newly-formed bloc received 9.02% of votes at the December 2003 Duma elections, thus entering the parliament.[15]
Although initially seen as a Kremlin-engineered project to siphon votes from the Communist Party, Rodina soon adopted a more oppositional stance, particularly after the 2004–2005 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, invoking a similar turn of events in Russia (Horvath & Lever 2024).[16] This shift prompted a state-led campaign to neutralise the movement, including a

[12] During his political experience, Konstantin Zatulin constantly gravitated towards the KRO's network and its humanitarian concerns. After being the leader of KRO's Krasnodar branch, in 1996 he founded an autonomous and influential non-profit organization, the Institute of CIS Countries (or, Institute of Diaspora and Integration), having several branches all around the post-Soviet region and promoting the need for supporting the rights of Russian compatriots abroad.
[13] Glazyev is another peculiar figure emerging from KRO's network, who later played an important role in the state apparatus: first, as advisor of President Putin on regional economic integration (2012-2019), and then as Commissioner for Integration and Macroeconomics within the Eurasian Economic Commission (2019-2024), the executive body of the Eurasian Economic Union. The Democratic Party of Russia was a political party evolving from liberal anticommunism to moderate Russian nationalism in the early 1990s: after an internal split, the Glazyev wing took part within the KRO list in the 1995 Russian legislative election.
[14] Aleksander Lebed, the former commander of the Russian 14th army stationing in Transnistria, took part in the 1996 Russian presidential elections as the KRO's candidate. He received 14.52% of votes, ranking third at the first round after Boris Ieltsin and Gennadii Ziuganov, the leader of the Communist party of the Russian Federation. After Ieltsin's victory at the second round, he was appointed as the secretary of Security Council of the Russian Federation, and eventually broke with the KRO.
[15] As Horvath and Lever (2024, p. 3) highlight in their study, Glazyev's role was crucial "in the design of Rodina as an amalgam of leftist and nationalist forces", gathering together Sergei Baburin's People's Will, "a haven for radical nationalists" and KRO, "one of the most succesfull nationalist projects of the 1990s", as the main elements of the 2003 electoral bloc becoming the fourth largest force in the Duma.
[16] The departure of Rodina from state support was a result of the different roads undertaken by the party leaders after the 2003 elections. As Horvath and Lever (2003, p. 3) retrace: "In a bid to capitalize on the bloc's success, Glaz'ev ran against Putin in the 2004 presidential elections. Incensed at this reckless challenge to his Kremlin patrons, Rogozin appropriated Rodina's name for his own eponymous party. The damage, however, was already done [...] The result was that the Presidential Administration ceased to regard the bloc as a

ban on televised appearances and 2006's regional elections. This "preventive counterrevolution" enforced by the Kremlin (*ibid*., p. 4) culminated in the resignation of Rogozin from the leadership of Rodina; on the following day, the party congress voted for the merger of Rodina with the pro-Kremlin social-democratic party A Just Russia. The potential registration of a successor party to Rodina, Great Russia, advanced by Rogozin was refused by the electoral commission in 2007.

Paradoxically, Rogozin's marginalisation was rapidly followed by his reintegration into the state apparatus. In 2008, he was appointed by then-exiting President Vladimir Putin as the country's permanent representative to NATO. In such capacity (2008-2011), Rogozin voiced incessantly the Kremlin's criticism towards NATO enlargement and its concern with the potential membership of Ukraine and Georgia in the Alliance, as hinted at during the Bucharest Summit.[17] Already in February 2008, when talking about the Ukraine question, Rogozin spoke about the contestation of post-Soviet borders: "The question of Ukraine joining NATO is the question of saving Ukraine as one state … Why take such a risk? I cannot rule out the situation in which Ukraine would just collapse. It would be divided into two parts" (Rogozin 2009b, p. 14). Moreover, among the reasons behind the Kremlin's swift recognition of the international borders of the separatist states of South Ossetia and Abkhazia after August 2008 Russia-Georgia war, Rogozin mentioned "the direct threat to life and security of nation as a whole" – the Russian nation (Rogozin 2009b, p. 37).

During his tenure, Rogozin also revived the KRO as a registered social organisation supporting compatriots abroad and aligned it with the Kremlin's broader strategy of co-opting patriotic movements as informal power tools of the regime. Having lobbied consistently to revamp the KRO since 2006 (Kommersant 2006), in 2011 Rogozin finally achieved his goal, with 'Rodina-KRO' being officially registered by the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation.[18] Rogozin, at the time described as organisation's unofficial leader, promptly clarified that "the Congress of Russian Communities has no serious political ambitions and the organisation will rather be a human rights organisation" – and yet "it would be wiser for the Russian part of the Congress to conclude a direct contract with political forces, according to which, on the one hand, the KRO would provide moral support to the parties, and they, in turn, would take on the programs and tasks that the KRO defends" (Sadovskaia 2011).

Such speculations were the result of Vladimir Putin's, the then Prime Minister of the Russian Federation, opening to formal alliances between United Russia, the ruling party since 2001, and various Russian non-governmental organizations and political platforms — which was first disclosed one week before KRO's official registration. On the occasion of the Interregional Conference of United Russia in Volgograd, on May 6, 2011, Putin launched the idea of creating an All Russia's People's Front on the eve of the upcoming legislative elections in December 2011. In his view, the new coalition would have gathered together "political forces that are close in spirit":

potential ally. The cooling of relations left Rogozin's *spetsnaz* with little incentive to support Putin or his government".

[17] "Russia would like the Alliance to stop pursuing policies which contradicts its own interests, such as the unceasing drive for enlargement. Who is enlargement conducted against? Against which states? The new members, and the would-be member-states are of no military significance. However, they are unstable territories in volatile regions. Enlargement increases the area of responsibility for the alliance, but its capabilities, its military potential is not increased. Enlargement does not increase security. The policy is a kind of new Trotskyism" (Rogozin 2009a, p. 4).

[18] In May 2011, a revamped KRO was first officially registered as an international union of social organizations supporting compatriots abroad (RAPSI 2011a). Then, in August 2011, a new Russian social organization 'Rodina-KRO' also came to be registered by the Minister of Justice of the Russian Federation (RAPSI 2011b).

"I propose to create a 'broad popular front'. This form of unification of efforts of all political forces is used in different countries and by different political forces – both left, right, and patriotic. This is an instrument for unifying political forces that are close in spirit. This association could be called the 'All-Russia's People's Front', within the framework of which non-party candidates could get into the Duma on the list of 'United Russia'" (Suslikova 2011). Already in August, rumours about a potential entry of KRO into the new All Russia's People's Front were confirmed by the United Russia party official website (Edinaia Rossiia 2011a). One month later, on the occasion of the KRO Congress taking place in Moscow on September 21, Rogozin's endorsement of Putin ("a person with whom I am connected not only by political contacts and values, but also by bonds of human relations" – KRO-Rodina 2011) and his call for patriotic forces to integrate into the state apparatus marked a turning point in the institutionalisation of the KRO's agenda. Rogozin stated that it was "time to move to the offices where strategic decisions about the future of Russia are made" (RBK 2011), and the patriotic movement had to set the task of integrating itself into both parliamentary and executive power, thus supporting the legalization in the political sphere of other patriotic organizations: "We should also attract representatives of power to our ranks everywhere, we should form the most influential Russian lobby in the country's leadership … The situation where Russians in Russia consider themselves the opposition is intolerable" (KRO-Rodina 2011).

In early November 2011, Rodina-KRO officially addressed the United Russia party leadership "to defend together the rights and interests of the Russian people and other indigenous people of Russia" (Kommersant 2011): among the main proposals, we witness the formation of 'Slavic battalions' from among foreign volunteers, wishing to undergo military service in the Russian armed forces (*ibid*.). The significance of the dialogue with KRO was highlighted by the Deputy Secretary of the Presidium of the General Council of United Russia, Iurii Shuvalov. In the context of a roundtable emblematically titled "The Russian Question in Modern Russia: Stable Interethnic Relations as the Basis of National Unity" the two parties were said to have found common ground on "issues of unity, integrity, civilizational significance of Russia, and its path as an independent sovereign state" (Edinaia Rossiia 2011b).

This integration of KRO into the Kremlin's power network was further cemented during Putin's 2012 presidential campaign, particularly in the programmatic article 'The National Question,' which echoed the KRO's long-standing themes of civilisational unity, cultural dominance, and the state's duty to protect Russians at home and abroad:

"The Russian people are state-builders, as evidenced by the existence of Russia. Their great mission is to unite and bind together a civilisation. Language, culture and something Fedor Dostoyevsky defined as an 'all-encompassing empathy' is what unites Russian Armenians, Russian Azeris, Russian Germans, Russian Tatars and others, in a type of state civilisation where there are no ethnicities, but where 'belonging' is determined by a common culture and shared values. This kind of civilisational identity is based on preserving the dominance of Russian culture, although this culture is represented not only by ethnic Russians, but by all the holders of this identity, regardless of their ethnicity. It is a kind of cultural code which has been attacked ever more often over the past few years; hostile forces have been trying to break it, and yet, it has survived. It needs to be supported, strengthened and protected … When people start complaining that the rights of Russians are being infringed upon in Russia and particularly in historical Russian territories, this means that government agencies are failing in their direct duties: they do not defend the lives, the rights or the security of the people" (Putin 2012).

The official leader of Rodina-KRO, Aleksei Zhuravlev, and Dmitrii Rogozin welcomed Putin's article as the proof of their organisation's successful engagement with the state apparatus

(Edinaia Rossiia 2012; Rogozin 2012). The further formalization of this alliance saw Rogozin entering the ranks of both parliamentary and executive power: first, as an 'authorized representative' of the United Russia Party for the December legislative elections and then, after the party's victory, as a member of Putin's election campaign staff for the March 2012 Presidential elections (Edinaia Rossiia 2011c; Interfax 2011). Rogozin's subsequent appointment as deputy prime minister with responsibility for the military-industrial complex signalled the full absorption of the KRO's ideological legacy into the state's strategic vision.

Since then, Rodina-KRO has served a threefold role in Putin's Russia, proving essential for confronting both domestic and foreign challenges: on the one hand, it helped answer "(1) the surge of nationalist protest during the leadup to the 2011–2012 election cycle," and "(2) the participation of anti-Kremlin nationalists in the protest movement against fraud in the 2011 Duma elections;" on the other hand, it actively contributed to the adoption and implementation of the strategy to answer "(3) the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine and the need to legitimize Russia's attack on that country" (Horvath & Lever 2024, p. 3).

In fact, the KRO's influence extended beyond discourse to concrete geopolitical outcomes. In the 2014 annexation of Crimea, the local branch of the KRO — founded in 1995 under Rogozin's initiative (see KRO-Kryma) — played a pivotal role in mobilising support, coordinating with Russian political actors, and facilitating the referendum. Differently from what happened in the 1994 Crimean crisis, when – as retraced by Ingram (2001, p. 208) – KRO could not boast state support and have enough resources to actively mobilise local population, in early 2014 the organisation could actually advance both state interests and the long-term ambition of remaking the borders inherited from the Soviet collapse, now taking full advantage of its embeddedness into the Kremlin's power network. As recounted in the memoirs of Sergei Shuvainikov (2018, 2021, 2024), the leader of KRO-Crimea since 1995, the organisation intensified its activities in September 2013, in the context of an open confrontation with "the ideology of Ukrainian Nazism and manifestations of Russophobia that swept over Ukraine" and led to "the bloody Maidan and the unconstitutional coup in Kyiv in February 2014" (Shuvainikov 2021, 806).

Already on 22 September 2013, KRO-Crimea expressed concern for the action of the Ukrainian opposition "neo-nazi party Svoboda" and, despite the inaction of most Russian and pro-Russian politicians, started arranging weekly meetings and actions, together with representatives of the Russian Unity party,[19] against "Russophobe facts in Crimea and nationalist acts in Ukraine" (Shuvainikov 2024, pp. 17-18). These were followed by new gatherings in November and December, after the start of Euromaidan in Kyiv, when on the main square of Simferopol' KRO-Crimea activists "publicly burnt the flag of the European Union" (Shuvainikov 2024, p. 20). Most importantly, in early February 2014, representatives of Russian organisations in Crimea, under the leadership of the head of the Russian Unity Party, Sergei Aksenov, met the leader of the Russian party Rodina-KRO, Aleksei Zhuravlev. Shuvainikov highlights the crucial role that KRO-Crimea played in making the cooperation between Crimean and Russian politicians possible:

"I will not hide that this was partly my initiative. My deputy for the Congress of Russian Communities of Crimea, Nikolai Zakharchenko, worked for a long time for Dmitry Rogozin and knew Zhuravlev well. He managed to establish contacts with him through his old

[19] Russian Unity (*Russkoe Edinstvo*) was a political party registered in Crimea in 2008. While being a quite irrelevant player in Crimean and the all-Ukrainian political scene until 2014, Russian Unity and his leader Sergei Aksenov played a crucial role in mobilizing both resources and population during the events preceding the annexation of Crimea to the Russian Federation. The party merged into the Russian party United Russia, right after the annexation of Crimea in Spring 2014.

connections, and he invited him to come to Crimea to meet with Russian organizations and agree on cooperation" (Shuvainikov 2024, p. 23).

Through its networks, the KRO further helped establish the Slavic Antifascist Front, which united local pro-Russian groups under the supervision of Russian deputies. As Shuvainikov (2024) recalls, "[i]t was the beginning of a concrete joint Crimean-Russian activity, the first stage of contacts and agreements with representatives of political power in Russia" (p. 23). Such partnership worked as the main tool of Russian influence in Crimea, eventually facilitating its swift seizure.

On 22 February, on the initiative of the then President of Ukraine Viktor Ianukovych, the Congress of People's Deputies of Southern and Eastern regions took place in Kharkiv, "to put covert pressure on the opposition, allegedly threatening a potential split of Ukraine" (*ibid*., p. 24); Shuvainikov participated as a member of the Crimean delegation. After Ianukovych's departure from Kyiv and the seizure of government quarters by the protesters on the very same day, Shuvainikov was informed that on the following day "the party Russian Unity would organise the registration of volunteers for the Crimean people's militia on the square in front of the Supreme Council of Crimea" (*ibid*., p. 25). On 24 February, "activists from the Congress of Russian Communities of Crimea began to prepare for the upcoming actions and to prepare wooden flagpoles so that they could be used in the event of an attack by militants, to instruct men on how to use them and what tactics to employ in a street fight" (ibid., pp. 26-27) On 26 February, the protesters gathered in front of the Supreme Soviet of Crimea and clashed pro-Kyiv factions (*ibid*., p. 29). Fearing the potential seizure of power from pro-Kyiv activists the day after, "at night, armed people in camouflage uniforms, whom Crimeans later called 'polite people,' entered the building of the Council of Ministers of Crimea and the building of the Supreme Council of Crimea peacefully, without violence or shooting" (*ibid*., pp. 29-30). As Shuvainikov recalls, "[t]hese were Russian special forces, soldiers who raised Russian flags over the buildings, lowering Ukrainian ones, and were supposed to ensure the safety of the work of the legitimate authorities of the Republic of Crimea" (*ibid*., p. 30).

On 27 February, an ordinary session of the Crimean Parliament took place, and the former chair of the Crimean government, Anatolii Mogilev, came to be substituted with the leader of Russian Unity, Sergei Aksenov, whereby the members of KRO-Crimea played "a decisive role at the time of the voting for his candidacy" (*ibid*., p. 30). What followed was the approval of the referendum on the annexation of Crimea to the Russian Federation: Shuvainikov is proud of having been "the first to communicate to mass media that the All-Crimean Referendum will take place on March 16, that Crimea will return to Russia" (*ibid*., p. 31). The very same day, the Russian party Rodina-KRO leader Aleksei Zhuravlev was in Sevastopol', stressing the need for the defending the rights of the local population in the face of all-Ukrainian developments (Rodina 2014).

The day after the referendum sanctioning the willingness of Crimean voters to join the Russian Federation, a delegation of Crimean deputies, activists of Russian organisations, and journalists was invited to Moscow, where on 18 March they took part in the session of the Russian State Duma hosting the ratification of the Crimean accession. On that occasion Shuvainikov met with Rogozin in the Kremlin:

"I was pleased to meet Dmitry Rogozin, on whose initiative the Congress of Russian Communities of Crimea was created back in the mid-90s of the last century. We communicated often when he was not yet deputy chairman of the government. He gave me a friendly hug and said: 'I am glad that your dream has come true.'" (Shuvainikov 2024, p. 33).

Putin's speech celebrating the ratification of the Crimean annexation to Russia further cemented the institutionalisation of the KRO's narrative on the Russian nation as "the

largest ethnic group to be divided by borders" (*razdelennyi narod*),[20] finally advancing a clear concern for the humanitarian consequences of the Soviet collapse and the failure of the CIS as "a new form of common statehood" for former Soviet republics (Putin 2014).
The KRO's legacy continued in the Donbas, where the Russian party Rodina-KRO provided political and logistical support to local forces, helping "to instigate separatist agitation in southeast Ukraine" and "mobilizing Russian nationalist support for the two Russia-backed 'peoples republics" (Horvath and Lever 2024, p. 10). Moreover, Rogozin's role as a key figure of Russia's militarised ethno-nationalism expanded further. After serving as head of Roscosmos (2018-2022), he returned to the frontlines in Ukraine, forming the 'Tsar's Wolves' – a volunteer unit comprising senior military advisers and veterans that provided training and military-technical support to local armed formations and Russian Combat Army Reserve Units dispatched to the South of Ukraine (Krym Realii 2022). In July 2022, Rogozin was expected to move into a position in the presidential administration or to serve as the administration's envoy to Russia's potential new federal district, comprising Donets'k and Luhans'k People's Republics and the other two partially occupied regions of Ukraine, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson (Meduza 2022): eventually, in September 2023, Rogozin was appointed as the senator in the Federation Council, representing the executive authority of the Zaporizhzhia region (Kommersant 2023)— after the results of the sham referendums held in late September 2022 making the four partially occupied regions of Ukraine part of the territory of the Russian Federation.
In sum, the KRO exemplifies how peripheral actors can shape state policy through ideological persistence, strategic networking, and eventual institutional integration. In what Gleb Pavlovsky, a Kremlin veteran consultant, described as the Russian "sistema", "governance requires the temporal appropriation of the state regulator by groups of players" (Pavlovsky 2016: 14): the latter are supervised by "curators", who are "semi-official figures through whom state governance flows" (ivi, p. 12). Such an informal decision-making process, where semi-official figures play a prominent role in implementing policies autonomously, is embodied at its best by the role played by KRO-Rodina and Dmitry Rogozin in "Russian action in Ukraine", where since "early 2014, a number of Russian groups with various interests and strategies became active in the conflict in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine" (ibidem). From its early advocacy of a divided Russian nation to its role in redrawing post-Soviet borders, the KRO's trajectory illustrates the transformation of biopolitical concerns into geopolitical action – underscoring the long-term impact of nationalist movements on Russia's reterritorialisation agenda.

Conclusions

This article traced the evolution of Russia's reterritorialisation agenda from the fragmented ideological landscape of the 1990s to the assertive state-led strategies of the 2010s and beyond. By focusing on the KRO, we showed how peripheral actors – initially excluded from formal political power – played a foundational role in shaping the discourses and practices that would later underpin Russia's foreign policy. The KRO's early emphasis on the protection of compatriots, the restoration of historical unity, and the moral imperative to defend Russian culture abroad anticipated many of the narratives that now define the Kremlin's geopolitical posture.

[20] Curiously, the image of the Russian nation as a "divided people" (*razdelennyi narod*) had been even advanced by Rogozin himself as a potential addendum to the arguments discussed by Putin in his previously mentioned 2012 article on the national question: "My entire political life, starting with the activities of the "Congress of Russian Communities" in the early 1990s, has been connected with the problems of Russian people in Russia and abroad. My scientific works and books are devoted to this issue. And believe me, I have something to say to supplement and develop Putin's article. Today, the Russian people are the largest divided people in Europe" (Rogozin 2012).

In doing so, this article made three key contributions. First, it contextualised Russia's foreign policy within the historical and domestic debates that shaped its post-Soviet identity. Second, it contributed to border studies by showing how early post-Soviet elites conceptualised and contested Russia's territorial boundaries. Third, it introduced a novel methodological approach – combining Russian and Russian-language sources with a prosopographic analysis of elite trajectories – to trace how marginal ideas became institutionalised. These contributions help illuminate the long-term processes through which Russia's current reterritorialisation agenda has taken shape.

Importantly, our analysis challenged the notion that Russia's reterritorialisation is a purely top-down project orchestrated by the presidential administration. Instead, we argued that it is the outcome of a longer-term process of ideological sedimentation, in which marginal actors like the KRO incubated and disseminated ideas that were gradually absorbed into the state apparatus. The political trajectory of Dmitry Rogozin exemplifies this dynamic: from his early activism in the KRO to his later roles in diplomacy, defence, and the annexation of Crimea, Rogozin's career illustrates the permeability of Russia's political system and the strategic utility of nationalist networks. By integrating biopolitical concerns – such as the fate of Russian-speaking populations abroad – with broader geopolitical objectives, the Russian state has constructed a flexible yet potent framework for justifying territorial revisionism.

The influence of the KRO and its network extended beyond what this article could fully explore. Figures such as Iurii Luzhkov, Viktor Alksnis, and Konstantin Zatulin – who were involved in the KRO's early development – later played key roles in institutionalising biopolitical measures within the Russian state (Laruelle 2015). In the early 2000s, Iurii Luzhkov, who served as the mayor of Moscow in 1992-2010, pioneered municipal-level programmes for compatriots abroad that were later adopted nationally. At the time of the approval of the 2002 citizenship law, Viktor Alksnis, then member of the State Duma, helped lay the legal groundwork for Russia's 'passportisation policies,' creating "a loophole for residents in the breakaway regions to become Russian citizens in a simplified procedure" and enabling Russian military interventions (Nagashima 2019, p. 190). Konstantin Zatulin, through his leadership of the Institute for the CIS Countries (also Institute of Diaspora and Integration) and his roles in the State Duma, was instrumental in shaping Russian migration and repatriation policies. These examples underscore the broader impact of originally peripheral actors in shaping the institutional and legal architecture of Russia's foreign policy.

Future research should pay closer attention to the role of such actors in the making of Russian foreign policy – coherently with the scholarly efforts of researchers, such as Marten and Wallander, among others. On the one hand, the relevance in Russian policy-making of "personal and business-related contacts inside the presidential administration" (Laruelle 2015, p. 95) may be greater than top-down ideological convictions; hence, their study may help researchers see beyond the "opacity of Russia's decision-making process" (*ibid*., p. 88). On the other, a long-term, prosopographic approach to the careers of semi-official political figures can help illuminate the ideological continuities that underpin Russia's evolving strategies in the post-Soviet space.

In other words, rather than treating Russia's current imperial turn as a sudden or purely top-down development, scholars should examine the processual nature of how plural ideas and practices concerning the Near Abroad and the Russian Space have been selectively mobilised and institutionalised over time. Emphasising continuity over rupture allows us to decentre the analysis from personalised rule and instead highlight the diversity of actors, the historical dynamics that enabled their integration into the state apparatus, and their enduring impact on the remaking and contestation of borders in the former Soviet space.

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