Studying a negative external actor: Russia’s management of stability and instability in the ‘Near Abroad’

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The literature on transition and democratization was for long dominated by internal explanatory factors such as economic performance, civil society, institutions, etc. Only recently have external actors’ democratizing efforts – like those of the US and the EU – been systematically incorporated. But the perspective remains too constrained, since only ‘positive’ external actors are considered, while possible ‘negative’ actors are left aside. This article attempts to rectify some of the imbalance. First, an analytical framework that can be used to analyse both positive and negative external actors is proposed. Then, the framework is put into use through an analysis of the negative effects of Russia’s foreign policy in the so-called ‘Near Abroad’. It is argued that two general effects take shape: the ‘policy of managed stability’ and the ‘policy of managed instability’. Both are weakening the democratic perspectives in the post-Soviet area, so I argue that Russia’s foreign policy in the ‘Near Abroad’ is a, hitherto, underestimated and badly understood ‘negative’ factor in the literature on transition and democratization in the post-Soviet space.

Keywords: external actors; democratization; authoritarianism; Russia; post-Soviet region

Introduction

Russia is back in business on both the international and the domestic stage, and this has radically changed the context surrounding the post-Soviet republics’ political development. Since the chaotic and acquiescent period in the beginning of the 1990s, Russia has been trying to regain its foothold. In the last decade this objective has been pursued with increasing vigour and assertiveness. Considering Russia’s size and influence capacity, this development, obviously, has real consequences for the republics situated in the Russian neighbourhood. But despite the gradual nature of the changing empirical realities, the literature on transition and democratization has not adequately managed to follow suit. This, I claim, is due to the literature’s imbalanced and narrow focus on Western external actors – an imbalance this article sets out to rectify in two steps.

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First, I claim that the neglect of Russia’s influence is not an isolated case. In general, the literature on transition and democratization is narrowly focused on analysing external actors’ attempts to promote a development from dictatorship to democracy. By only focusing on the West’s efforts to promote democracy, the potential ‘negative influence’ of other major players (i.e., influence that is counterproductive to the process of democratization and liberalization) is disregarded, which produces a simplified, romanticized picture of the international dimension’s influence. I challenge the literature’s predominant focus on what I term ‘positive’ external actors and call for more attention to what I term ‘negative’ external actors as well. In order to comprehend this increased complexity, an analytical framework is introduced that can be used to analyse both positive and negative actors and help bring the literature on transition and democratization in accordance with empirical realities.

Second, in order to exemplify how the developed framework can come into use, I turn to the case of Russia. By analyzing numerous empirical examples I show how Russia’s foreign policy in the so-called ‘Near Abroad’ (Blizhnee Zarubezh’e) has both direct and indirect negative effects on what I term the region’s liberal performance (I focus on the processes of political liberalization and democratization; the reasons for deliberately avoiding the concept of democratization will appear below, together with a precise definition of liberal performance). Thus, the case of Russia is used to illustrate that negative external actors are an empirical fact, and that my proposed analytical framework can be used to analyse them. Furthermore, Russia is indeed a very important actor in the post-Soviet space, and to understand political development in the region, we need to analyse not just the external influence of the EU and the US, but of Russia as well.

The subject of Russia’s transformation has received much attention. The media, politicians, and scholars have increasingly attached importance to Russia and its foreign policy towards the post-Soviet republics. But systematic accounts of how Russia influences these republics’ internal development have, so far, been surprisingly scarce. In particular, one is stunned by the lack of thorough theoretical and empirical accounts of Russia’s influence on the liberal performance of its neighbouring republics.

Several authors have, en passant, argued that Russia is supporting autocratic incumbents and counteracting democratizing states, but only very recently have academics devoted their full attention to analysing this question in depth. Nevertheless, there is still a long way to go. We still need to clarify by what means, in what way, and how much Russia matters as an influential factor in the context of post-Soviet democratization. In particular, a theoretically grounded understanding of what exactly it is that connects the Russian actions with a given country’s political development is still missing – that is, the mechanisms that link Russian foreign policy and the post-Soviet republics’ liberal performance need to be established. With the help of the proposed analytical framework, I argue that Russia can indeed be labelled a negative external actor and throughout the analysis of the negative side of Russia’s influence, I pinpoint exactly why this is so and by what means it is realized.
The article is organized in four parts. First, literature on external influence, in general, and negative domestic and international influence, in particular, are briefly assessed. Then, the article’s key concepts are defined and typologies of external actors’ influence and levers are outlined. Finally, the framework’s applicability is illustrated through an analysis of Russia’s foreign policy in the ‘Near Abroad’.

Gaps in the literature on external influences and recent advancements

For long the literature on transition and democratization was, primarily, dominated by internal explanatory factors such as economic performance, institutional design, strength of civil society, the need for nation and state building, etc. That is, a consensus obviously prevailed that a given state’s regime trajectory is, primarily, determined by its internal conditions — and because of that, the international dimension’s influence on transition and democratization was underdeveloped for many years.

Fortunately, we have come a long way since then. Up through the 1990s the international dimension received more and more attention, but at the turn of the millennium scholars were still stressing the need for more systematic and comparative research on external explanatory factors. But, as I will argue, this need has only partly been addressed. For instance, several studies in the so-called Europeanization literature have documented how the EU, through the latest enlargement process, has had a decisive impact on the democratization of candidate countries. The Europeanization literature is a weighty contribution to the understanding of transition and democratization processes, but huge gaps remain in the knowledge on external explanatory factors.

In particular, the narrow focus on only positive external actors is problematic, because it reduces the international dimension to a unidirectional push-factor for democracy. Thus, either are international actors other than the Western democracy promoters discarded as insignificant. Or, if they obviously have some sort of effect, their influence is merely taken for granted and is not analysed in a systematic and coherent manner on a par with the positive influences. Bluntly said, the possible international pull away from democracy has, apart from a few earlier notable exceptions, either been ignored or only superficially analysed.

Surprisingly, some of the first accounts of external actors in the democratization and transition literature concerned the negative side of the coin. In particular Muller, but also to a lesser degree Whitehead and Huntington, have shown how the United States deliberately intervened negatively in the internal affairs of several Latin American countries during the 1960s and 1970s. US authorities were, for example, deeply involved in promoting the military coups against socialist governments in Brazil (1964) and Chile (1973–1974). The result was reinstitution of authoritarianism and with that an effective rollback of the democratic achievements. But with the easing of the Cold War atmosphere and the general spread of democratic and liberal ideals, researchers’ awareness of the existence of negative external actors has faded away.
Only recently have scholars concerned with post-communist democratization again begun to properly address aspects of the matter. Way, Levitsky and Way, Burnell, Ambrosio, Kagan, and Kramer all centre on authoritarian resistance. They claim that it is wrong to perceive non-democracies as mere passive targets of Western democracy promotion. In the words of Levitsky and Way, autocrats seek to strengthen the autocratic house in order to survive – that is, autocrats fight back if they are able to do so without losing too much. From this very reasonable perspective, the push for democracy is not a one-way process; instead the push is counterbalanced and resisted with every means possible by autocrats, who wish to remain in power.

But autocrats’ resistance does not stop with the strengthening of their own autocratic house; it often expands to their backyards as well. Ambrosio, in particular, takes one step further and convincingly shows how Russia supplements its domestic regime insulation (strengthening of its house) with three external strategies; bolstering the authoritarian regime in Belarus, subverting the democratizing regime in Ukraine, and promoting authoritarian norms internationally through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. That is, according to Ambrosio, Russia is acting as what I term a ‘negative external actor’ because it actively weakens the liberal performance of its neighbours. To my knowledge, these are the only studies that deal explicitly with Russia’s negative influence in a systematic and theoretically grounded manner and, therefore, add significantly to our understanding of the post-Soviet republics’ problematic environment. Nevertheless, we still have some way to go, and to take the literature one step further, solutions to the following three challenges need to be found.

First of all, we need to build a solid theoretical framework that does away with essentialism. As evident from the introduction, I will argue that Russia does indeed act as a negative external actor towards its neighbouring republics. But still, we have to develop concepts that are tied not to particular actors per se, but to their influence. That is, I focus on external actors’ effects – not on who they are, or what they intend to do. Why external actors act the way they do is of course always interesting, but nonetheless irrelevant for my purpose. If we are to steer clear of the normative bias that characterizes, e.g., Robert Kagan’s division between the good guys (democrats) and the bad guys (autocrats) in world politics, we need to construct our theoretical concepts so that it is possible for an external actor to act as both a positive and a negative factor depending on time and place – thus leaving it to the empirical analysis to settle the question. Negative external actors need not be authoritarian, and positive external actors need not be democratic, so our concepts should therefore not rule out the possibility beforehand. Second, to do so, we need to clarify what we understand by a positive and a negative act. That is, certain criteria have to be established upon which an unbiased evaluation of the empirical data can be based. Thus, it is of paramount importance to define clearly the dependent variable that in this article is termed ‘liberal performance’. Only in this way can we settle the question of whether or not Russia should be termed a negative external actor. Third, once the dependent
variable has been specified, it is essential to clarify precisely what the negative external actor influences in a given country, and how this influence connects with the dependent variable. That is, if the influence of the external actor affects a given country’s liberal performance indirectly, then we need a step-by-step specification of the causal mechanism that finally produces the positive or the negative effect. These are the challenges I now turn to.

External influence on what? Defining key concepts

As clarified in the introduction, I focus on external actors’ impact on a given country’s democratization and liberalization process, but I have chosen to stick to the term liberal performance. So what should we understand by this concept? And why not use the more common term democratization?

First of all, it is clear that I, like many before me, differentiate between processes of democratization and processes of liberalization. In line with Carothers, I do not argue that ‘any country moving away from dictatorial rule can be considered a country in transition toward democracy’.

There is a substantial difference between when an authoritarian regime chooses to, for instance, release political prisoners and when it begins to conduct real competitive elections. Releasing political prisoners may be part of a limited opening of a repressive system, but it does not equal a move towards a democratic regime. Since it is ‘obvious that there can be liberalization without democratization’, it is paramount for further analysis to be aware of the limitations of the two concepts. Otherwise, we risk stretching the term democratization too far. And, given that most of the countries in the ‘Near Abroad’ cannot be said to be undergoing democratization, I will stick to the broader term of liberalization to avoid such conceptual stretching.

Now that the question of terminology is dealt with, we can turn to the question of substance. That is, how do we tell whether an external actor has affected a given country’s liberal performance? Which elements are relevant, and which are not? In order to clear up some of the confusion, I resort to a maximalist, though still realistic, definition of democracy, because only this way can both the liberal (releasing political prisoners) and the democratic aspects (conducting free elections) be captured. Many scholars have sought to establish the ‘universal’ definition of democracy, but consensus on the subject has so far not been — and will probably never be — reached. When I speak of democracy, I follow Wolfgang Merkel’s criteria of embedded democracy presented below in Table 1.

In this view, democracy is not only about inclusive elections, participation, and political rights, but expands to include liberal elements of civil rights and the rule of law, horizontal accountability and separation of powers, and the absence of undemocratic power domains such as the military, the police, or foreign powers that can hinder the democratically elected government in effectively ruling the country. Merkel argues that the three dimensions are interrelated and mutually embedded, which means that the five so-called partial regimes (A, B, C, D, and E) reinforce and feed on each other — hence the name embedded democracy.
Merkel’s perception of democracy is very useful for at least three reasons. First, because it draws on insights from most of the important advances within the field of democratic theory, the concept of embedded democracy is theoretically well grounded. Second, even though the concept is maximalist in the sense that it encompasses both democratic and liberal elements, its criteria are gathered in a clear framework that is fairly easy to use as guideline in an empirical analysis. Third, Merkel convincingly shows how the liberal elements support and strengthen the democratic elements – indeed, the democratic elements cannot ‘be meaningful’ without the liberal elements. So even though liberalization is not necessarily democratization, Merkel’s embedded democracy makes it clear that the liberalization process is equally important as (and cannot be separated from) the democratization process. And, therefore, the whole package must be included if we want to fully understand the puzzles of democratization throughout the world.

Hence, using Merkel’s embedded democracy as a starting point I can now define my key concepts. First, the dependent variable: a change in liberal performance is here understood as any change in a country that strengthens or weakens the fulfilment of any of the five partial regimes of embedded democracy. Only by referring to such clearly defined criteria can we clarify when an external actor is relevant, and why, indeed, this is the case. Second, this definition allows us to objectively categorize external actors according to how they influence – thus, dealing with the increased complexity, but avoiding the problem of essentialism and disentangling preferences. A positive external actor is defined as an external actor that strengthens another country’s liberal performance, and a negative external actor is defined as an external actor that weakens another country’s liberal performance.

Thus, with the help of Merkel’s embedded democracy, the researcher is able to clearly establish which external actors are relevant, why they are relevant, and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Merkel’s criteria of embedded democracy.</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Dimension of vertical legitimacy</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>A. Electoral regime</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>(1) Elected officials</td>
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<tr>
<td>(2) Inclusive suffrage</td>
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<tr>
<td>(3) Right to candidacy</td>
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<tr>
<td>(4) Correctly organized, free and fair elections</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>B. Political rights</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>(5) Press freedom</td>
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<td>(6) Freedom of association</td>
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whether they should be characterized as a positive or a negative influence. So now that the key concepts are in place, let me proceed to the last elements of the analytical framework necessary for the empirical analysis.

**Typologies of external influence and levers**

As I have argued above, studies of external actors’ influence need to be grounded much stronger theoretically and conceptually. Only by carefully categorizing the external influences will we, on a more solid foundation, be able to compare external actors’ actions across time and space. Hence, before conducting the empirical analysis it will prove useful to start out with a few comments on the fairly simple framework of different types of influences and levers that will structure it.

Regarding the types of influences, the empirical analysis will be structured around the fourfold differentiation between *active/passive* and *direct/indirect* influence developed by Peter Burnell. 24 Besides the comparative scope, both dichotomies are helpful in reminding the researcher of the already mentioned importance of clarifying the causal mechanisms at work. If, for instance, an external action does not bear directly on one of Merkel’s partial regimes, then either the causal chain that transmits the action into affecting the liberal performance must be established, or that given action must be discarded as irrelevant for a study of external effects on democratization.

All four variants are in principle possible, but the following analysis will be limited to the *active* influence of Russia: not because I consider active influence to be more important than passive influence, 25 but rather because the empirical analysis in this article merely serves to exemplify that negative external actors indeed are important and that the presented analytical framework can be used to analyse them. That is, the empirical analysis of Russia’s negative influence in the ‘Near Abroad’ neither claims nor intends to be comprehensive. So even though this delimitation means that the scope of our understanding of Russia’s negative external influence will only be partial, we will still gain considerable theoretical and empirical ground.

Regarding foreign policy tools, I distinguish between three types of levers: *military, political* and *economic*. In Table 2, the Russian foreign policy levers in the ‘Near Abroad’ are listed under these three headings. The listed levers and the groupings are primarily inspired by Bugajski, Hendenskog and Larsson, and Kramer. Bugajski lists 14 concrete levers, but does not group them in overarching categories. Hedenskog and Larsson work with five groups (political, human-based, energy, economic and military levers), while Kramer resorts to three groups (political, economic/energy, and military/national security). To keep the framework simple and applicable to other external actors as well, I only use the three basic types of levers. It should be noted, though, that the group *political levers* is very broad and, in the Russian case, encompasses many diplomatic and non-diplomatic tools. For instance, the wording ‘support for’ covers all kinds of measures ranging from open diplomatic support in international institutions and domestic struggles.
Table 2. Russian foreign policy levers in the ‘Near Abroad’.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Military levers</th>
<th>Political levers</th>
<th>Economic levers</th>
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<tr>
<td>Military interventions</td>
<td>Support of anti-Western groups/governments</td>
<td>Energy monopoly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military threats</td>
<td>Opposing pro-Western groups/governments</td>
<td>Trade embargos</td>
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<tr>
<td>Military bases abroad</td>
<td>Support of secessionist republics</td>
<td>Subsidizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military support to secessionist republics</td>
<td>Multilateral organizations dominated by Russia</td>
<td>Credits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peacekeeping forces</td>
<td>Control of the CIS Election Monitoring Organization</td>
<td>Debt payments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military alliances dominated by Russia</td>
<td>Russian state TV</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Russian diaspora</td>
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to more covert bilateral support through, e.g. advice on party organization, tools of repression, and so on. I have, on the one hand, intentionally preserved these broad terms to avoid blurring the picture with too many concrete levers. On the other hand, I have chosen to emphasize three levers (even though these levers could easily fit under the umbrella of supporting or opposing certain groups): control of the CIS Election Monitoring Organization, Russian state-TV, and Russian Diaspora.

I will not discuss further what lies behind the various levers, but instead save the explanation for the following analysis, where empirical examples from Russia’s conducted foreign policy will help clarify how the levers work. Note that this list is far from exhaustive, but is merely meant to give the reader a good impression, prior to the empirical analysis, of the types of levers that are dominant in Russian foreign policy in the ‘Near Abroad’.

Analysing Russia’s active negative influence in the ‘Near Abroad’

What does Russia’s foreign policy in the post-Soviet region look like? How are the foreign policy levers listed above applied? And how exactly does this application affect the neighbouring republics’ liberal performance? These questions form the point of departure of the following section. Using several empirical examples from throughout the region, I show that Russian foreign policy in the ‘Near Abroad’ can be characterized as negative, as it is weakening the liberal performance of the post-Soviet republics through both direct and indirect effects. The main argument is that Russia’s actions in the ‘Near Abroad’ can be summoned in two general policies – the policy of managed stability and the policy of managed instability.26

Table 3 presents the negative effects of Russia’s two policies according to their type of influence and to the elements of liberal performance that they affect. As
Table 3. The negative effects of Russia’s foreign policy in the ‘Near Abroad’.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Elements of liberal performance</th>
<th>Policy of managed stability</th>
<th>Policy of managed instability</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Direct influence</td>
<td>Indirect influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Electoral regime</td>
<td>Interference in elections</td>
<td>Political, economic and military support strengthens the ruling elites’ coercive state capacity and, thereby, their ability to conduct rigged elections (A), curtail political (B) and civil rights (C), and concentrate power in the executive (D)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Legitimizing undemocratic elections</td>
<td>Delegitimizing undemocratic elections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Political rights</td>
<td>Sharing knowledge on how to curtail political rights</td>
<td>The ‘managed’ part makes Russia an effective undemocratic veto-player</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Legitimizing curtailment of political rights</td>
<td>Support and control of undemocratic secessionist regions inside the republics weaken the central governments’ power to rule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Civil rights</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Horizontal accountability</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Effective power to rule</td>
<td>The ‘managed’ part makes Russia an effective undemocratic veto-player</td>
<td>The ‘managed’ part makes Russia an effective undemocratic veto-player</td>
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Political, economic and military sanctions work destabilizing in two ways:
1) Western-oriented elites’ chances of getting elected or reelected (and, thus, commencing or sustaining democratic reforms) are weakened (A, B, C, D)
2) Western organizations lose interest in unstable regimes, and thus, their push for reforms are weakened (A, B, C, D)
evident, the policies have both differences and similarities. First of all, they differ slightly as to which of Merkel’s partial regimes are affected and how they are affected. Second, the two policies differ with regard to the kinds of countries they target. While the policy of managed stability is most likely to be conducted in republics that are not striving toward Western integration and democratic reforms, the policy of managed instability is most likely to be found in countries that are consolidated democracies and deeply integrated with the West, or in countries that seem more or less committed to democratic principles and Western integration. Right now the first group consists of Belarus, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the Central Asian republics, while the second group is consists of the Baltic States, Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia.

It is important to note that these groupings merely represent a snapshot of today’s realities. That is, the groups are not fixed but can change according to the internal development of the republics (e.g., Ukraine earlier on clearly belonged to the first group but since the Orange Revolution has moved to the group targeted by the policy of managed instability). Furthermore, it should be stressed that Russia’s degree of influence is of course not uniform even across the cases inside these two groups – that is, the negative influence varies both between and within the groups. Thus, the two groups present a fair, but crude, overall picture of Russia’s dichotomized negative influence in the ‘Near Abroad’.

Turning to the similarities, both policies, obviously, encompass the same two elements – one concerning the ‘managing’ part and one concerning the ‘stability’ part. The former relates to Russia’s overt attempts to control its neighbourhood, while the latter deals with how each policy, apart from the direct impact on the neighbouring republics’ liberal performance, has an indirect effect as well – an effect that works through the crucial dimension of stability. By using its comprehensive influence capacity, Russia affects the level of stability in a given country and can, thus, through mechanisms described below, indirectly have an impact on the level of liberal performance.

Regarding the policy of managed stability, the ‘stabilization’ part emphasizes Russia’s attempts to avoid regime change in a given republic by ensuring the incumbent’s power. The ‘managing’ part stresses that during and after this stabilization process, Russia endeavours to tie the incumbent and his country more strongly to it in order to maximize its influence on the state’s internal affairs. That is, in the short run, stability seems to have priority over instability, but in the long run, stability is not necessarily the goal at all costs, but appears to be contingent on whether or not Russia gains substantially from it.

For the policy of managed instability, the ‘instability’ part stresses Russia’s efforts to destabilize the regime in a given country, while the ‘managed’ part reflects both an attempt to enhance, in particular, its economic control over the country and to make sure that instability does not get out of hand and spill over to neighbouring republics (risking destabilization of the whole region). Again, differentiating between the short and the long run is useful. In the short run, instability seems to be preferred, but only as long as it does not escalate beyond control.
Instability is only accepted in the short run in the hope that it will lead to a regime change and increase Russian influence in the longer run.

To show how the Russian influence is applied and how it bears on the neighbouring republics’ liberal performance, the two policies’ direct and indirect effects are now treated consecutively with the help of empirical examples from throughout the region. I begin with the policy of managed stability and then turn to the policy of managed instability.

**The policy of managed stability – direct effects**

As Table 3 shows, the policy of managed stability has direct negative effects on three of Merkel’s five partial regimes; the electoral regime, the regime of political rights, and the regime concerning the democratically elected elites’ effective power to rule. The effect on the electoral regime is mostly transmitted through political and economic levers and can consist of biasing the pre-election campaign towards the incumbent, help planning electoral fraud and, subsequently, legitimizing the whole process through rhetorical approval by Russian politicians and/or by a multilateral organization dominated by Russia.

As exemplified below, Russia has a long record of interfering directly in pre-election campaigns by supporting a favoured candidate via overt diplomatic support on the highest level, offering help from experienced political strategists, granting economic support for an effective campaign, and by assisting with media support through Russian state-controlled TV, which is widely watched in many of the post-Soviet republics. Ukraine’s parliamentary election in 2002 and its controversial presidential election in 2004 are examples of such multifaceted support (note that Ukraine at this time was in the group targeted by the policy of managed stability, thus underlining the flexibility of the groups).

In 2002 Russia intervened in the elections to back the incumbent President Kuchma’s supporters. Kuchma was at that time turning more and more towards Russia, and it was, therefore, important for Russia to keep him in power. Russian TV stations were openly discrediting all parties that were not favoured by the Kremlin; parties that supported Kuchma were propped up financially; and Russian politicians were publicly singling out those parties that their country could cooperate with and those that would hamper the relationship. In 2004 Kuchma’s popularity ratings had declined drastically, and his chosen heir, Yanukovich, was not doing too well either. This called for action. Russian political strategists were sent in to organize Yanukovich’s campaign, President Vladimir Putin (whose popularity rating in Ukraine at the time was 66%) openly supported Yanukovich on several occasions, and Russia invested around US$300 million in bribes, vote buying, and campaign management. So, both in 2002 and in 2004, Russia skewed the election process by helping the incumbent conducting elections that were not free and fair (violation of Merkel’s fourth criteria, cf. Table 1).

However Russia’s interference is, as mentioned, not restricted to the pre-election campaign, but is evident in the post-election period as well. There are
several examples of how a conducted election — rigged or not — is subsequently approved and legitimized by the CIS Election Monitoring Organization. The CIS observers, who have been sent to elections in the CIS member states since 2002, are often only Russians, and their evaluations of the elections are not based on objective criteria but seem to be dependent on whether pro-or anti-Western forces are winning. Therefore, the fixed elections in, for instance, the first round of the presidential election in Ukraine in 2004, the parliamentary elections in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in 2005, and the presidential elections in Kyrgyzstan 2005 and in Belarus 2006 were approved as free and fair even though the OSCE reported massive fraud. Such an approval clearly strengthens the autocrats, because it helps legitimize the authoritarian rule by shielding it against internal and external criticism that officials were not elected in a truly competitive vote.

But Russia does not only influence the electoral regime. By sharing advice on tools of repression and by applauding and thus legitimizing the use of such tools, Russia directly influences the regime of political rights as well. An extreme example is the overt support, assistance, and enhanced integration that followed the brutal slaughter of hundreds of demonstrators and passers-by in the city of Andijan in Uzbekistan in May 2005 (just a couple of months after the Orange Revolution). The West sharply criticized Uzbek President Karimov, but Russian President Putin congratulated Karimov, saying ‘My rady tomu, chto obstanovka normalizuetsya ... My u dovletoremy tem, chto udalos’ vzhat’ obstanovku pod kontrol’; i nadeemnya na to, chto ona budet tol’ko ukrepliyat’lya [We are glad that the situation is becoming normal ... We are happy that it was possible to get the situation under control and hope that it will only become strengthened]’ (author’s translation). By supporting Karimov’s reasons for the repression, Russia supported a curtailment of the freedom of association (Merkel’s sixth criteria, cf. Table 1). Just as the CIS observers’ approval is tightly connected to the whole election process, so is the act of ‘legitimizing curtailment of political rights’ tightly connected to the very act of curtailing political rights and the ruler’s attempt to frame these curtailments as necessary — and just — actions. That is, the process of successfully curtailing political rights is strengthened.

In the next couple of months, the EU imposed a ban on arms sales to Uzbekistan and a one-year visa ban on 12 top Uzbek officials. But Russia acted differently. In the same period, the two countries’ military relations tightened and Russian authorities willingly shared legislative details on how to best impose tight controls on NGOs. After the Uzbek incident, officials from Russia have further tried to spread the word on the necessity of firm NGO control to the leaders in Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan.

The final direct negative effect of the policy of managed stability concerns the ‘managed’ part of the term. As examples below show, Russia is following a long-term strategy of increasing neighbouring republics’ dependence on its help in, e.g., military or economic matters. This increasing dependence is making the republics very vulnerable to Russian influence. Thus, there is a risk that Russia creates reserved policy domains — that is, areas in a society that are not controlled by the
government but by actors who carry great influence, yet cannot be held accountable by the population (Merkel’s tenth criteria, cf. Table 1). So apart from posing a serious challenge to the authoritarian (in this section) rulers, Russia also prepares the ground for major future influence in areas that may very well prove to be a serious problem for a possible future democratically oriented government. The most obvious cases are within the strategic military, energy, and transportation sectors.

An extreme example is Belarus, whose military is deeply integrated with the Russian military. Forty thousand Russian troops are stationed on Belarusian territory; Belarus has a preponderance of Russian officers (all educated in Russia); it buys all military hardware from Russia; the two countries have a common air defence system; and Russia exerts strong influence on the appointment of personnel to the Belarusian Ministry of Defence. Hence, I find it fair to characterize the Belarusian military as a reserved policy domain dominated by the currently undemocratic Russia. This clearly circumscribes the current Belarusian leadership’s effective power to rule, and it will definitely pose a serious challenge in the future, should Belarus decide to leave the Russian sphere of influence and democratize.

Turning to the energy and transportation sector, Armenia stands out as a critical example of how Russia is taking over its neighbours’ economic infrastructure. Since 2002 Russia has been pressuring the Armenian government to either hand over strategic assets or be forced to repay its US$94 million debt and feel the consequences of rising gas prices. Since Armenia is entirely dependent on Russian gas and is incapable of repaying its debts, a property-for-debt agreement has been struck. This has, so far, resulted in the take-over of, inter alia, atomic and hydroelectric power plants (providing 50% of Armenia’s electricity supply) and the country’s electric power grid and pipelines, and a long-term agreement whereby Russia leases and thus controls all of the country’s railways. If we combine these strategic take-overs with Armenia’s near total dependence on Russian energy exports (providing another 40% of Armenia’s electricity supply), the contours of an influential and vital reserved policy domain dominated by Russia once again appear. By controlling the economy, Russia has a major say over the country’s development and, thus, the central government’s effective power to rule is restricted.

The policy of managed stability – indirect effects

So much for the direct effects. As Table 3 indicates, the policy of managed stability also has indirect negative effects. The effects are indirect because they do not bear directly on the liberal performance of the targeted republics, but instead strengthen what Levitsky and Way call their coercive state capacity. Coercive state capacity is paramount for autocratic resilience; only by holding the capacity to quell opposition and reinforce elite cohesion can a regime withstand the external and internal pressures for change, and only this way can authoritarianism be consolidated.
Thus, Russia’s policy of managed stability strengthens the incumbents’ coercive state capacity by helping them sustain stability, order, and control. The help is, primarily, channelled through economic levers such as favourable subsidies, credits, and lower energy prices. A well-known example is the arbitrary differences in Russian gas prices – differences that in 2008 ranged from US$280/mcm (the Baltic republics), over US$230 (Georgia), US$191 (Moldova), and US$179 (Ukraine), to US$119 (Belarus) and US$110 (Armenia).\textsuperscript{39} This vital economic support to authoritarian regimes makes it easier for incumbents to keep the economy running, finance the necessary welfare goods, pay salaries to the coercive state apparatus, and to distribute rents to the ruling elite to secure support. While the former two guarantee a minimum of stability, the latter two ensure that order and control are upheld.

Even though economic levers are the most important tools for the policy’s indirect negative effect, military and political levers serve the purpose as well, although only as a supplement. By supporting and cooperating with the incumbent regime on both bilateral and multilateral terms, Russia minimizes the costs of possible Western isolation. Thus, by cooperating with the regime, Russia adds legitimacy to it and offers an alternative to Western integration – an integration that would, \textit{ceteris paribus}, be conditioned on democratic improvements.\textsuperscript{40}

All in all, Russian support on the military, political, and economic levels can be said to minimize the costs of being authoritarian. Without Russia’s protection, many of the authoritarian regimes in the ‘Near Abroad’ would be much worse off due to bad performance on all three levels of security, legitimacy, and welfare. And this would, \textit{ceteris paribus}, make it more difficult for the incumbents to uphold a strong coercive state apparatus that can rig elections to ensure legitimacy, curtail political and civil rights to quell the opposition, and help concentrate power in the executive to consolidate authoritarianism. In brief, Russia’s policy of managed stability makes it easier to be authoritarian – in the words of Ambrosio, Russia \textit{bolsters} the authoritarian regimes.\textsuperscript{41} Now let me turn to the policy of managed instability.

\textbf{The policy of managed instability – direct effects}

As evident from Table 3, the policy of managed instability has direct negative effects on two of Merkel’s five partial regimes – the electoral regime and the regime concerning the democratically elected elites’ effective power to rule. The effects on the electoral regime very much resemble the ones outlined under the policy of managed stability – the only difference being that, in this case, Russia is not supporting the incumbent, but instead an opposition candidate who does not aspire to democratization and Western integration. As will be exemplified below, Russia again interferes directly in the pre-election campaign by supporting a favoured candidate with both political, economic and media support, and after the election, the CIS Election Monitoring Organization is once again used – though this time not to legitimize a rigged election, but to delegitimize an otherwise clean election.
A clear-cut example of such interference is Moldova’s parliamentary election in March 2005. Prior to the election, incumbent President Vladimir Voronin had staunchly refused to sign the Kozak Memorandum (a Russian-drafted peace plan for a settlement of the Transnistria conflict that would allow Russian troops on Moldovan territory permanently and grant Transnistrian politicians a disproportionately large say over federal matters), and Russia was therefore very eager to minimize the influence of his communist party. The Kremlin openly supported the opposition parties Moldova Democrata (BMD) and Rodina in several ways; political strategists were sent to Moldova to help plan the campaign, the party leaders were invited to official talks with prominent members of Putin’s presidential administration, and the two parties were applauded on Russian state TV broadcast in Moldova. At the same time, Voronin and the communists were openly discredited, and it was made crystal clear that a communist victory in the elections would result in Russian economic and visa sanctions. Because of this overt intervention in the pre-election campaign, the Moldovan authorities refused to allow CIS observers into the country. Russia was outraged, and the CIS observers declared that the parliamentary election was rigged in favour of the incumbent, despite the fact that the OSCE observers, who were on the ground during the election, found it to be in general compliance with international standards.

Turning to the regime concerning the neighbouring republics’ effective power to rule, two effects crystallize. The first is similar to the one described in the section on the policy of managed stability. By deepening neighbouring republics’ dependence on its help in, e.g., economic matters, Russia is becoming an influential undemocratic veto-player that holds the power to severely sanction the republics’ economies if they do not pay attention to Russian interests. Thus, Russia’s hold on the countries’ fragile economies is restricting the democratically elected leaders’ effective power to rule, and is, therefore, weakening the republics’ liberal performance. This is evident in the ongoing struggles over control of the gas distribution system in, for instance, Ukraine (this is very relevant in Moldova and Georgia as well). But since the mechanisms in play here are a mirror image of those presented above under the policy of managed stability, I will not go into further detail.

The second effect concerns Russia’s overt support to secessionist regions within the republics — such South Ossetia and Abkhazia within Georgia, and Transnistria within Moldova (the Crimea in Ukraine receives considerable support from Russia as well, but the effect is more pronounced in the chosen examples). This support affects the liberal performance of the targeted republics in two ways. Since the secessionist regions are characterized by a general lack of democratic progress, the external support is keeping the undemocratic parts of the republics alive and thriving. At the same time, the breakaway regions are aware that they are dependent on this support, and consequently, they allow Russia a significant say on internal matters. Hence, Russian support to the secessionist regions creates increasingly undemocratic reserved policy domains within the main republics that severely restrict the democratically elected central governments’ effective power to rule. Let me provide some examples.
Politically, Russia attaches political attention on the highest level to the secessionist regions’ autocratic authorities – climaxing, so far, with the recognition of South Ossetia’s and Abkhazia’s independence in the wake of the Russian–Georgian war (August 2008). This increases the legitimacy of these republics and thereby legitimizes Russia’s influence on the internal affairs of Georgia and Moldova.

Financially, Russia grants credits and subsidizes goods as aid to the secessionist regions. Tellingly, Russia has constantly pressed the governments in Tbilisi and Chisinau for debt payments, while at the same time in effect keeping the breakaway regions financially alive with subsidies and credits. Militarily, Russia is using its ‘peacekeeping’ forces to support the secessionist republics. Russia has sent its forces to all major conflict zones in the territory of the former Soviet Union: Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Georgia); Transnistria (Moldova); Nagorno-Karabakh (Armenia and Azerbaijan); and Tajikistan. But in contrast to the normal conduct of peacekeeping forces, the Russian forces have actively supported one of the sides in these conflicts – thereby placing the goal of maximizing Russian influence above the goal of maintaining peace and security.

The cases of Georgia’s secessionist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia serve as a good example. First, Russia secured its foothold here by militarily assisting former Georgian President Shevardnadze’s efforts to regain control over the regions in return for Georgia’s entry into the CIS. Later, Russia changed sides and, up to the outbreak of war between Russia and Georgia (instigated by the incumbent President Saakashvili’s bold attempt to win back control over the regions), was trying to fan the flames of these ‘frozen conflicts’ in order to maximize its leverage over the Georgian government. Since the war, Russian control over the territories has increased significantly and has thus further strengthened Russia’s hand vis-à-vis Georgia. By more or less controlling the governments in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia can upgrade or downgrade the conflict as it deems fit. So, by supporting the undemocratic secessionist regions and controlling the level of conflict, Russia is hindering a nationwide process of state-building and democratization in Georgia, and thus, the Georgian central government’s power to effectively rule and set the agenda is severely hampered.

The policy of managed instability – indirect effects

Turning to the indirect effects of the policy of managed instability, the stability dimension once again shows its importance. While Russia is trying to stabilize the targeted republics under the policy of managed stability, the opposite is the case with the policy of managed instability. This instability has two consequences for the republics’ liberal performance.

First, military, political, and economic sanctions raise the costs of continuing reforms or choosing them in the first place. This is because reform-minded elites will have a harder time convincing the electorate of the rightness of pursuing democratic ideals when they cannot secure order and prosperity. Second,
Russian sanctions and their effects make the democratizing states look unstable and unfit for integration in the eyes of the West. This not only prolongs the integration process but potentially also weakens the support and enthusiasm of the West and thereby the Western push for further reforms. Let me explain how this is done.

Militarily, Russia is destabilizing the Western-oriented republics in several ways. Apart from the already mentioned support to secessionist regions, relevant levers are military threats, interventions, and strategic use of military bases within the countries. While it is evident how military invasions, like the one against Georgia in August 2008, are devastating for a country’s political and economic stability, it is less clear how exactly Russian military bases affect the stability dimension. One example is the Russian naval base in Sevastopol in Crimea, Ukraine. Ever since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the ownership of the naval base (and of Crimea) has remained a disputed issue that Russia again and again has used to question Ukrainian independence and territorial integrity. By repeatedly questioning Ukraine’s sovereignty, Russia acts as a constant nuisance factor for regime consolidation, and, furthermore, makes the country look less attractive as a partner in the eyes of the West (which is sceptical about importing territorial conflicts).

Politically, Russia is working fiercely to delegitimize the Western-oriented governments, while at the same time supporting more Russia-oriented elites in the opposition or in secessionist parts of the country. When Russia weakens the incumbent and strengthens the opposition, the political situation in the country is destabilized and maybe even deadlocked, as is the case in Ukraine. This pattern of support and sanctions very much follows the already mentioned procedure that is used during elections with interference on the diplomatic, the financial, and the media level. Therefore, it will not be discussed further here.

Financially, Russia is destabilizing the republics in the ‘Near Abroad’, first and foremost through its aggressive energy policy – a policy that consists of supply cut-offs, non-transparent models of price increases, and attempts to take control of strategic pipeline routes, infrastructure and energy-producing and distributing companies. Tellingly, from 1991 to 2006, 55 incidents of supply interruptions occurred in the post-Soviet region that were purely motivated by political or economic reasons.

Russian economic levers are not limited to energy matters, but also encompass more ordinary trade issues. For instance, in March and April 2006, Russia placed an embargo on the import of Moldovan wine after a long period of tension between the two nations regarding, in particular, the issue of Transnistria. The Russian Federal Goods Supervisory Service (Rospotrebnadzor) claimed that it had found pesticides and heavy metals in the wines. But as the same scenario took place in Georgia (not just with wine, but also with mineral water), and as both countries were exporting to the US and the EU without problems, the allegations can, plausibly, be regarded as politically motivated. As around 200,000 people work in the wine-producing sector and wine exports make up 30% of Moldova’s total export,
and as Russia is the main importer, the ban was a serious strike against the state’s vulnerable economy.  

Another example of such financial destabilization is Moscow’s use of debts and credits. Many of the post-Soviet republics have large debts to Russia, which are from time to time used to influence the states on various issues. This was, for instance, the case in Ukraine following the parliamentary elections in September 2007. After the frayed Orange Coalition’s narrow victory, Russian official reactions were unusually muted. But just two days after the election, Gazprom suddenly demanded that Ukraine repay its US$1.3 billion gas debt within a month. If the demand were not met, the exported volume of gas to Ukraine would be reduced. Such sudden economic disturbances challenge the government’s long-term planning and weakens its ability to control the economy.

Overall, the policy of managed instability has dire consequences for the targeted countries. To use Ambrosio’s words, the destabilization of the republics and the deterrence of Western involvement indirectly subvert the liberal performance of the given republics. Building a healthy democracy demands not only political will, but also security and political and economic stability. And as long as Russia actively counteracts this, the republics’ prospects of a democratic future are severely hampered.

**Conclusion**

That Russia is a very important actor in the ‘Near Abroad’ is nothing new. Much has been written on its foreign policy and crucial role as the region’s great power. In the last decade, in particular, the awareness of Russia’s international and domestic resurrection has been considerable. Taking this into consideration, it is even more surprising that this fact has not found its way into the literature on transition and democratization in the post-Soviet space. External actors such as the EU and the US have been the subjects of numerous analyses, but attention to Russian influence has been scarce.

However, the narrow focus on Western external actors is not just found among scholars of post-communism, but is characteristic of the democratization literature in general. This Western bias has resulted in a perception of the international dimension whereby external actors only affect processes of liberalization and democratization in a positive way – thus, neglecting possible negative external factors. I have tried to address these shortcomings in two ways.

First, I have proposed a neutral conceptual framework that can be used to analyse both positive and negative external actors’ influence on what I term liberal performance. Using Merkel’s concept of embedded democracy as a starting point, I have established objective criteria for what counts as a weakening and a strengthening of other countries’ liberal performance. Thus I have paved the way for unbiased evaluations of when and where a given external actor should be characterized as a positive or a negative actor (thus, avoiding the problem of essentialism). Furthermore, drawing on various authors, simple typologies of
external influences and policy levers have been presented to further sharpen our understanding of external actors’ influences and make it easier to compare cases across time and space.

Second, with the help of the analytical framework I have analysed several examples of Russia’s negative active influence in the ‘Near Abroad’. It has been argued that Russia weakens the liberal performance of the post-Soviet republics through the policies of managed stability and managed instability. Therefore, I claim that Russia can, on many occasions, rightfully be regarded as an influential negative external factor in the post-Soviet space – a factor that, consequently, deserves at least the same attention that is currently given to positive external actors in the area.

It should be noted that I have not sought to explain why Russia acts the way it does, but has merely pointed to the highly visible effects of its active foreign policy. That is, I have not claimed that Russia systematically exports authoritarianism or has a clear preference for such a regime type. However, I have shown how it consistently strengthens autocrats’ coercive state capacity and destabilizes democratizing states in the region. This may be due to a genuine preference for authoritarianism, but it may also simply reflect a preference for regimes that are pro-Russian or anti-Western. So, even though these regimes in reality turn out to be authoritarian, it is not necessarily that characteristic that fosters the Russian support. Thus, the aim of the article has not been to portray Russia as the evil empire or the perpetual ‘bad boy’ in international politics, but rather to argue that we need to come to terms with empirical realities and analyse them on as objective grounds as possible.

Nevertheless, the picture painted in this paper regarding the democratic prospects of the post-Soviet space is rather bleak. Russia’s goals in the region seem to be incompatible with those of the West, and this means that the possible positive influence that, for example, the EU, NATO, or the US, can exert in the area is actively counterbalanced and maybe even ‘crowded out’ by the negative influence of Russia. So even if one could claim that democracy is on the march in the area, or that we could clearly acknowledge that, for instance, the EU has the capability to positively affect non-candidate countries through its neighbourhood policy, such tendencies may be opposed by Russia’s extrovert authoritarian resistance. Thus, only by summing up both the positive and the negative external forces do we get the full picture of the international dimension’s importance for democratic development throughout the world. Only then will we be better able to explain the striking regime diversity in the ‘Near Abroad’ and beyond.

Notes
2. The terms ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ should in this context not be ascribed any normative connotation; they only refer to whether the actor strengthens or weakens the democratic perspectives of other countries. The two terms will be defined more precisely below.
3. The Russian concept of the ‘Near Abroad’ is very blurry, and it is difficult to clearly delimit its geographical scope. Most often, it is used to distinguish the former Soviet republics (both the Baltic republics and the present CIS states) from the ‘real abroad’ (that is, from the countries that were not part of the Soviet Union). Thus, it amply illustrates how Russia has special interests in the region, and that this special interest is found to be quite legitimate. See Safire, ‘On Language’; Skak, *From Empire to Anarchy*, 67.


5. E.g., Ambrosio, ‘Political Success’, ‘Insulating Russia’, ‘Catching the “Shanghai Spirit’’, and *Authoritarian Backlash*.

6. E.g., Kopecky and Mudde, ‘What Has Eastern Europe’.

7. E.g., Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, *Europeanization*; Vachudová, *Europe Undivided*.


13. Ambrosio, ‘Catching the “Shanghai Spirit’’.


18. C.f. Sartori, ‘Concept Misformation’.


23. Ibid., 37.


25. Important examples of Russian passive influence are easy to come up with. One negative example is Russia’s modular effects. Being an authoritarian regime that has managed to bring stability and prosperity to a country plagued by instability and economic crisis, it could inspire other autocratic-minded leaders to follow the same path. A positive example is Russia’s ‘deterrent effect’. Many of the republics in the ‘Near Abroad’ surely fear Russian domination and are, hence, forced to seek protection in the West, even though this protection comes with strings attached in the form of demands for democratization.

26. The two concepts are partly inspired by Kramer, who in an earlier unpublished draft of his article (Kramer, ‘Russian Policy’) used the term ‘managed instability’ with regard to ‘the Russian government’s effort to keep the “frozen conflicts” simmering in Abkhazia and South Ossetia’.

27. With regard to the Baltic republics, Russia seems to be aware that their commitment to democracy and integration with the West are irreversible and that it is beyond the
scope of its leverage to destabilize the countries sufficiently to force through a regime change. But even in the light of these acknowledgements, Russian foreign policy towards these republics is still characterized by the bullying and punishing behaviour experienced by the rest of the group.

38. Levitsky and Way, ‘Dynamics’.
40. Ambrosio, ‘Political Success’.
41. Ambrosio, ‘Insulating Russia’.
42. Eurasia Daily Monitor, ‘Russian Political Campaign’ and ‘Double Vector’.
43. Hedenskog and Larsson, ‘Russian Leverage’, 27.
47. Skak, *From Empire to Anarchy*, 159.
48. Russia still has 25 military bases in the other CIS republics, except Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (Kramer, ‘Russian Policy’, 14). The troops in the Baltic States were withdrawn in 1994 (Bugajski, *Cold Peace*, 6).
54. Eastweek, ‘Gazprom Disciplines’.
55. Ambrosio, ‘Insulating Russia’.

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