The NATO Precedent:

How Russia's Conceptions of Sovereignty Dictate Strategic Narratives in Ukraine

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Abstract

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine spawned an abundance of narratives from Russia in its attempt to justify its actions. Many scholars have established that Russia's strategic narratives in previous controversial military engagements with former Soviet states have mirrored Western narratives in the 1999 NATO bombing of Kosovo, as well as the subsequent support for Kosovar independence. The breach of Serbia's sovereignty for humanitarian reasons was contrary to Russia's foreign policy at the time, but this has changed since. Kosovo was instrumental in shifting Russia's view on sovereignty away from dominant Westphalian sovereignty focused on territory and recognition towards one focused on citizens and shared values, known as *organic sovereignty*. This paper will demonstrate that this view of sovereignty not only originated with Western narratives in Kosovo in 1999, but also that has been present in narratives justifying Russia's involvement in Georgia in 2008, Crimea in 2014, and Ukraine in 2022.

"It is not the territory and borders that I am concerned about but the fates of people."

- Russian President Vladimir Putin, 2016.

Introduction

In the early hours of February 24th 2022, large-scale war came to Europe for the first time since World War II. The army of the Russian Federation invaded Ukraine in an escalation of a conflict that physically began in 2014 but dated back to the dissolution of the Soviet Union at least, if not earlier. Despite warnings from President Vladimir Putin in the months leading up to the invasion, much of the world was shocked that Russia would commit such a brazen act. Those who had been paying attention, however, noticed some similarities between the situation in February of 2022 and several contemporary controversial Russian military engagements. In fact, there is a term dedicated to the narratives Russia is known to employ once militarily involved in former Soviet territories: the "Kosovo precedent," named after Russia's twisting of Western narratives following the 1999 North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO) bombing of Kosovo during the Serbian civil war and the subsequent Western support for Kosovo's independence.

This paper first and foremost seeks to bridge the gap in literature regarding the Kosovo Precedent in the context of Russia's controversial military engagements in former Soviet republics. Much academic attention has been focused on establishing Russia's "Kosovo precedent;" at the time of writing this paper, however, there have been no articles linking the Kosovo precedent to the narratives employed in the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. This paper therefore seeks to demonstrate the similarities in those narratives, paying particular attention to the narratives about sovereignty.

Serbia's sovereignty was a key point of contention when it came to the NATO intervention and Kosovo's independence, particularly for Russia. Russia held fears about the Western propensity for intervening in what could be considered strictly domestic affairs and breaching state sovereignty. Since then, however, Russia's very notions of sovereignty have

shifted, and it is not alone. China and the United States have also subtly shifted the way they discuss and, assumedly, perceive sovereignty. This is startling since the very foundation of the modern international system is founded on Westphalian sovereignty, and until recently it was assumed that despite differences in culture, governance, and laws, most nations agreed on what a "sovereign" nation entailed; after all, their very survival depended on it.

This paper seeks to examine whether Russia's non-Westphalian understanding of sovereignty, invoked by Russia in its narratives in the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, has its roots in the Western narratives justifying the 1999 NATO bombing of Kosovo and its independence campaign. To put it more simply, the core questions are:

- How has Russia's conception of sovereignty shifted in the wake of the 1999 NATO bombing campaign in Kosovo and the subsequent Western support for Kosovar independence?
- How has this conception of sovereignty been used by Russia to justify its 2022 invasion of Ukraine, as it has in several previous conflicts with former Soviet republics?

By examining a mix of academic articles and primary sources, a direct line can be traced from Russia's response to Western narratives in Kosovo to its own narratives in Ukraine. This will demonstrate definitively that Russia employs non-Westphalian understandings of sovereignty in its strategic narratives before, during, and after conflicts in former Soviet republics. It will also demonstrate that this understanding of sovereignty emerged partially as a result of the Western narratives surrounding the conflict in Kosovo, as the Russian narratives during the NATO campaign and debates about independence tell a different story than more recent ones.

Such an exploration of the way Russia employs strategic narratives and views sovereignty is crucial if the West seeks to understand more about Russia and its decision-making. Despite the rising sentiment that Russia is no longer the superpower it once was, its regional and international influence is undeniable. The West needs to keep an open line of communication with Russia and attempt to meet it where it stands, rather than attempting to impose Western thought processes and ideals onto the state. A detailed analysis of Russia's actions and justifications would therefore help the international community better understand its intentions and decisions.

Evidently, it may never be entirely known what Russia's true intentions are when it comes to its foreign and military policy; the sheer number of narratives circulating around the 2022 invasion demonstrate that. This paper, however, is not attempting to explain *what* Russia's foreign policy is, but rather *what justifications it has given* for certain foreign policy decisions. Understanding Russia's view of sovereignty will also allow the international community to communicate with Russia more effectively. If appeals to Westphalian sovereignty during peace talks in Ukraine are meaningless, then perhaps an appeal to this alternate view of sovereignty would yield better results.

This paper will begin with a description of the methodology used to examine the research question. An overview of the sources that were used, as well as which topics were selected and why, will be presented in this section. A literature review will then follow, exploring some of the existing literature on the topic and identifying gaps and issues. Several academic articles were instrumental in the understanding of sovereignty and strategic narratives and will therefore be explained in detail to the reader as to establish crucial theoretical context for the analysis. The analysis itself will be divided into several sections. First and foremost, a brief history of Soviet

and Russian constitutional law will be presented. This is to situate the reader in Russia's official policies on sovereignty, which will in turn help when the time comes to compare what the strategic narratives demonstrate about sovereignty. These narratives will be presented for each conflict chronologically following the sovereignty section. A brief overview will be given to help contextualize the reader in the events of each conflict, and then a discussion will follow. This section will focus on the Russian narratives relating to organic sovereignty employed in each conflict to demonstrate that respecting Westphalian sovereignty is not a priority for Russia and has not been for several decades.

Methodology

This paper's research pertains to historical, legal and cultural context of Russia's recent military engagements and its foreign policy. Given the nature of the topic, this paper will employ a qualitative approach to research, closely examining both primary and secondary written sources and focusing on key words and phrases to craft its analysis.

The logical first step in research was to examine literature relating to the history of the relevant conflicts. Building a good foundation of the key events and general timelines, as well as all parties involved and their motivations was necessary in order to understand the narratives surrounding the events in Kosovo, Georgia, and Ukraine. It was also crucial to read academic articles discussing the strategic narratives employed during those conflicts, as they presented a distilled version of official narratives from both within and outside of Russia. Many authors also employed unique methodologies to gather their data, which was helpful in the crafting of this paper's methodology.

The next leg of the research process focused on academic literature that would provide important context for the conflicts and concepts explored in this paper. A multitude of articles on various topics were pulled from journals and databases relating to foreign and international affairs. The goal here was to attempt to understand Russia's views on foreign policy, the Kosovo precedent, and strategic narratives more broadly. Articles that discussed the Kosovo precedent were especially of note as they presented a clear argument for Russia's re-use of the narratives employed in Kosovo, which laid some of the groundwork for this paper's analysis. Many of the articles that were read during this stage and the previous were carefully analyzed to provide key words and phrases related to the conflicts and their narratives that would be used when exploring primary sources. Some examples include: "humanitarian," "Russian citizens," "genocide," "self-determination," and "brotherly."

For the analysis itself, official press releases from The Office of the President of Russia, various Russian government officials, the Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations (UN), and other similar sources from the 1990s through today were pulled online. Strategic narratives vary and can be numerous, and it is logical to conclude that most academic authors had to be selective in which narratives they chose to highlight. As a result, narratives that were more specific to the research question for this paper could have been overlooked by other authors, or at the very least not explored in detail. Additionally, all authors hold biases that may cause them to interpret primary sources in a way that is favourable to their thesis, if not their overall worldview. As such, it was crucial to go to the source and get the Russian narrative directly, without an author's careful selection and framing. While no primary sources are infallible, as will be discussed in the limitations section, in this instance they were

still a key building block for this analysis due to them being the most direct line to the Russian government's perspective.

To parse through the large number of primary sources, a search was conducted using the previously mentioned key words and phrases pulled from articles. The resulting sources provided a large selection of official Russian narratives that demonstrated the similarities between the 1999 Kosovo conflict, the 2008 conflict in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and the 2014 annexation of Crimea. Since there was no existing literature linking the Kosovo precedent to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, key words and phrases from other articles on the topic were used to find official Russian sources that would also contain those similar narratives.

The goal, however, was not only to link the Kosovo precedent to the 2022 invasion but to specifically examine Russia's understanding of sovereignty and how it has shifted following the conflict in Kosovo. As such, when selecting the key words and phrases special attention was paid to those that related to *organic sovereignty*, a concept found in a key academic article that will be discussed later. This narrowed down results that would help answer the research question.

Given this focus on sovereignty, it is worth noting that some background reading on Russian constitutional law was also necessary. This was helpful in establishing precedent regarding Russia's conceptions of sovereignty and understanding how it interprets international law. It also provided an understanding of how Russian law interpreted the status of Soviet republics, which was useful as some of these rulings continue to impact strategic narratives today.

Limitations

As with any research project, it is important to be aware of limitations with the chosen source material. Authors undoubtedly bring their biases to any work they create, and a topic as contentious as Russia and its behaviour is no exception. Many Western academics appear to be on the offensive when they discuss Russia, often holding outdated views of the superpower or leaping to conclusions. This paper made an effort to select articles from Eastern European and Caucasian authors in addition to Western ones to provide a more rounded perspective, but in some instances this was not possible. Not to mention, of course, that authors from non-Western backgrounds may hold some biases of their own. Russian authors may feel a need to defend Russia or downplay its actions and their consequences, while Caucasian authors whose nations have been invaded by or were in conflict with Russia may feel animosity towards the nation.

Additionally, Russia may not make all motives known, and what its representatives say may not always be the truth or even what they believe. Press releases and conferences are nothing more than a careful image that Russia presents to the world, with every word no doubt carefully chosen. It is imperative, therefore, to maintain a level of skepticism when assessing any Russian primary sources.

Literature review

Paris's *The Right to Dominate*

Roland Paris's article *The Right to Dominate: How Old Ideas About Sovereignty Pose New Challenges for World Order* describes how older, non-Westphalian conceptions of

sovereignty have seen a resurgence in popularity with world leaders in recent decades.[1] The Westphalian understanding of sovereignty is the one that has defined the international system since its conception following the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, a peace treaty bringing about the end of the Thirty Years' War.[2] Westphalian sovereignty is defined as "the exclusive entitlement of state authorities to govern a bounded territory and the recognition of this right by other actors."[3] In other words, there are two key elements to this prevailing view of state sovereignty: territory to rule over, and legitimacy in the eyes of other sovereigns.

The two other popular views of sovereignty highlighted by Paris are *extralegal* and *organic*. Extralegal sovereignty refers to the innate right of a state leader to act as they see fit to serve the interests of their nation. Traditionally, this has manifested through the belief in the divine right of kings or emperors to rule. The will of the sovereign is, in effect, the power and authority of a state.

Organic sovereignty, on the other hand, is derived from the citizens that make up a state. Whether they are bound by ethnicity or simply the "social contract," it is the people's shared identity, the state's "fundamental organic unity" that gives it its power.[4] Historically, this was conceptualized as the state's political identity being akin to a body with a will of its own – the people, in this case, being the will. In other words, it is the citizenry, the literal human composition of the state that gives it its power. This view emerged during the Enlightenment era

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[1] Roland Paris, "The Right to Dominate: How Old Ideas About Sovereignty Pose New Challenges for World Order," *International Organization* 74, no. 3 (2020): 453-89. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000077.
[2] "Münster and Osnabrück – Sites of the Peace of Westphalia, Germany," Culture and Creativity (accessed August 21, 2024). https://culture.ec.europa.eu/cultural-heritage/initiatives-and-success-stories/european-heritage-label/european-heritage-label-sites/munster-and-osnabruck-sites-of-the-peace-of-westphalia-germany.
[3] *Supra* note 1, 454.
[4] *Ibid*, 460.

and was a deliberate departure from older, extralegal understandings of sovereignty where the common view was that a state ruler was handed the divine right to rule from God himself.

Paris then introduces the concept of *norm retrieval* to help the reader understand how modern states might apply these alternative views of sovereignty to their decisions. Norm retrieval occurs when states begin to call on older understandings of state behaviour and international affairs as an attempt to justify their own actions and practices. To demonstrate this concept of norm retrieval, Paris provides several case studies, namely the United States, Russia, and China. In each case, Paris examines the discourse of state leaders where sovereignty was mentioned and determines which kind of non-Westphalian sovereignty is invoked. Some foreign policy speeches are also analyzed to see whether organic or extralegal sovereignties are used to justify or explain decisions. In the end, Paris finds evidence in all three cases that non-Westphalian conceptions of sovereignty are experiencing a resurgence in popularity in foreign policy discourse. This is significant because, according to Paris, major powers are turning to alternative understandings of sovereignty to justify their domination over other states. Indeed, these conceptions of sovereignty are just another way for these states to interpret the international order and their position within it, a theme that appears in other literature about Russia and sovereignty.[5]

This article was essential in introducing differing views on sovereignty. One issue that arose, however, was that the terminology employed by Paris appeared to be entirely his own; this made finding related articles to give additional context on *extralegal* and *organic* sovereignty difficult. Nonetheless, the principle of organic sovereignty introduced in this article is one that

[5] *Supra* note 1, 482.

dominates official Russian narratives, and as such will be instrumental in answering the research question going forward.

Literature Relating to Narratives

Much of the existing literature on Russia's justifications for the 2022 war in Ukraine is linked to strategic narratives. Strategic narratives are commonly defined as tools "by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors."[6] In practice, this typically refers to the reasons a state gives to its citizens or to the international community to justify its decisions at home or abroad. Studying strategic narratives can reveal a lot about an actor's motivations, desires, and beliefs.

One example of literature on the topic, Marco Ehrl's *Understanding Russia's Disinformation Narratives About Ukraine: A Ratio-Oriented Approach to Strategic Crisis Narratives,* focuses on the common keywords found in Russian narratives at different stages of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.[7] He does so by examining reports from the EuvsDisinfo website, a collaborative project between several European nations that aims to combat Russian disinformation campaigns. One finding, for instance, was that Russia often focused on agents in its narratives. Per the author, agents refer to those who drive decisions and acts. Some agents that came up often were NATO, Nazis, the European Union (EU), the West, and the United States.[8]

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[6] Laura Roselle, Ben O'Loughlin, and Alister Miskimmon, eds., *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations,* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press (2017): 88. https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.6504652.
[7] Marco Ehrl, "Understanding Russia's Disinformation Narratives about Ukraine: A Ratio-Oriented Approach to Strategic Crisis Narratives," *ESSACHESS* 16, no. 1 (2023): 135-. https://doi.org/10.21409/essachess.1775-352x.
[8] *Ibid*, 144.

The author not only identified key words but attempted to track when they were most commonly used prior to and during the conflict to identify any trends.

The sheer number of narratives that Russia has released during this war has made this article slightly too large in scope for the purposes of this paper. Nonetheless, it was good as an introduction to the broad themes and general trends in Russian narratives during the war – doubly so considering how difficult it is to get a snapshot of trends when looking at traditional and social media alone.

Similarly, Bohdan Kordan's *Russia's War against Ukraine: Historical Narratives, Geopolitics, and Peace* discusses the two opposing stories told by Russia and Ukraine when it comes to Ukraine's independence and identity.[9] Broadly, Russia's narratives tend to stress its past as a grand empire, one that Ukraine was a part of and shares a history with. Ukrainian independence is nothing more than a creation of the West, intended to undermine Russia and its influence in the region. The histories, identities and fates of Ukrainians and Russians are so closely intertwined that "those who support Ukrainian sovereignty are not simply anti-Russian, they are avowedly anti-Ukrainian, steering Ukraine down an erroneous and disastrous path."[10] By contrast, the Ukrainian story is more European, focused on modernization where Russia is focused on the past. Themes of fighting for statehood and joining the international system are also prevalent, directly contrasting the Russian stories of power and dominance.

These narratives are useful for identifying trends in how Russia views Ukraine, but they are not directly related to conflict. Interestingly, there is some mention of sovereignty in this

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[9] Bohdan Kordan, "Russia's War against Ukraine: Historical Narratives, Geopolitics, and Peace," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 64, no. 2–3 (2022): 162–72. https://doi.org/10.1080/00085006.2022.2107835.
[10] *Ibid*, 166.

article, namely when the author discusses how Russia violated Ukraine's sovereignty each time it invaded and how these actions are a direct threat to the stability of the international order. What is particularly of note, however, is how the author does not appear to consider that Russia's views of sovereignty do not align with that of the international order. If Ukrainian people and Russian people are one and the same, then it is not invasion but merely an escalation of domestic affairs. Russia does not have to fear disrupting the international order because it does not believe in it or its view of sovereignty.

Literature Relating to Sovereignty

When looking specifically at the literature relating to Russia's post-1990s understanding of sovereignty, there are several examples tracing the line from Kosovo to the 2008 Georgian conflict through to the 2014 annexation of Crimea; so far, however, there has been nothing relating Kosovo to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. It is also worth noting that few articles take the time to explore the notion of sovereignty as deeply as Paris, but they make mention of both *explicit* uses of the word in Russian statements and *implicit* key words related to alternative understandings of sovereignty; these words include "humanitarian needs," "self-defence," and variations of "protecting Russian citizens" and "preventing Western influence."

For example, Pupcenoks & Seltzer's *Russian Strategic Narratives on R2P in the "Near Abroad"* describes how the Serbian civil war was a definitive turning point for Russia in their narratives around international law and conflict.[11] Throughout the war and particularly in response to NATO's involvement, Russia's statements were more focused on the illegality of

[11] Juris Pupcenoks and Eric James Seltzer, "Russian Strategic Narratives on R2P in the 'Near Abroad,'" *Nationalities Papers* 49, no. 4 (2021): 757–75. https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2020.54.

NATO's intervention, citing the need to leave the issue of Kosovo to Serbia. The main arguments at the time were that the "parent" state should have sole authority on whether it was to be dismembered, and that the independence of Kosovo was nothing more than an attempt "to 'reshape the world map' under the guise of humanitarian intervention."[12] Russia then proceeded to twist this logic in Georgia and Crimea and use it to its advantage, claiming that its interventions were to stop genocide and provide humanitarian aid instead of what appeared to the world to be a display of regional power.

This article does not mention sovereignty by name, but does discuss R2P. R2P, or Responsibility to Protect, is an international legal concept that is often used as a defence for breaches of sovereignty. All states have the "responsibility to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity."[13] In other words, there is a precedent for an acceptable, albeit controversial, defence for armed humanitarian intervention. R2P would be relevant if the discussion were simply about the similarity between the narratives in Kosovo and other Russian military engagements, as Russia has indeed made use of R2P in its narratives in both Georgia and Crimea. Unfortunately, R2P is related more closely to Westphalian understandings of sovereignty; it provides a justification for states to violate the territorial sovereignty of another state should that state be host to or complicit in crimes against humanity. Therefore, this paper will be omitting R2P from the analysis.

Another example can be found in Christian Nielsen's *The Kosovo Precedent and the Rhetorical Deployment of Former Yugoslav Analogies in the Cases of Abkhazia and South*

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[12] *Ibid*, 761.
[13] Ivan Šimonović, "The Responsibility to Protect," United Nations (December 2016). https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/responsibility-protect.

Ossetia.[14] Similarly to the previously discussed article, Nielsen seeks to demonstrate the similarities and differences in the Russian narratives around the military interventions in Kosovo and Georgia. The author specifically identifies main themes common to both conflicts, and finds that the protection of citizens, genocide and humanitarian intervention, regime change and illegitimacy, and "criminal states" are discussed in both instances. In just one of the examples the author presented, Russia had claimed that their actions were nothing more than "humanitarian intervention" and drew parallels to NATO's intervention in Kosovo. Indeed, prior to Russia's involvement it had "warned repeatedly that it would consider the use of military force to protect its 'citizens' in South Ossetia and Abkhazia."[15] The evidence, however, showed that there were few civilians killed in South Ossetia, where this alleged "humanitarian intervention" took place.

This thorough exploration of the conflict in Georgia was helpful in identifying not only key words and phrases for further research, but also because it provided explanations and rebuttals to Russia's narratives. Unfortunately, the analysis of this paper is not interested in the validity of Russia's claims, so the rebuttals were not useful beyond providing additional context. Nonetheless, such a detailed exploration of the narratives in Georgia specifically was valuable.

[14] Christian Axboe Nielsen, "The Kosovo Precedent and the Rhetorical Deployment of Former Yugoslav Analogies in the Cases of Abkhazia and South Ossetia," *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 9, no. 1–2 (2009): 178. https://doi.org/10.1080/14683850902723595.
[15] *Ibid*.

Analysis

Sovereignty

The modern Russian state understanding of sovereignty aligns with what Paris has identified as organic sovereignty. As mentioned earlier, proponents of organic sovereignty believe that "a fully sovereign state [resembles] a physically and mentally strong being whose people [are] united and mindful of their cultural uniqueness and superiority and committed to working together to fulfill their collective destiny."[16] This collectivity is not always meant in a democratic sense, but rather that citizens of a shared ethnicity, value system, and/or religion will naturally have more of a vested interest in the security and strength of their state. Indeed, while some philosophers viewed the general will of a group of people simply as democracy, others understood it as a metaphysical manifestation of their desires.[17] Even though everyone may not want to or have the right to vote, through desires and actions they are still able to manifest their collective shared destiny. This is consistent with not only modern strategic narratives but with historical legal understandings within Russia itself.

In the early days of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), sovereignty was explicitly defined as the "supremacy of the state power which makes this power unlimited and independent inside the country and runs autonomous foreign policy in international relations."[18] Aside from the use of the word "unlimited," which would be more in line with extralegal sovereignty, the definition is quite similar to what would be considered Westphalian sovereignty,

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[16] *Supra* note 1, 460.
[17] *Ibid*.
[18] Mikhail Antonov, "Theoretical Issues of Sovereignty in Russia and Russian Law," *Review of Central and East European Law* 37, no. 1 (2012): 100. https://doi.org/10.1163/092598812X13274154886548.

indicating that the alternative view of sovereignty as seen in recent years was not always so dominant.

In general, through the existence of the Soviet Union the concept of sovereignty was inherently contradictory. Many Soviet republics were considered somewhat sovereign based on their constitutions. The Tartar constitution, for example, specifically mentioned that the republic was "a sovereign state, as a subject of international law."[19] Eventually, however, the Russian Constitutional Court (known as the Constitutional Court of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic during the Soviet era) would later find that the republics were not actually sovereign when it came to international relations, and that self-determination was acceptable only insofar as there was no attempt at full secession.[20]

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union the Russian Constitutional Court found that only federal states can be sovereign, and one of the reasons was particularly interesting given the current narratives.[21] The Court found that "the status of the republics that are parts of the Russian Federation was not established and defined by federal treaties, nor by referendums or self-determination of the local nations but, rather, by the will of the united people of the Federation."[22] Here the beginnings of the current Russian understandings of sovereignty were formed, as the concept of the citizenry's identity making up the sovereign's power is a key element of organic sovereignty.

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[19] *Ibid*, 103.
[20] *Ibid*, 104-105.
[21] *Ibid*, 107.
[22] *Ibid*.

There is some evidence to suggest that Russia also subscribes to ideas of *extralegal* sovereignty, although to a lesser extent when it comes to foreign affairs. The dissolution of the Soviet Union encouraged the Russian federal government to strengthen its central authority in an attempt to stop the loss of resources and power in the region. "The new Russian state apparatus was centered around the president, whose role had been considerably strengthened by the December 1993 constitution. (…) In essence the government served at the pleasure of the president, not the parliament."[23] This sentiment persists; President Putin said in 2007 that Russia "cannot be strong if the President's power is weak."[24]

Even though Russia practices extralegal sovereignty to an extent, this paper will only discuss organic sovereignty due to its dominance in narratives surrounding recent Russian conflicts in former Soviet republics, as well as its relation to the Western narratives in Kosovo in 1999.

Kosovo

Conflict

The collapse of Yugoslavia in the 1990s was a unique time in history. For one, so many conflicts in Europe at once caused fear for the newly established international world order, and prompted the involvement of large international players. Additionally, the ethnic rivalries in the Balkans that had existed for centuries came to the forefront once more, turning what started as a routine economic collapse of a communist state into all-out ethnic wars all over the region.

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[23] Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press (2011): 531.
[24] Vladimir Putin, *Transcript of Meeting with Members of the Valdai International Discussion Club* (September 14, 2007). http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24537.

Slovenia and Croatia declared independence in 1991, prompting other ethnic groups in former Yugoslavia to do the same with varying degrees of success. The failing state of Yugoslavia and its various republics tried desperately to stop the total loss of control by repressing minority groups with the full force of their militaries, creating a humanitarian crisis the world had not seen in Europe in half a century.

In 1998, an Albanian rebel group known as the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) began creating trouble for local authorities in the Serbian region of Kosovo after years of peaceful protesting failed.[25] The group's aim was to separate entirely from Serbia, as the Muslim Albanians were the ethnic and religious majority in Kosovo but a minority everywhere else in Orthodox Christian Serbia, and thus subject to significant discrimination. The leader of Serbia, Slobodan Milošević, deployed the military to combat the KLA, leading to mass violence against Serbia's ethnic Albanians.

After years of fighting, NATO involved itself due to a consistent failure to elicit an international response to the atrocities. NATO then proceeded to bomb parts of Serbia from March to June of 1999 in an attempt to get Milošević to open up to a discussion, hoping to come to a peaceful resolution and, more importantly, protect Serbia's Albanian population without resorting to full separation from the state.[26] Regretfully, the campaign only caused Milošević to continue his onslaught of violence against Kosovar Albanians. Eventually, however, NATO's pressure yielded results when a peace treaty was signed on June 10th 1999; Serbian and Yugoslav forces would withdraw from Kosovo, and an interim government headed by UN specialists

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[25] Peter Finn and R. Jeffrey Smith, "KLA: Rebels With an Uncommon Cause," *Washington Post Foreign Service* (April 23, 1999). https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/inatl/longterm/balkans/stories/kla042399.htm.
[26] Ivo H. Daalder and Michael E O'Hanlon, *Winning Ugly: NATO's War to Save Kosovo*. Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press (2000): 2.

would take over leadership of the territory. Serbia would be barred entirely from playing any role in governing Kosovo.[27] Kosovo officially declared its independence from Serbia on February 17th 2008. Most Western nations were immediately in support of the decision, with the EU tapped to help with the transition of power. To this day, Kosovo is not universally recognized as an independent state. Roughly 100 nations recognize Kosovo as independent, but there is even dispute over the exact number, with figures ranging between 90 and 115.[28]

Russia's official response to Kosovo's independence was to worry about the precedent it would set.[29] There was concern that there would be "consequences for the world order;"[30] exactly what these consequences were was not specified in the initial press release reacting to the declaration of independence, nor in subsequent statements. To make matters worse, Russia and Serbia have been close allies for centuries thanks to shared culture and religion. NATO's bombing felt more personal as a result, as did the international support for Kosovo's independence from Serbia, and to this day Russia continues to not formally recognize Kosovo's independence.

Narratives

In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the Russian narratives surrounding the NATO campaign in Kosovo and subsequent independence, it is crucial to first examine the official narratives from the West in their attempt to explain their actions. Two sets of narratives

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[27] "The Case for Kosovo," U.S. Department of State (accessed June 9, 2024). https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eur/ci/kv/c24701.htm.
[28] Katharina Buchholz, "Kosovo & beyond: Where the UN Disagrees on Recognition [Infographic]," *Forbes* (March 21, 2023). https://www.forbes.com/sites/katharinabuchholz/2023/02/17/kosovo--beyond-where-the-un-disagrees-on-recognition-infographic/.
[29] *Supra* note 14, 178.
[30] "Statement by Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Kosovo," The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (February 17, 2008). https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/international_safety/1649512/.

are important here: those justifying the bombing campaign, and those justifying the independence of Kosovo from Serbia.

Bombing campaign

NATO's primary reason for forceful intervention in Kosovo was to put an end to the "humanitarian catastrophe."[31] Attempts at diplomatic resolutions of the conflict had failed, with the matter having gone to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) for discussion. Russia, Belarus and India accepted a Russian-drafted UNSC resolution calling for an end to the violence in Yugoslavia in March of 1999, with 12 countries voting against. The draft claimed that the humanitarian justifications for the intervention "bordered on blackmail," and that it was a gross violation of the United Nations Charter.[32] The United States, on the other hand, was among those against the resolution, and in its statement mentioned that the latter claim in the draft was outright false. Given that Russia was the one who introduced the resolution, this spurred on its sentiment that the conflict was a West vs. the rest issue, rather than an genuine expression of international interest in the self-determination of Kosovo.

Despite the lack of Western support for the resolution, NATO decisionmakers felt that the situation in Kosovo warranted intervention to stop the ethnic cleansing campaign and mass displacement at all costs. Other objectives included the removal of all military personnel from the region and the establishment of some form of political agreement, but the priority appeared to be the humanitarian cause, as it was stressed repeatedly in NATO communications.

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[31] NATO, "Kosovo Air Campaign (March-June 1999)," NATO (accessed July 28, 2024). https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49602.htm.
[32] "Security Council Rejects Demand for Cessation of Use of Force against Federal Republic of Yugoslavia," United Nations (March 26, 1999). https://press.un.org/en/1999/19990326.sc6659.html.

Independence

When it comes to Kosovo's independence, the narratives vary; even among like-minded nations that support independence, such as those in the EU, there is no solid consensus.[33] In their support for Kosovar independence, for example, the United States chooses to focus on Kosovo's newfound democratic nature and role in the international community.[34] Others believe that the Kosovars deserve a land of their own after decades of atrocities against them at the hands of the Serbian government, a righting of a historical wrong.[35] Respecting and preserving multiethnicity is also cited repeatedly from both states and international legal experts..

One element that appears to be universally acknowledged, however, is the conflict between the equally important concerns of territorial integrity and self-determination.[36] In the end, international law recognized the right to self-determination of ethnic minorities that were subjected to systemic discrimination as more important than Serbia's claim over the Kosovar territory.[37]

During the long road to independence, additional concerns were raised regarding the precedent that Kosovo would set for international law.[38] In other words, what would Kosovar independence mean for other (primarily European) regions seeking the same? The common narrative used to dissuade these fears was that Kosovo is a unique case due to having been part

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[33] Branislav Radeljic, "Official Discrepancies: Kosovo Independence and Western European Rhetoric," *European Politics and Society (Abingdon, England)* 15, no. 4 (2014): 433. https://doi.org/10.1080/15705854.2014.893706.
[34] Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, "U.S. Relations with Kosovo," U.S. Department of State (July 28, 2021). https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-kosovo/.
[35] *Supra* note 33, 431.
[36] Albert Rohan, "Kosovo's Path to Independence," European Council on Foreign Relations (February 2, 2018). https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_kosovos_path_to_independence/.
[37] *Ibid*.
[38] Sabine Freizer, "Why Kosovo's Independence Is Necessary," International Crisis Group (May 14, 2007). https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/balkans/kosovo/why-kosovos-independence-necessary.

of Yugoslavia. Following Yugoslavia's dissolution, special regulations were established for the region to ensure a smooth transition to statehood for the former republics. It was decided that only former republics would get statehood, but that these new states would have a duty to protect minority rights within their borders – a duty that Serbia failed to uphold when it began the ethnic cleansing campaign against Albanians in the region of Kosovo. As a result, Serbia lost its "moral authority" to govern that region, and the governing rights were handed over to the UN.[39] In the eyes of many, this was a unique case that could not simply be replicated in any typical ethnic conflict.

One element that was repeatedly stressed by Russia was how Kosovo was *not* unique, despite Western claims to the contrary.[40] Indeed, the concern that Kosovo's independence would create precedent that could endanger not only Russia but Western nations like France and Spain was a recurring topic in Russian press releases.[41] President Putin accused Europe of employing double standards when it came to ethnic conflicts and official recognition, mentioning during a 2008 press conference that Kosovo was touted as a special case when that was incorrect as regions with similar stories, such as the Northern Republic of Cyprus, had been effectively independent for four decades at that point with no official recognition or fanfare.[42] To President Putin, Kosovo was just another common ethnic conflict that turned into something larger at the hands of the West. In Russia's view, the ideal way to resolve the question of Kosovo should have

[39] *Ibid*.
[40] *Ibid*.
[41] Vladimir Putin, *Transcript of Meeting with the Leaders of the News Agencies of G8 Member Countries* (June 2, 2006). http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/23613.
[42] Vladimir Putin, *Transcript of Annual Big Press Conference* (February 14, 2008). http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24835.

been the creation of a universal framework for the international community to be able to respond to similar events in the future.

From Russia's statements, it is clear that there was a large concern for Serbia's territorial sovereignty. Whether this was the case because Russia truly believed in the principles of Westphalian sovereignty at that time, or simply because Serbia was an ally, will most likely never be known. Nonetheless, this was the narrative Russia chose for its foreign policy decisions at the time; things changed quite quickly after this.

After Kosovo's independence was formalized in 2008, right as the conflict in Georgia was reaching its tipping point, the Russian leadership got to work drawing parallels between the two situations. While they would not directly support or disavow independence when comparing the two, the goal was obvious; Russia realized it could use Western narratives to its advantage in its own contentious interventions. Much like the narrative relating to Serbia losing the right to govern Kosovo following the establishment of special provisions for former Yugoslav states, Russia challenged Georgia's governing rights.[43] Then, following the five-day conflict in Georgia, Russia's representative to NATO at the time, Dmitri Rogozin, said "if [Russia] did proportionally in the Caucasus what [NATO] did in Serbia, then Tbilisi would have been demolished."[44] In the coming years Russia would continue to find ways to incorporate narratives from Kosovo into its own justifications, all the while shifting away from territorial to organic sovereignty.

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[43] *Supra* note 14, 179.
[44] Clifford J. Levy, "Russia Adopts Blustery Tone Set by Envoy," *The New York Times* (August 28, 2008). https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/28/world/europe/28moscow.html.

Georgia

Conflict

As was the case in Kosovo, the 2008 conflict in the Georgian breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia began with a grassroots desire to separate from their parent state. For South Ossetians, this was largely a question of ethnicity, as Ossetians are descended from a tribe that had its own language and culture unique from that of Russia and Georgia. Ossetia was incorporated into the Russian Empire several centuries ago and promptly split into north and south. South Ossetia was then incorporated into Georgia during the Soviet Era, with North Ossetia remaining within Russian borders; both were allowed to operate as an autonomous region.[45]

South Ossetia lost all autonomy with the collapse of the Soviet Union, while North Ossetia retained its autonomous status within the Russian Federation. South Ossetia felt that their kin to the north were receiving privileges that they felt they also deserved based on not only shared ancestry and culture, but on historical precedent as well. Abkhazia, incidentally, also enjoyed a relative degree of autonomy during the Soviet era; the region was considered a republic in association with the Georgian Republic but was eventually fully incorporated into Georgia in the 1930s.[46] Both South Ossetia and Abkhazia had tasted freedom, and desired to no longer be part of any country but their own. Russia is known for fostering numerous autonomous regions within its borders to this day, leading the Georgian breakaway regions to view Russia as

[45] Helen Womack and Mark Tran, "Q&A: South Ossetia Dispute," *The Guardian* (August 12, 2008). https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/aug/08/georgia.russia4.
[46] "Abkhazia Profile," *BBC News* (August 28, 2023). https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-18175030.

their best option for allies in their pursuit of independence – a role Russia has been all too happy to accept.

South Ossetia and Abkhazia sought to declare independence from Georgia directly following the dissolution of the Soviet Union.[47] South Ossetia eventually separated and created an independent Russian-backed government, while the conflict in Abkhazia ended in a ceasefire, the conditions of which included the posting of peacekeeping forces composed of Russian, Belarusian and Georgian troops.[48] It is worth noting here that not everyone believed the peacekeeping troops stationed in Abkhazia were there for the sole reason of peacekeeping; instead, they were seen more as a physical threat, a show of force.

A few relatively peaceful years passed before tensions began to rise once more, due in part to the election of a pro-European Georgian president in 2003, and an unrecognized referendum in South Ossetia in 2006, which saw overwhelming support for separation from Georgia.[49] The situation reached a boiling point in April of 2008 when Georgia accused Russian peacekeepers of shooting down one of its unmanned aerial vehicles over Abkhazian airspace, in response to which Russia sent additional troops to the area in case of Georgian retaliation.[50] In the early hours on August 8th 2008 Georgia launched an attack on South Ossetia's capital city, Tskhinvali, and was met with resistance. Georgian and Russian forces clashed for five days

[47] *Supra* note 11, 762.
[48] *Ibid*.
[49] *Ibid*.
[50] "2008 Georgia Russia Conflict Fast Facts," *CNN* (March 13, 2024). https://www.cnn.com/2014/03/13/world/europe/2008-georgia-russia-conflict/index.html.

before a peace agreement was reached. Around 800 people died in the conflict, with another 192 000 displaced.[51]

Currently, South Ossetia and Abkhazia continue to consider themselves to be independent from Georgia, supported by Russian officials and military personnel, as well as financial aid.[52] Their claims of independence are not recognized by most members of the international community. Russia remains steadfast in its public and administrative support for the breakaway regions, even as Georgia continues to turn away from the superpower and towards the EU. Russia has also been facilitating the passport application and approval process for South Ossetian and Abkhazian citizens; this decision has seen an outpouring of support, with 80% of residents in South Ossetia currently holding a Russian passport.[53]

Narratives

Many of the narratives employed by Russia in its course to justify military engagement in Georgia in 2008 were, as previously alluded to, similar to the Western narratives employed to justify the events in Kosovo. Some related to the government of Georgia, making claims that it was an illegitimate and criminal state.[54] Others appealed to the humanitarian side of the issue, citing the need for Russia to save lives and avoid a genocide.[55] The concern for this paper, however, are the narratives that relate to organic sovereignty. These were mainly concerning two points: Russian citizens in the breakaway regions, and the referendums held there.

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[51] Stephen F. Jones, "South Ossetia's Unwanted Independence," openDemocracy (June 10, 2014). https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/south-ossetias-unwanted-independence/.
[52] Stephen Dowling, "Abkhazia: The 'country' Living in a Soviet Time Warp," *BBC News* (May 31, 2019). https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20190530-abkhazia-the-country-living-in-a-soviet-time-warp.
[53] *Supra* note 51.
[54] *Supra* note 14, 181.
[55] *Ibid*, 178.

Russian citizens

The protection of citizens was a key point that was stressed repeatedly through Russian narratives. The day after the Georgian military's attack on Tskhinvali, Russia's representative to the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Vladimir Voronkov, gave a statement at a special meeting of the Permanent Council. In this statement, Voronkov discussed the events of the previous night, condemned the Georgian government's decision to strike, and most importantly, discussed the devastating effect military action has had on civilians.[56] In fact, Voronkov called the attack a "gross violation" of international and humanitarian law.[57] In and of itself, a humanitarian appeal may be linked to the narratives from Kosovo, but it does not necessarily mean that Russia is appealing to notions of organic sovereignty. It is the curious addition of the focus on Russian citizens that, when combined with the appeal to humanitarian justification for intervention, tells a different story.

Voronkov mentions Russian citizens several times in the context of offering protection and not allowing harm to befall them. Most interestingly, Voronkov mentions that "the Russian Federation will not leave its citizens and peacekeepers in South Ossetia to the mercy of fate and will take all necessary measures to protect them."[58] Similarly, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs said in a press release a day prior that the priority in Georgia would be protecting the "life and dignity of Russian citizens."[59] There were also reports of Kremlin officials stating that

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[56] Vladimir Voronkov, *Statement by Vladimir Voronkov, Acting Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation, at the Special Meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council held on August 8, 2008* (August 8, 2008). https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1595515/.
[57] *Ibid*.
[58] *Ibid*.
[59] "Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Sergey Lavrov Speaks by Telephone to Javier Solana, European Union Council Secretary General and High Representative for the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy," The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (August 8, 2008). https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1595260/.

Russia would be prepared to use "military force to protect its citizens in Abkhazia and South Ossetia."[60] It is unclear from these quotes alone whether "citizens" in this instance refers only to the troops sent to the Georgian breakaway regions or to the residents of those areas themselves. Given that Voronkov's statement mentioned Russian troops and citizens separately, and that Russia has provided South Ossetian and Abkhazian residents with Russian passports, it is likely that Russia is referring to them when its representatives speak of "protecting Russian citizens." Russia has *de facto* made these groups Russian, so that an act taken to protect them within the borders of another state under the guise of a humanitarian appeal may not be considered a breach of sovereignty – depending on what type of sovereignty one subscribes to.

Referendums

The South Ossetian referendum was a natural extension of Russia's acceptance of the residents of Georgia's breakaway groups as Russian citizens, as well as its reliance on narratives built up around Kosovo's war for independence. In 1991, the residents of Kosovo had held a referendum wherein they overwhelmingly voted to declare independence from Serbia, but the referendum was not internationally recognized.[61] It was only after the ethnic cleansing campaign began that Western nations changed their opinion, horrified at the treatment an ethnic minority was receiving for expressing their right to self-determination.[62]

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[60] "Georgia and Russia: Clashing over Abkhazia," International Crisis Group (June 5, 2008). https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/georgia/georgia-and-russia-clashing-over-abkhazia.
[61] "The President: On September 26-30, 1991, Kosovo Expressed with a Referendum the Political Will of Its Citizens for an Independent State," President of the Republic of Kosovo (September 26, 2022). https://president-ksgov.net/en/the-president-on-september-26-30-1991-kosovo-expressed-with-a-referendum-the-political-will-of-its-citizens-for-an-independent-state/.
[62] John B. Bellinger III, "Why the Crimean Referendum Is Illegitimate," by Jonathan Masters, Council on Foreign Relations (March 16, 2014). https://www.cfr.org/interview/why-crimean-referendum-illegitimate.

After a 2008 referendum in both South Ossetia and Abkhazia demonstrated a desire from the citizens to separate from Georgia and join Russia, the leaders of both regions made an appeal to the Russian government to recognize their sovereignty – an appeal that was heard and recognized by Russia.[63] In Russia's view, a referendum is simply a manifestation of the will of the people, a crucial element of organic sovereignty. Even if many of the people in question are not ethnically Russian, their desire to join Russia is enough for Russia to claim that the issue of self-determination overrides the concern of Georgian territorial and political sovereignty. The fact that many residents of South Ossetia and Abkhazia hold Russian passports only adds to the evidence that Russia is subscribing to an alternate view of sovereignty, if only in its narratives. While it would be difficult to prove that Russia's understanding of sovereignty is a *cause* for its behaviour in this instance, it certainly is not a stretch to say that Russia was aware of the importance of narratives in conflict and prepared to justify itself once the conflict erupted. Granting Russian passports to residents of South Ossetia and Abkhazia was a premeditated, pre-emptive creation of a justification for Russia's actions.

Ukraine

Conflicts

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine was an escalation of a conflict that began in 2014, when Russia invaded Crimea, a peninsula that belonged to Ukraine at the time but has long housed Russia's Black Sea fleet. Tensions began to rise in late 2013 when the pro-Russia president of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovych, turned down a lucrative energy deal with the European Union. This prompted protests in Kiev that culminated with Yanukovych fleeing the

[63] Dmitry Medvedev, *Statement by President of Russia Dmitry Medvedev* (August 26, 2008). http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/1222.

country and a pro-EU government stepping up to take the helm. Taking advantage of the chaos, troops bearing no discernible uniforms or markings entered the Crimean peninsula on February 27th 2014 and took over its autonomous assembly;[64] it is believed that the troops were members of the Russian-associated paramilitary Wagner Group, acting on Putin's orders, but this has never been outright confirmed. A referendum was held, facilitated by the now-controlled assembly, and Crimea became part of Russia despite the referendum and results not being considered legitimate by most of the international community.[65]

Things also began heating up in Donestk and Luhansk, two eastern Ukrainian regions collectively known as Donbas that had been expressing a desire to separate from Ukraine due to language, ethnicity, and strong cultural ties to Russia. Despite seeking independence since May 2014 following a successful referendum, Russia only recognized the separatist regions' status in the days leading up to the 2022 invasion.[6667] Separatist rebel groups financed and armed by Russia had been clashing with Ukrainian armed forces for eight years, but the conflict had avoided spilling out beyond the region.[68]

Russia began amassing troops and military equipment near Ukrainian borders around April 2021. The goal, according to Russian sources, was simply to run routine exercises, nothing out of the ordinary.[69] The sheer number of troops and equipment, however, indicated that there

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[64] Nigel Walker, "Ukraine Crisis: A Timeline (2014 - Eve of 2022 Invasion)," House of Commons Library (August 22, 2023). https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9476/.
[65] *Ibid*.
[66] "Ukraine Separatists Declare Independence," *Al Jazeera (*May 12, 2014). https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2014/5/12/ukraine-separatists-declare-independence.
[67] Mansur Mirovalev, "Donetsk and Luhansk: What You Should Know about the 'Republics,'" *Al Jazeera* (February 22, 2022). https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/22/what-are-donetsk-and-luhansk-ukraines-separatist-statelets.
[68] Ivan Shovkoplias, "8 Years of War in Donbas: The History of Russia's Aggression," Official Website of Ukraine (July 14, 2022). https://war.ukraine.ua/articles/8-years-of-war-in-donbas/.
[69] Mykola Bielieskov, "The Russian and Ukrainian Spring 2021 War Scare," Center for Strategic & International Studies (September 21, 2021). https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-and-ukrainian-spring-2021-war-scare.

was something unusual about the decision. Then, early in the morning of February 22nd 2022, Russia launched surprise attacks across Ukraine in an attempt, according to some official Russian sources, to demilitarize Ukraine.[70] Experts believed that the invasion was really the first attack in a plan that would culminate in the overthrowing of Ukraine's democratically elected government.[71] Other still believe that this was nothing more than President Putin making good on his threats to invade Ukraine if attempts at Westernization and courting by NATO did not subside.[72] Major cities, including the capital of Kiev, were targeted with air strikes and ground combat, and losses six months into the conflict were estimated to be around 100 000 for each side.[73] Since then, the losses have somewhat stayed consistent, despite the conflict having slowed to a stalemate and shifting to drone-based warfare. As of the time of writing, the conflict is still ongoing; reports in the recent months indicate that Russia is gaining some ground in the south of Ukraine, particularly near the second-largest Ukrainian city of Kharkiv, but Ukrainian officials are maintaining that they have control over the situation.[74] Western nations are continuously committed to providing aid to Ukraine, with the United States alone having provided around $51 billion so far;[75] this outpouring of support has been negatively interpreted by Russia as an encroachment on Russia's regional authority.

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[70] "Explosions Heard across Ukraine as Russia Launches Military Attack," *CBCnews* (February 24, 2022). https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/ukraine-russia-crisis-feb23-2022-1.6361074.
[71] Matthew Chance et al., "Peace in Europe 'shattered' as Russia Invades Ukraine," *CNN* (February 25, 2022). https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/24/europe/ukraine-russia-invasion-thursday-intl/index.html.
[72] David Ignatius, "Opinion | Putin Warned the West 15 Years Ago. Now, in Ukraine, He's Poised to Wage War.," *The Washington Post* (February 20, 2022). https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/02/20/putin-ukraine-nato-2007-munich-conference/.
[73] Helene Cooper, "Russia and Ukraine Each Have Suffered over 100,000 Casualties, the Top U.S. General Says," *The New York Times* (November 10, 2022). https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/10/world/europe/ukraine-russia-war-casualties-deaths.html.
[74] Visual Journalism Team, "Ukraine in Maps: Tracking the War with Russia," *BBC News* (May 17, 2024). https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60506682.
[75] Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, "U.S. Security Cooperation with Ukraine," U.S. Department of State (June 7, 2024). https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-ukraine/.

Narratives, 2014

Similarly to the conflict in Georgia, Russia was keen to justify its actions to the international community. As a result, multiple – often conflicting – narratives were promulgated by Russian officials by way of press releases, speeches, and interviews. One big talking point was that Crimea had always belonged to Russia, and that giving it to Ukraine was a mistake that needed to be rectified. Claims of Ukraine having a fascist government or, worse, simply being illegitimate, illegal, and not a real country were common during this time.[76]

When looking specifically at narratives that relate to sovereignty, one common theme that emerged when looking at the annexation of Crimea was the protection of civilians, an appeal to humanitarian principles. In Russia's view, Crimea was ripe for ethnic cleansing campaigns at the hands of the Ukrainian government.[77] In 2014, 60% of the peninsula's population was ethnically Russian, the only region in Ukraine to have a Russian majority population at the time.[78] Russia felt that these conditions could lead to ethnic conflict, despite no evidence indicating that this was a possibility. President Putin specifically said that Russia is "very concerned about any possible ethnic cleansings and Ukraine ending up as a neo-Nazi state."[79] Logically, Ukrainians would not commit an ethnic cleansing against other Ukrainians, so Putin most likely meant that ethnic cleansings would possibly occur against Russians. This could

[76] Vasile Rotaru, and Miruna Troncotă, "Continuity and Change in Instrumentalizing 'The Precedent'. How Russia Uses Kosovo to Legitimize the Annexation of Crimea," *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 17, no. 3 (2017): 333. https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2017.1348044.
[77] Vladimir Putin, "Interview to German TV Channel ARD," by Hubert Seipel, President of Russia (November 17, 2014). http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47029.
[78] Steven Pifer, "Crimea: Six Years After Illegal Annexation," Center for International Security and Cooperation (March 16, 2020). https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/news/crimea-%C2%A0six-years-after-illegal-annexation.
[79] *Supra* note 78.

provide an adequate justification for a military intervention under the umbrella of organic sovereignty, as in this view territorial integrity is less important than the people.

Several laws affecting Russian-speakers came into effect in Ukraine in the years leading up to the conflict, lending some credence to the worries that an ethnic conflict might arise. Notably, in 2012 the Kivalov-Kolesnichenko law was introduced, allowing for increased minority language rights; several regions adopted languages such as Russian, Hungarian, and Romanian as their official regional language.[80] The law was seen as a "political gesture aimed at dividing Ukrainian society" by many members of the public and officials, and as a result the government that took helm in 2014 made an unsuccessful attempt to overturn it.[81] The attempt to repeal the law was also viewed negatively, with many perceiving the decision as a direct attack on Russian-speakers specifically, despite the law impacting all minority languages spoken in Ukraine. President Putin was amongst those who perceived the decision in this way, claiming that the attacks on Russians and Russian-speakers was a direct attack on Crimea, since Crimea is "more densely populated by Russians and Russian-speaking than other parts of Ukraine."[82]

Both the laws and fear of ethnic cleansing campaigns are clear attempts at drawing a connection between Russian-speakers and Russians, most likely to help bolster its overall narrative founded on organic sovereignty. Russia has made it clear both covertly and overtly that

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[80] Liudmyla Pidkuimukha, "Law of Ukraine 'On Ensuring the Functioning of Ukrainian as the State Language': The Status of Ukrainian and Minority Languages," Forum for Ukrainian Studies (October 20, 2020). https://ukrainian-studies.ca/2020/10/20/the-official-act-on-the-state-language-entered-into-force-on-16-july-2019-the-status-of-ukrainian-and-minority-languages/.
[81] Tetyana Ogarkova, "The Truth Behind Ukraine's Language Policy," Atlantic Council (March 12, 2018). https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/the-truth-behind-ukraine-s-language-policy/.
[82] Vladimir Putin, *Interview to German newspaper Bild. Part 1* (January 11, 2016). http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51154.

it considers Crimea Russian because this helps to justify its military action; it is evidently not a breach of sovereignty to militarily intervene to save one's own citizens on one's own soil.

To further attempt to strengthen the relationship between the two, President Putin has repeatedly turned to the shared history. Speaking in a radio broadcast in early 2014, he said "Sevastopol is a city of Russian naval glory, which every Russian citizen knows."[83] Sevastopol is the largest city in Crimea, home to the Black Sea Fleet's base port. During World War II, Sevastopol was the site of a siege during the Axis's occupation of the peninsula.[84] Crimea held strategic importance for the Soviets in their quest to thwart the Axis's incursion into their territory, and thus parts of the peninsula were taken over while its main city of Sevastopol held out.[85] The Siege of Sevastopol would become canonized in the Russian military legends as a momentous feat of Soviet resilience, heroism, and power. The ethnicity or republic of those fighting did not matter; they were all fighting for the Soviet Union to protect their home from being overtaken by fascism. By focusing on the glory of successfully protecting their nation, President Putin is reminding the world – and Ukraine – about the shared history between the two nations during the times of the Soviet Union and the key role that the disputed peninsula played.

As previously mentioned, the residents of Crimea held a referendum following the takeover of their assembly, a factor that has been present across every conflict discussed herein. The Crimean referendum has not been recognized by the international community, with many claiming it as illegal and contrary to Ukraine's constitution. Nonetheless, President Putin chose

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[83] Vladimir Putin, Transcript of *Direct Line with Vladimir Putin* (April 17, 2014). http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20796.
[84] Robert Coalson, "The Siege of Sevastopol: Why the Crimean Campaign Means so Much to Moscow," RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty (May 7, 2014). https://www.rferl.org/a/crimea-world-war/25375944.html.
[85] *Ibid*.

to highlight the Crimean referendum in his narratives, lauding the results as proof that Crimeans desire to control their own destiny, despite the wishes of their parent state – much like the situation in Kosovo. In a lengthy interview with a German newspaper in 2016, President Putin said of the Crimean referendum: "under the United Nations Charter, every nation has the right to self-determination. Concerning Kosovo, the UN International Court of Justice ruled that, when it comes to sovereignty, the opinion of the central government can be ignored."[86] In reality, what the International Court of Justice (ICJ) had ruled was that "the scope of the principle of territorial integrity is confined to the sphere of relations between States."[87] In other words, territorial sovereignty is only a concern when a foreign government breaches another's territory. So, in the case of the self-determination of a group within an existing state, the issue – while complex – is *not* about territorial integrity like President Putin has interpreted it to be. This is an example of not only how Russia directly references Kosovo in its foreign policy narratives, but how the principles of organic sovereignty get added to the mix.

Narratives, 2022

The widespread use of social media today has allowed the world to see Russia's strategic narratives at work in Ukraine real time. The sheer number of narratives circulating online and in the press and official statements has been a defining feature of Russia's attempts to justify its invasion. Some of the narratives directly attack the Ukrainian government, with claims of fascism and Nazism.[88] Others blame NATO and its courting of Ukraine for membership, an act that Russia has directly stated it perceives as a threat.[89] Indeed, the fears of "Westernization" and

[86] *Supra* note 83.
[87] *Accordance with International Law of the Unilateral Declaration of Independence in Respect of Kosovo, Advisory Opinion*, I.C.J. Reports (2010): 437.
[88] *Supra* note 7, 150.
[89] *Ibid*, 147.

overexertion of western influence over Ukraine were a major talking point leading up to and at the beginning of the invasion.[90]

Similarly to Crimea, the way organic sovereignty has been applied in strategic narratives here is twofold, and at times contradictory. At times Russia makes the argument that Russians within Ukraine are suffering at the hands of the Ukrainian government, facing discrimination and inhumane treatment. At other times, however, Russia goes to great lengths to impress upon foreign spectators to the conflict just how similar Russia and Ukraine are, and how their shared history, culture, ethnic background, religion, and geography makes them one nation.

Ethnic Russians

This first application of organic sovereignty relates to the treatment Russians within Ukrainian borders face. Luhansk and Donetsk are home to many Russian speakers and ethnic Russians. Part of this is simply the proximity of the regions to the Russian border, allowing for easier flow of people between the two areas. Another part, however, is the history of the Soviet Union. When the Union still existed, movement between the republics was simple as the borders were less strict. The dissolution of the USSR, however, saw what President Putin called a "humanitarian disaster" emerge.

[90] *Ibid*.

> "All the citizens of the Soviet Union lived in a union state irrespective of their ethnicity, and after its collapse 25 million Russians suddenly became foreign citizens. (…) Families were divided; people lost their jobs and means of subsistence, and had no means to communicate with each other normally."[91]

Residents around borders between the republics were presumably among those who had their families divided, their citizenship status thrown into question. Given President Putin's sympathy towards these residents, it is no surprise that they have been repeatedly used as a justification for Russia's intervention.

One way that Russian-speakers in Ukraine had been impacted prior to the war was by way of language laws, as mentioned earlier. Ukraine had been steadily introducing and amending more language laws limiting the use of Russian in the public sphere, reversing the progress made for minority language rights in the years leading up to the annexation of Crimea. The Kivalov-Kolesnichenko law was found unconstitutional by the Ukrainian Constitutional Court in 2018, and in 2019 a law was introduced that formally made Ukrainian the only official state language.[92] The law's official justification was that a renewed focus on Ukrainian could strengthen overall Ukrainian identity.[93] Other supporters felt that the prevalence of the Russian language was "a legacy of the Soviet era," one that they would prefer to move past given Ukraine's recent focus on modernization and Westernization.[94]

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[91] Vladimir Putin, "Vladimir Putin's interview with Radio Europe 1 and TF1 TV channel," by Jean-Pierre Elkabbach and Gilles Bouleau, President of Russia (June 4, 2014). http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/45832.
[92] *Supra* note 81.
[93] Roman Huba, "Why Ukraine's New Language Law Will Have Long-Term Consequences," openDemocracy (May 28, 2019). https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/ukraine-language-law-en/.
[94] Pavel Polityuk, "Ukraine Passes Language Law, Irritating President-Elect and Russia," Reuters (April 25, 2019). https://www.reuters.com/article/world/ukraine-passes-language-law-irritating-president-elect-and-russia-idUSKCN1S110Y/.

Opponents, however, felt that linking Ukrainian language directly to Ukrainian identity was a harmful act, one that would push away the Russian-speakers. This sentiment was heightened by a statement from the President of Ukraine in power at the time of the law's implementation, Petro Poroshenko. President Poroshenko, when asked about minority language concerns, stated that the government had carefully considered the opinion of all parties involved, except the one whose opinion he did not care for: Moscow. "Let them study Russian," the President said.[95] Pushing the issue of Russian-speaking Ukrainians onto Russia sent what many considered to be a clear message: if Ukrainian identity was inextricable from the Ukrainian language, and Russian speakers were Moscow's problem, then it stood to reason that Russian speakers were not considered Ukrainian.

In January 2022 another new law was introduced that, amongst other media requirements, required all print news publications registered in Ukraine to publish in Ukrainian, a move that could hurt an already financially declining industry. Exceptions were made for "certain minority languages, English, and official EU languages, but not for Russian."[96] Human Rights Watch condemned the move, saying that "the Ukrainian government has every right to promote its state language and strengthen its national identity. But it should ensure a balance in its language policy, to avoid discrimination against linguistic minorities."[97] The Hungarian Foreign Minister also expressed frustration, echoing the sentiment that the law was discriminatory towards Hungarian speakers in Ukraine.[98]

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[95] *Supra* note 94.
[96] Rachel Denber, "New Language Requirement Raises Concerns in Ukraine," Human Rights Watch (January 19, 2022). https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/01/19/new-language-requirement-raises-concerns-ukraine.
[97] *Ibid*.
[98] *Supra* note 81.

Seeing public support for this position, President Putin proceeded to take the opportunity to spin the situation from simply being harmful acts against Russian-speakers to harmful acts against Russians. After all, there was built-in justification for this, considering the Ukrainian president's comments about Russian-speakers being Moscow's problem. In a controversial article published on July 12th 2021, President Putin wrote:

> "It would not be an exaggeration to say that the path of forced assimilation, the formation of an ethnically pure Ukrainian state, aggressive towards Russia, is comparable in its consequences to the use of weapons of mass destruction against us. As a result of such a harsh and artificial division of Russians and Ukrainians, the Russian people in all may decrease by hundreds of thousands or even millions."[99]

The message is clear: Russians are at risk of erasure in Ukraine. Such a humanitarian crisis was cause for foreign intervention in Kosovo and could be used in Russia's case as well. The focus on ethnic Russians specifically aligns with organic sovereignty, where the protection and self-determination of one's citizens is the priority over foreign borders and territory.

Not only did these laws prompt a response from Russia, but a law of its own as well. Since 2019 residents of Luhansk and Donetsk have been benefitting from a simplified Russian passport application process as a result of the discriminatory language laws.[100] At the outbreak of the conflict in 2022 around 18% of the residents in those regions would hold Russian

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[99] Vladimir Putin, "Article by Vladimir Putin 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,'" President of Russia (July 12, 2021). http://en.kremlin.ru/misc/66182.
[100] Yuras Karmanau and Dasha Litvinova, "With Fast-Track Passports, Russia Extends Clout in Ukraine," *AP News* (February 17, 2022). https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-europe-russia-moscow-donetsk-9e451c5a094b7b2f5ead7534a3a23740.

passports.[101] This would help bolster Russia's repeated claims of needing to protect Russian citizens in Ukraine – after all, here was proof that there were genuine Russian citizens within the borders of Ukraine, seeking independence and needing support.

Another law introduced by Ukraine around this time related to indigenous people and included a review of the Ukrainian state definition of protected ethnic minorities. According to President Putin, under this new law only ethnic minorities who do not have their own state outside of Ukraine are protected.[102] This was important because under Ukrainian law, minorities are afforded important minority rights, including the right to hold referendums and exercise their right to self-determination. Excluding ethnic Russians from the definition of protected minorities gives the Ukrainian government legal precedent to discriminate. There is one issue, however, with this interpretation of the law; the word of the law frames it somewhat differently. Minority groups who have a parent state other than Ukraine are barred from receiving administrative or financial assistance from said other state, and only if the activity that is being funded or supported directly puts Ukraine's sovereignty and national security at risk.[103] Evidently, like any law aimed at eroding rights in favour of protecting national security, this legislation can potentially be interpreted in a way that could bring harm to minorities. Saying that this actively strips Russians of minority group protections is a stretch, however – albeit a convenient one for Russia if it seeks to apply organic sovereignty to the situation to justify its actions.

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[101] *Ibid.*
[102] *Supra* note 99.
[103] Krzysztof Nieczypor, "The Changes That Change Nothing. Ukraine Amends the Law on National Minorities," OSW Centre for Eastern Studies (October 2, 2023). https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2023-10-02/changes-change-nothing-ukraine-amends-law-national-minorities.

Much like in Kosovo, Crimea, and Georgia, referendums were held in 2022 in Luhansk and Donetsk to determine whether the residents desired to separate from Ukraine and join Russia. The results were overwhelmingly in favour of independence, but the referendums themselves and their results are considered controversial. This is not surprising given that the referendums are occurring during wartime and had suspiciously high voter turnout.[104] Regardless of the international community's perspective, the referendums allowed Russia to use the narrative of "self-determination" once more.

Russian-Ukrainian bond

The second crucial point stressed by Russia in an attempt to justify its 2022 invasion is the brotherhood that Russians and Ukrainians share. In recent years President Putin has written articles and made numerous television appearances wherein he describes how Russians and Ukrainians are the same. In the aforementioned 2021 article, President Putin described what was presumably the West's efforts to bring Ukraine into its sphere of influence as an attempt to "pit the parts of a single people against one another."[105]

The essay continues to give a lengthy explanation of the history of Russia and Ukraine, beginning with what he calls "Ancient Rus," the kingdom from which ethnic Belarusians, Russians and Ukrainians hailed. It is worth noting that in the essay President Putin calls the 9th century political entity "Ancient Rus," despite the fact that most historians and secondary sources refer to it as "Kievan Rus."[106] The change is a deliberate attempt to erase the crucial

[104] "Understanding Russia's Referendums in Ukraine," *Al Jazeera* (September 20, 2022). https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/9/20/russia-unfolds-annexation-plan-for-ukraine.
[105] *Supra* note 99.
[106] Nicholas V. Riasanovsky and Mark D Steinberg, *A History of Russia*, 8th ed. New York: Oxford University Press (2011): 24.

contribution of Ukraine and the Ukrainian people to the history of the region, as keeping only the "Rus" part instead makes it seem like the kingdom was Russian from the start. The goal of this could be to shape the narratives in favour of promoting Russian organic sovereignty. By erasing the role Ukraine had played in the shaping of the region, President Putin erases Ukrainian identity and presents instead one regional identity: the Russian one. The essay continues with the history to arrive to post-2014 Ukraine, wherein President Putin discusses the EU's attempts to push Ukraine away from Russia and reviews several controversial laws passed by the Ukrainian government, which had been discussed here already.

The shared history emphasized by President Putin was not only medieval history. World War II was fought with the combined strength of every Soviet republic and is known as the Great Patriotic War in Russia and other former Soviet states. There is much pride in the actions of the Red Army and its defeat over fascism. In President Putin's view, Ukraine and Russia's status as Soviet republics fighting side by side arguably makes their new borders less important than their shared history, duty, and sacrifice. This was highlighted further when he commented "for the Ukrainians who fought in the Red Army (…) the Great Patriotic War was indeed a patriotic war because they were defending their home, their great common Motherland."[107]

President Putin also makes an appeal to religion, as both Russia and Ukraine have a long history with Orthodox Christianity. He writes about his frustration at the Ukrainian Orthodox Church's desire to act as a separate entity from the Russian Orthodox Church. Specifically, he mentions how he believes that this destroys a "prominent and centuries-old symbol of our kinship at all costs."[108] As mentioned, a shared spirituality could be one of the binding factors of

[107] *Supra* note 99.
[108] *Ibid.*

a people in the context of organic sovereignty. By making an appeal to the shared religious past and present, Russia seeks to once more emphasize that the Ukrainian people and Russian people are actually one people. When taken together with the shared history, glory, and sacrifice, the message is clear: any forceful interventions in Ukraine are not breaches of a foreign nation's sovereignty, because the two nations are made up of one people. This is organic sovereignty at work.

Summary of findings

There are several clear trends in the strategic narratives employed by Russia in conflicts involving former Soviet republics, despite the sheer number of narratives and the differences in the conflicts themselves. Many Russian narratives focus on the shared culture, ethnicity, history, and religion between the Ukrainian and Russian people, suggesting that they are actually one people altogether. This gives the impression to observers that the conflicts are more akin to a civil strife than the forceful military interventions that they are.

A large focus is placed on ethnicity and protection of citizens, particularly citizens considered to be Russian. This narrative directly contradicts the previous one as Russian narratives in Georgia, Crimea, and now eastern Ukraine focused on the harm done to Russian citizens and the need to protect them. If Russians and Ukrainians are one people, how can Ukraine be committing oppressing ethnic Russians? Nonetheless, in these narratives the Russian citizens' needs override the territorial sovereignty of Georgia and Ukraine. This priority is a hallmark of organic sovereignty.

Referendums played a big role in all the mentioned conflicts. Russia saw the response to the desire for independence in Kosovo and applied similar principles in Georgia, Crimea, and

Donbas. Given that the international community had accepted that the right to self-determination of the Kosovar people was more important than the territorial and governing sovereignty of Serbia, it is not surprising that Russia internalized this approach to justify its own breaches of foreign sovereign borders.

Conclusion

In March of 2024, Russia brought a proposal to the UNSC to re-examine and debate the issue of the 1999 Kosovo Bombing.[109] The UNSC rejected the proposal, prompting frustration. Serbian officials were disappointed with the decision, claiming that it was a deliberate attempt to not allow the truth to be heard. Representatives from Kosovo, on the other hand, were convinced that the proposal was nothing more than an attempt from Russia to draw parallels between the two conflicts in a way that could potentially justify the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

While it opposed the NATO bombing campaign in 1999 and the Western push for Kosovar independence, Russia has since been all too keen to spin the narratives used then in its recent military engagements in former Soviet republics. A narrative focus on self-determination, humanitarian appeals, and R2P have been present in Russia's official communications regarding the conflict in 2008 in Georgia, 2014 in Crimea, and now 2022 in Ukraine. With these, scholars have been able to definitively demonstrate what is known as the "Kosovo precedent," or the way in which Russia has repurposed the Western narratives surrounding Kosovo to justify its own

[109] Milica Stojanovic, "Serbia 'disappointed' as UN Security Council Rejects NATO Bombing Debate," Balkan Transitional Justice (March 28, 2024). https://balkaninsight.com/2024/03/26/serbia-disappointed-as-un-security-council-rejects-nato-bombing-debate/.

military interventions. Given that Kosovar representatives to the UN have realized what Russia was attempting to do with its 2024 proposal, it appears that the Kosovo precedent has made its way out from academic circles and into real-world discussions of foreign policy.

When examining the narratives more closely, an interesting pattern emerged. While many of the Russian narratives evoked international law, attacked the sitting governments of the opposing nations, or claimed victimhood at the hands of the West, many more were centered around the citizens. In fact, these narratives told a story of an alternative view of sovereignty, one that ignored the dominant Westphalian understanding of the term in favour of one focused on the people. *Organic sovereignty*, as this view known, stipulates that a state's sovereignty is not founded on the Westphalian principles of territory and recognition. Rather, a state is sovereign when it has a group of people with shared culture, ethnicity, history, spirituality, beliefs, or any combination thereof who work together to achieve their collective destiny. This could also be interpreted as self-determination, which is a universally recognized right under international law and often used to defend a breach of traditional sovereignty – as was the case in Kosovo.

This paper has demonstrated the link between the events in Kosovo and Russia's view of sovereignty, as well as the link between the narratives in Kosovo and those in subsequent conflicts involving Russia and former Soviet republics. Based on the evidence gathered from both academic articles and from Russian officials themselves, it is clear that Russia's view of sovereignty has been shaped by the events in Kosovo and twisted to suit its needs.

At the time of writing this paper, the conflict in Ukraine is ongoing with no end in sight. Both sides appear outwardly committed to see the fight through to victory at any cost. The

narratives have appeared to take on a life of their own, spinning the conflict into an ideological battle between East and West, good and evil, fascism and freedom. No matter what side one supports, it is hard not to be fearful for the state of the international world order when the leader of a major superpower says and believes statements like "I am confident that true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia."[110]

[110] *Supra* note 99.

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