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Russian Strategic Narratives on R2P in the ‘Near Abroad’

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Abstract

This article assesses Russian strategic narratives towards its interventions in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014–16) based on a new database of 50 statements posted on the websites of the Russian Mission to the United Nations and the President of Russia homepage. By looking more broadly at Russian strategic narratives aimed at persuading other global actors and publics abroad and at home, this article identifies how Russia attempted to develop a story that could win global acceptance. This analysis shows that contrary to traditional Russian emphasis on sovereign responsibility and non-intervention, Russia supported claims for self-determination by separatist groups in Georgia and Ukraine. Russia used deception and disinformation in its strategic narratives as it mis-characterized these conflicts using Responsibility to Protect (R2P) language, yet mostly justified its own interventions through references to other sources of international law. Russian strategic narratives focused on delegitimizing the perceived opponents, making the case for the appropriateness of its own actions, and projecting what it proposed as the proper solution to the conflicts. It largely avoided making any references to its own involvement in the Donbas at all. Additionally, Russia’s focus on the protection of co-ethnics and Russian-speakers is reminiscent of interventions in the pre-R2P era.

Keywords: foreign policy; Eastern Europe; Ukraine; Georgia; Russia; ethnic conflict; humanitarian intervention; R2P; strategic narratives

Ever since the 2008 Russian intervention in Georgia, many have paid attention to the ever more assertive Russian foreign policy. Special interest has been paid to Russian policies towards what it calls its ‘Near Abroad,’ as well as its positions and actions on military interventions (see Allison 2013). It has been widely understood that Russia has been rather instrumental in its use of humanitarian and legal discourse, which has been frequently voiced inconsistently to either advance its interests or to potentially shape the existing norms on military humanitarian intervention. For example, Allison (2013) has studied historical Russian legal, normative, political and moral reasons given for military intervention.

This study seeks to build on previous research by comparatively studying Russian strategic narratives on Responsibility to Protect (R2P) in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014–16). It will show how such narratives—aiming to present to the world why Russia was involved, what was its position, and what was the proper resolution to the conflict—evolve. The main contribution that this article aims to deliver is empirical: this research is based on a comprehensive analysis of all pertinent statements about these conflicts posted on the websites of the Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, and on the homepage of the President of Russia. Such an approach will allow us to look at how Russia presented its narratives on these interventions to the broader public—as opposed to looking at more technical debates taking place at diplomatic meetings and interactions. The comparative angle of this study will also allow assessing continuity

and change in Russian strategic narratives on R2P from Georgia to Ukraine, two cases where Russia supported the claims of self-determination of certain regions. This stands in a stark contrast to Russia's definitive rejection of any claims of self-determination from Kosovo.

Russia's inconsistent position with regards to R2P and breakaway regions seeking self-determination regionally and globally has been noticed by keen observers. Allison (2013, 216) argues that Russia's support for state sovereignty and non-intervention outside of the region, while justifying its interventions within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) regional setting, reflects that Russia believes in the existence of a dual normative order, regional and global. However, Russian rhetorical choices could be alternatively explained by perceived loss or gain of influence or territory. Russia placed emphasis on national sovereignty and the principle of non-intervention in the case of Kosovo, in order to preserve the territorial integrity of its protégé Serbia. Meanwhile, it used R2P rhetoric and referenced a need for self-determination for breakaway regions in Georgia and Ukraine, where such outcomes led to gains in influence and/or territory for Russia.

Overall, Russia used R2P language to mischaracterize both conflicts, yet publicly justified its own involvement somewhat differently in each of them. In contrast to Georgia, Russia did not use R2P references to justify its own intervention in Ukraine. In the Georgian case, Russia justified the involvement by referencing alleged atrocity crimes and acts of aggression taken by the Georgian government. It noted that its intervention was to save lives and for humanitarian reasons, and it celebrated the creation of a perceived better regional world order that Russian involvement had brought about. Meanwhile, in Ukraine Russia not only referenced the alleged atrocities committed by the Ukrainian government, it also consistently linked anti-Russian parties in Ukraine to fascism. Early on, Russia denied its own intervention in East Ukraine; later, it called for humanitarian measures to be taken to alleviate the crisis. It emphasized the principle of self-determination in Crimea and celebrated its annexation as an important historic event. Moreover, in both cases Russia's focus on the protection of co-ethnics and Russian-speakers is reminiscent of some interventions of the pre-R2P era. In contrast to some other legalistic analyses on Russian intervention in Ukraine, Russian strategic narratives notably underscore the utmost importance of the allegations that fascism and extremist ideology have taken root in Ukraine; emphasize the need to protect journalists in Ukraine; and do not make references to intervention by invitation. This research also brings attention to the use of propaganda in Russian strategic narratives. Russia used deception and disinformation both to misrepresent the extent of the humanitarian crises and to misrepresent (or even deny) its own military actions.

Thus, by looking more broadly at Russian strategic narratives and "humanitarian" military interventions in these situations, one can see the Russian case made as an attempt to try win the story in each of these instances. While such narratives were generally rejected by audiences in the West, they were commonly accepted in Russia and in some areas within the 'Near Abroad' where media from Russia remains influential.

Strategic Narratives, Military Humanitarian Intervention, & R2P

Literature on strategic narratives bridges the fields of international relations and communications. It looks at rhetoric and intentions of different international actors as they "construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future ... to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors" (Miskimmon et al. 2013, 2). This research builds on the work of Joseph Nye Jr. who observes that in the contemporary environment, "victory may sometimes depend not on whose army wins, but on whose story wins" (Nye 2014, 20).

Strategic narratives on war and conflict are important, as they provide the story of why the given state is involved in the conflict, its position on the conflict, and the proposed resolution to the situation—which can involve the creation of a slightly different order (Miskimmon et al., 2013, 5, 182). Political actors develop and use such narratives to both try to persuade each other and the public, and in instances where successful narratives are created, they can become binding and then

can either shape or put constraints on the actions of countries at home and abroad. Strategic narratives can include system narratives, identity narratives, or issue-specific narratives (Miskimmon et al. 2013, 102; Roselle, Miskimmon & O’Laughlin 2014). This article builds on insights from this literature by looking at Russian strategic narratives that involve a specific issue in international relations: R2P. The rest of this section will look at key studies related to intentions and rhetoric on humanitarian military intervention.

The concept of humanitarian intervention has evolved since its development in 1840 and the 1920s, when the underlying rationale involved protection of nationals abroad (Weiss 2012, 35). The contemporary understanding of military intervention developed out of the post-Cold War atrocities in Rwanda and Former Yugoslavia, and is quite different from great power interventions before that. More recently, the extant body of international relations and social science scholarship regarding what constitutes legitimate military humanitarian intervention tends to investigate how existing norms have placed restrictions on state behaviors, when interventions should be conducted, their scope, who should intervene, and who should be protected. The following review briefly summarizes prior scholarship about what constitutes legitimate humanitarian intervention and R2P in the contemporary international system.

The first set of studies discuss whether humanitarian interventions should be conducted on a multilateral basis, and the extent to which the UN should play a role in the process. Since the end of the Cold War, it has been increasingly agreed upon that a legitimate humanitarian intervention must be done on a multilateral basis, usually with UNSC authorization (Finnemore 1996, 180–185; Pattison 2010). Furthermore, Welsh (2006) notes that the most contentious areas in the debate about the scope and legitimacy of humanitarian action include the necessity to obtain consent from the relevant state for intervention, “whether humanitarian intervention is limited to punishment actions—as opposed to actions designed to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance,” and whether unambiguous UNSC authorization is necessary (3).

Second, a growing number of studies address the question of who should be protected when conducting humanitarian intervention. Specifically, these studies assert that beliefs regarding who is worthy of intervention have expanded to include people of all racial and religious backgrounds. Finnemore (2003; 1996) argues that humanitarian intervention is not a recent development, but that the application of justifications for its use has changed over time. In her view, the most notable variation has taken place with regard to which groups of people merit intervention—from the protection of Christians from the Ottoman Turks in the 19th century to all people regardless of their ethnicity, race, religion, or other distinctions (Finnemore 1996, 159–61). As a result, humanitarian interventions since 1945 have been almost exclusively on behalf of non-Christians and non-Europeans. However, a number of studies emphasizing bias and in-group favoritism challenge this inclusive notion of protection (Grillo & Pupcenoks 2017).

Third, several studies either assess the strength of the R2P norm introduced in the 2000s or outline how the norm is being challenged (Evans 2008). In 2001, the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty issued a report, *The Responsibility to Protect*, which argues that the global community has a responsibility to protect when a large-scale loss of civilian life is taking place, or is imminent, and the state government is unable or unwilling to protect these populations. More specifically, R2P addresses the following atrocity crimes: genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing. Broadly, the R2P entails three pillars: (1) the responsibility of each state to prevent its population from atrocity crimes; (2) international assistance to countries in meeting this responsibility; and (3) a timely and decisive response by the global community if atrocity crimes are taking place or responsibility to react. The forgoing principles were reaffirmed in the UN 2005 World Summit, which further clarified that R2P intervention requires UNSC authorization. Overall, R2P involves a wide continuum of actions, and the forced intervention aspect of pillar 3 is only the most extreme form of protecting vulnerable populations; intervention without invitation is envisioned only as an absolute extreme measure after other options have been tried unsuccessfully.

The utility of the R2P concept has been increasingly criticized because of the eruption of a civil conflict in Libya following what was initially perceived to be a successful R2P operation in 2011. The resulting regime overthrow in Libya also confirmed Russian opposition to R2P interventions, as evidenced in subsequent vetoes of UNSC resolutions on Syria (Averre and Davies 2015; Charap 2013; Ziegler 2016). Developing countries in general tend to be wary of the R2P concept, as many of them perceive R2P as a form of neo-colonialism used by Western countries to intervene in the Global South. For example, China has attempted to redefine the existing norms of international intervention, calling for the return to a traditional peacekeeping model and adherence to conventional Westphalian principles (Contessi 2010). Overall, R2P is still a heavily-contested concept.

Others are critical of the UNSC's inefficiency in implementing R2P. For example, Hehir (2010) laments that although R2P has changed the discourse surrounding humanitarian intervention, the UNSC has nonetheless been inconsistent when selecting cases for authorizing intervention. Bellamy (2013) uses empirical evidence from 2006–2011 as indication of how previous R2P initiatives depended on contextual variables, and highlights disagreements regarding what situations fall under the R2P purview. Similarly, Seymour (2013) criticizes world leaders for their failure to act during the Darfur crisis, despite their rhetoric denouncing the atrocities, and Hehir (2016) shows that the R2P norm has done little to affect the behavior of P5 states. At the same time, while the West frequently tends to think about R2P through the lenses of pillar 3 (intervention), most of the other countries prefer to focus on pillar 2 (prevention and assistance), for which there exists widespread support (Gallagher 2015).

In sum, the strategic narratives approach allows examining how different actors present their stories about the given issues or topics to the world, while the review of literature on humanitarian intervention and R2P provides the following observations. First, most studies agree that grave humanitarian crises should be addressed by the global community although the debate still persists regarding whether countries should respect state sovereignty or prioritize the protection of life and intervene militarily in instances of grave humanitarian crises. Second, it is nearly universally accepted that legitimate humanitarian intervention should be multilateral and should be authorized by the UN.¹ Third, the scope of who should be protected has generally become more inclusive to encompass diverse populations. Finally, although R2P language regarding the protection of vulnerable populations from atrocity crimes appears to be increasingly internalized by the global community, the core principles underlying R2P remain contested and its effectiveness questioned.

Russian Rhetoric, Deception, & R2P

Strategic narratives are advocated by state leaders for the purposes of predominately convincing other global political actors as well as broader audiences at abroad and at home. One way how Russian narratives are presented to the world is through the website of its Mission to the UN and the President of Russia homepage. At home, Russia has been rather successful in convincing its domestic public to accept and internalize Russian strategic narratives about international relations through the use of state TV, and by spreading it covertly through bots and paid internet trolls (Szostek 2018). Russian state TV notably shapes Russian public opinion and political consensus in the Russian society (Lauruelle 2014). Indeed, it is widely acknowledged that Russia, “operates a “troll army” of cyber professionals paid to promote the Russian worldview on message boards and below-the-line spaces in different online spaces” (Miskimmon et al. 2017, 11).

Traditionally, on matters related to military humanitarian intervention and R2P, Moscow has emphasized the principle of state sovereign responsibility and has rejected arguments that external actors have the right to intervene in instances of grave humanitarian crises. Russia's position on R2P focuses on the primacy of pillars 1 and, especially, pillar 2 (prevention and assistance). Russia (as well as many other rising powers including China and Brazil) finds pillar 3 to be problematic as the country tends to oppose military intervention (Avarre and Davies 2015). If outside

interventions are to be considered, however, Russia insists that they must be specifically authorized by the UNSC under Chapter VII of the UN Charter (Allison 2013, 66).

Russia's traditional approach to humanitarian military intervention was well illustrated during the 1999 crisis in Kosovo, when Russia objected to self-determination in Kosovo, insisted on territorial integrity of its protégé Serbia, dismissed Western claims that Serbia was conducting ethnic cleansing, strongly denounced the NATO mission, and later refused to recognize Kosovo as an independent state. In fact, while the theme of ethnic cleansing against Albanians in Kosovo was at the center of public attention in the West, it was hardly mentioned in the Russia media at all (Baranovsky 2015, 257). Initial Russian rhetoric emphasized that Kosovo needed to be treated as an internal issue within sovereign Serbia, and warned that any NATO involvement would be seen as an act against Russian interests and could lead to a "Vietnam in the Balkans" for NATO (Radeljc 2016, 71–72). As NATO's bombardment commenced, Russia referred to it as barbaric and genocidal. Following the NATO operation, Russia strongly opposed the recognition of Kosovo as an independent state, noting that self-determination can never dismember a state without the consent of that state, and Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov stated that recognition of an independent Kosovo would be "a subversion of international law" (BBC 2008). Soon after becoming the president of Russia in 2000, Putin criticized attempts "to 'reshape the world map' under the guise of humanitarian intervention" (Allison 2013, 62). At the same time, Russian rhetoric has been diametrically different in the cases of Georgia and Ukraine, two instances where intervention could allow Russia to gain influence and/or territory.

In conceptualizing Russian strategic narratives, it is important not to overlook the role of information warfare, as Russia has a history of past deception, disinformation, and propaganda (Grant 1991). During the Cold War, Russians spread fake news and even forged US governmental documents in an attempt to discredit the US (Romerstein 2001). Information warfare plays an important role in contemporary Russian foreign policy as well. For example, the Russian Information Security Doctrine calls for information aggression against Russia's geopolitical opponents—the West, the US, and NATO (Darczewska 2014, 33). A study of anti-Belarusian disinformation and propaganda in Russian online media revealed that many posted materials questioned the sovereignty and independence of Belarus (Елисеев 2019). Similarly, fundamental instances of deception and disinformation will also be outlined in the empirical case studies later in this article.

To comprehensively analyze how Russia publicly articulated its military interventions in Georgia and Ukraine, we conducted an exhaustive search and collected all relevant statements posted on the website of the Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations (RMUN) and on the official homepage of the President of Russia (PoR) for the time periods covering the conflict in Georgia and the beginning of the conflicts in Ukraine.² We chose to analyze documents from these two sites because the RMUN is the main Russian diplomatic mission to the United Nations³ and the PoR homepage highlights the most significant statements related to activities of the powerful Russian President (See Appendices A & B). Documents posted on these two prominent websites aim to showcase some of the most pertinent information that would broadcast Russia's narratives to both global and domestic audiences.

For both institutions, we reviewed all statements for the year 2008 about the Georgian conflict, and for years 2014–2016 about the conflict in Ukraine. Next, we selected for further analysis all statements which discussed the nature of the conflicts, Russian rationales for intervention, or made references to international law. The statements from the RMUN include press releases, statements by key Russian leaders, transcripts of remarks and interviews by Russian diplomats in social events and to the media, op-eds published by Russian leaders, and Russian statements in the UNSC and UN General Assembly (UNGA). The statements from the PoR include official statements, speeches, addresses, and transcripts of meetings involving Russian President Dimitri Medvedev during the conflict in Georgia, and President Vladimir Putin during the Ukrainian conflict. For Georgia, we identified 13 relevant RMUN and 11 PoR statements issued during 2008. For Ukraine, we collected 16 RMUN and 10 PoR statements from 2014–2016.⁴ In total, we gathered 24 statements on Georgia

and 26 on Ukraine. Combined, these 50 selected statements comprise an inclusive dataset of pertinent statements issued by the RMUN and PoR on these interventions.

Thus, our approach differs from the extant qualitative studies of the Russian position on the Georgian and Ukrainian conflicts. While such studies tend to focus their analyses on a selected number of documents or statements by political leaders, our research aims to analyze a definitive dataset of all relevant statements found on these two sites. In this way, we hope both to avoid criticism that qualitative researchers find what they want to find by picking and choosing their evidence eclectically, and to provide a definitive, comprehensive assessment of Russia's positions through time. In our analysis, we read through the relevant statements to identify first how the strategic narratives are formed by examining how the conflicts are portrayed, and second how Russian involvement is outlined and justified, as well as the proposed solutions to the conflicts. The formation of strategic narratives is commonly assessed by analyzing select presidential speeches and interviews (Miskimmon et al. 2017), and our research intends to do this systematically by looking at diplomatic postings on these two websites. In the sections that follow, this article will provide a brief overview of Russian involvement in Georgia and Ukraine, then comparatively analyze the Russian Federation's rhetoric.

The Russo-Georgian War (August 7–16, 2008) and Its Aftermath

The Russo-Georgian War of 2008 involved Georgia, Russia, and the self-proclaimed republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Tensions in this region date back to April 1991, when Georgia separated from the Soviet Union. Soon thereafter, civil war broke out between Georgian nationalists and pro-Russian separatists when South Ossetia declared its independence from Georgia, leaving it under the de-facto control of a Russian-backed but internationally unrecognized government. After another separatist war, the Abkhazian forces emerged as victorious and agreed to a May 1994 ceasefire that resulted in the deployment of Russian peacekeeping forces to the region.

In the early 2000s, relations between Russia and Georgia began to deteriorate yet again. First, in September 2002, Putin sent a highly-controversial letter to the UN Secretary General, UNSC, and the members of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) accusing Georgia of harboring separatist Chechen militants. The situation escalated further after Georgia's "Rose Revolution" of November 2003, when Mikheil Saakashvili was elected president on a pro-Western platform that stressed European and Euro-Atlantic integration as its main priority. Furthermore, on November 12, 2006, an unrecognized referendum was held in South Ossetia in which an overwhelming 99% of people demanded independence from Georgia (Radio Free Europe 2006).

The conflict in Georgia reached a full diplomatic crisis by April 20, 2008, when a Russian Mig-29 shot down an unarmed Georgian Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) over the coast of Abkhazia (Cornell & Starr 2009, 145). Russia denied its involvement outright, but sent more troops to the region under the guise of peacekeeping to counter a possible Georgian attack (Cornell & Starr 2009, 133). The final escalation occurred at the beginning of August, when South Ossetian separatists began shelling Georgian villages.

The armed conflict began on August 7, when the Georgian Army launched a late-night attack on the South Ossetian separatist de-facto capital, Tskhinvali. In the offensive that followed—code-named "Operation Clear Field"—Georgian forces advanced through Ossetia, taking control over Tskhinvali. With the stated aim of peace enforcement, Russia launched a large-scale military invasion in Georgia on August 9. The situation changed rapidly by the afternoon, when Russian troops forced the outnumbered and poorly-trained Georgian military to flee from Tskhinvali. By one report, over 12,000 Russian Troops—along with hundreds of tanks, armored battle vehicles, multiple rocket launchers, and heavy guns—were involved in operations in South Ossetia (Cornell & Starr 2009, 171). Russian and South Ossetian separatist forces continued to battle the Georgians in the region for several days, advancing towards the city of Gori.

Before the Russo-Georgian War could escalate any further, French President Nicolas Sarkozy negotiated a ceasefire agreement between Russia and Georgia on August 12. The agreed-upon proposal called for (1) no recourse to the use of force; (2) definitive cessation of hostilities; (3) free access to humanitarian aid and the return of refugees; (4) the withdrawal of Georgian military forces to their normal bases of encampment; and (5) the withdrawal of Russian military forces to the lines prior to the start of the hostilities. The conflict officially ended on August 16, when the agreement came into force.

The direct costs of the war in terms of human casualties and material damage are difficult to estimate. The European Union's Tagliavini report approximates that Georgia suffered the loss of 170 military servicemen, 14 policemen, and 228 civilians, while 1,747 civilians were injured. There were reportedly 67 Russian military officials killed and 283 wounded. As for South Ossetia, there were 365 casualties between separatist combat forces and civilians (Gahtron 2010, 181). Another account finds that approximately 750 people were killed and thousands more were wounded during the Russo-Georgian War (Stefes & George 2010, 170).

Russian Rhetoric on Intervention in Georgia

Russia's strategic narrative on the situation in Georgia (2008) focused on outlining the alleged international law violations and atrocities committed by the Georgian government towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia while emphasizing the legality of its own intervention. Russia justified self-involvement with the stated need to stop Georgian aggression, to save lives, and to provide humanitarian relief. After the military operations ceased, Russia stated that its actions led to a creation of a better regional world order. Russia particularly used deception and disinformation when purposefully exaggerating the humanitarian disaster on the ground—in other words, by refereeing to it as a genocide—and by calling for protection of lives when it generally meant the protection of Russian nationals.

Paradoxically, although Russia was generally skeptical of the R2P doctrine prior to the 2008 Russia-Georgia war, it did make appeals to R2P when intervening in Georgia (Snetkov and Langeigne 2014, 124). The Kremlin accused Georgia of “aggression against South Ossetia,” as well as the “genocide of thousands of its people”—claims that were later deemed gross exaggerations (Roudik 2008). Still, a major apparent reason for the intervention in South Ossetia and Abkhazia was likely the so-called “Medvedev Doctrine,” which declared that Russia has a privileged sphere of interest in its ‘Near Abroad,’ and that protecting the rights and dignity of Russian citizens abroad would be a major priority of Russian foreign policy and would warrant a military intervention if necessary (Larrabee 2010, 37; Green 2010). For years prior to 2008, Russia had been issuing passports to South Ossetians and Abkhazians without the consent of the Georgian government (Stefes & George 2010, 164). The Kremlin was quick to capitalize on escalated tensions in these regions, claiming that numerous Russian citizens were living in the turbulent areas. It is difficult not to agree with Allison (2009), who concludes that Russia's involvement in Georgia was driven by self-interest. Even in instances when Russia was not able to convincingly justify its intervention in terms of international law, it “still sustain[ed] a legal smokescreen and focus[ed] enough attention on the legitimacy of Georgia's own operation in South Ossetia to deflect international criticism” (192).

Overall, Russia gave six general explanations for its intervention in Georgia: (1) defense of Russian peacekeepers and inhabitants holding Russian passports; (2) humanitarian concerns for South Ossetians; (3) the need to prevent the expansion of United States influence in Georgia; (4) intervention as a response to South Ossetian requests for military assistance; (5) a desire to punish President Mikhail Saakashvili for his perceived criminal behavior; and (6) to demonstrate Russia's regional hegemony (Stefes & George 2010, 164).

In terms of rhetoric evoking principles of international law, both President Medvedev and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov justified unilateral Russian humanitarian intervention (Green 2010, 56). The official Russian position stated that Georgia's military actions in South Ossetia warranted a

Russian peacekeeping response (Allison 2009, 174). At the same time, Russia also claimed the right to use force in Georgia under Article 51 of the UN Charter, because its military actions protected Russian citizens living in South Ossetia and Abkhazia (Allison 2009; Green 2010). Russia therefore effectively called the situation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia a humanitarian crisis warranting military intervention, yet justified its intervention in the conflict predominately through references to self-defense.

An analysis of the statements posted on the Russian Mission to the UN and the President of Russia websites reveals recurrent allegations of international law violations by the Georgian government. In the days leading up to the hostilities, Russia detailed perceived Georgian international law violations. Similarly, during the intervention, Russia insisted that its actions were motivated by humanitarian and self-defense concerns, as well as the desire for a better world order. Specifically, Russian statements focused on the perceived aggression of the Saakashvili regime and accused the government of committing various atrocity crimes. Following this reasoning, the stated humanitarian goals of the Russian intervention were the protection of life, prevention of genocide, and, most notably, the security of Russian citizens and compatriots abroad. Simultaneously, Russia rationalized its intervention under international law through references to self-defense, the need to stop aggression by the Georgian government, and by drawing a parallel between the NATO intervention in Kosovo and the Russian intervention in Georgia. Russia made additional appeals to international law when justifying its recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, stressing the importance of protecting Russian citizens and national interests in the region. The final statements on this conflict asserted that Russian actions had contributed to an emergence of a better world order.

In the months leading up to the commencement of hostilities in August 2008, Russia highlighted the rising tensions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, justified its adherence to international law, and outlined alleged violations of international law by the Georgian government. On April 16, 2008, Russia stressed that it acted within the boundaries of international law when reacting to the escalation of tensions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, while also providing support for the two republics and Russian citizens living there. Russia particularly emphasized the need for “comprehensive defense of the rights, freedoms, and lawful interests of the Russian citizens living in Abkhazia and South Ossetia” (RMUN, April 16, 2008). Russia blamed Georgia’s leadership for the commencement of hostilities and stressed the importance of UNSC Resolution 1808, which extended the mandate of the UN Observer Mission in Georgia and was adopted a day earlier on April 15. On April 29, Russia requested to increase the presence of multilateral peacekeeping forces in Georgia, citing specific “destabilizing measures being taken by the Georgian side,” and outlining perceived Georgian violations of UN recommendations (RMUN, April 29, 2008). Russia baldly asserted that, “under these conditions, the presence of the Russian peacekeepers remains a decisive factor of preventing the escalation of tension” (RMUN, April 29, 2008).

On April 29, Russia issued a lengthy commentary on perceived instances of aggression by the Georgian government’s forces. The commentary mentioned attacks on separatist units and arrests of Russian officials who were in the region as per the Russian-Georgian agreement aiming to facilitate the withdrawal of Russian bases from Georgia. The commentary also asserted that Georgia violated “the generally accepted norms of international law and the existing agreements on the settlements of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict” (RMUN, April 29, 2008). Russia once again made references to UNSC Resolution 1808 and highlighted the important role played by UN and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) peacekeepers. On July 10, Russia issued its final statement prior to the commencement of hostilities, outlining its concern about escalated tensions and noting that “the need arose to take urgent and active measures to prevent bloodshed and keep the situation within legal and peaceful bounds” (RMUN, July 10, 2008).

During the period of active hostilities between Russia and Georgia (August 7–12), Russia once again insisted that its motives for intervention were purely humanitarian and that it was acting in accordance with international law. Russia castigated Georgia for its alleged aggression and spoke of

the importance of protecting civilian life and delivering humanitarian aid. In the words of the Russian Mission, the Georgian-initiated conflict brought “blood and pain to the civilian population of the region. The Russian Federation ... [would] do everything to save women, children and old people, all the citizens of Georgia, Russia, Ukraine and other foreigners who [were] in the region” (RMUN, August 10, 2008). At the same time, Russia claimed that force would only be used for self-defense in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter. On August 8, 2008, President Medvedev emphasized that Russia’s presence in Georgia was “absolutely lawful,” a claim that is repeated in subsequent statements (PoR, 8 August 2008). Medvedev also noted that Georgian troops committed “an act of aggression against Russian peacekeepers and the civilian population in South Ossetia” that resulted in the deaths of civilians, women, children, and the elderly—a majority of whom were Russian citizens (PoR, 8 August 2008). All of these statements present two diverging justifications as they allege that the Georgian government created an intolerable humanitarian crisis while also claiming that Russia would only intervene for self-defense under Article 51.

After August 12, when Russia stopped its military advances, and before August 16, when the official ceasefire commenced, Russia outlined how its mission in Georgia was humanitarian in nature and delineated perceived Georgian international law violations. Russia spoke of a need to provide humanitarian aid and blamed the Georgian government for committing atrocity crimes: “the Georgian leadership gave the orders that led to acts of genocide and developed into war crimes, and ethnic cleansings and this cannot remain unanswered” (RMUN, August 10, 2008). Russia also accused Georgia of being noncompliant with the Moscow Agreement ending a previous Georgian-Abkhazian conflict in 1994, and called for greater involvement of multilateral peacekeepers. These sentiments were reiterated on August 13 and 14 when Russia emphasized that its actions were aimed at alleviation of humanitarian crisis and protection of life. According to the Permanent Mission, Russian peacekeepers were “protecting the life, honor and dignity of the multinational populations of [Abkhazia and South Ossetia]” (RMUN, August 12, 2008).

During the immediate aftermath of the conflict following the ceasefire on August 16, Russia continued accusing Georgia of violating international law, asserting that Russia had no choice but to intervene following the alleged atrocity crimes, and calling for a multilateral approach in resolving the conflict by referencing the OSCE involvement. On August 18, President Dmitry Medvedev referred to the Georgian leaders as “political monsters” who were “ready to kill the innocent and the defenseless in pursuit of their own interests” (PoR, August 18, 2008b). In another statement that same day, Dmitry Medvedev contrasted the barbaric, uncivilized actions of Georgia with Russia, a “peace-loving country” that nonetheless was forced to give a “crushing response” to Georgia (PoR, August 18, 2008a). On the following day, Russian MFA spokesman Andrei Nestrenko called for the implementation of the six OSCE principles for resolving the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict (RMUN, August 19, 2008).

On August 26, in two separate statements, Russia reiterated that Georgia committed grave human rights violations, while assuring that Russia’s actions were conducted within the parameters of international law. These statements made references to previous agreements on the status of Abkhazia, and asserted that Georgia was “in violation of all the UN agreements and decisions,” both regarding the region as well as international law on human rights and Georgian obligations under the UN Charter (RMUN, August 26, 2008a; RMUN, August 26, 2008b; PoR August 26, 2008). The statements conclude with the bold assertion that Russian recognition of the independence of both Abkhazia and South Ossetia was grounded in international law—namely, “the Charter of the United Nations, the Helsinki Final Act, and other fundamental international instruments, including the 1970 Declaration on Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations among States” (RMUN, August 26, 2008a). Later, a September 17 statement identified the 1975 Helsinki Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe as another source of international law that justified Russia’s recognition of the two breakaway republics. Overall, there is substantial evidence that Russian leaders made noticeable efforts to identify and reference sources

of international law when denouncing alleged Georgian violations, and when qualifying the purpose of Russian actions.

Russia continued to utilize rhetoric reminiscent of R2P language while officially justifying its military intervention under Article 51 as a response to Georgian aggression. On September 6, Medvedev reiterated that “Russia will not allow anyone to compromise the lives and dignity of its citizens [in South Ossetia]” and that “Russia was obliged to save lives” (PoR, September 6, 2008). On September 18, Sergey Lavrov, Minister of Foreign Affairs, reiterated that the intervention in Georgia was justified as self-defense under Article 51 and that Russian peacekeeping efforts were aimed at ensuring the “survival of our fraternal peoples” (RMUN, September 18, 2008). These claims were further developed by Medvedev, who used three legal justifications for intervening in Georgia: (1) Article 51 of the United Nations Charter; (2) an Act of the General Assembly in 1974 that defined “acts of aggression;” and (3) Article 2 of Russia’s own Constitution which stipulated that the “head of state is responsible for protecting human rights and civil liberties” (PoR, September 18, 2008; PoR, September 19, 2008). Medvedev also drew an analogy to Kosovo and implied that the two breakaway republics should be similarly recognized as independent countries.

As in previous statements, Russian actions were legitimized through claims referencing the need to protect life—a common theme of R2P. Furthermore, Lavrov called for more multilateral peacekeeping activities, stating that Russia sought a peaceful resolution to the Georgian conflict in accordance with international law. On September 18, Medvedev once again argued that Russian peacekeeping actions in South Ossetia were aimed at stopping perceived Georgian aggression (PoR, September 18, 2008). Over the next few weeks, Medvedev echoed most of the points previously made about the nature of the conflict in Georgia and about Russian motivations in lengthy remarks with representatives of public organizations on September 19 and in a speech on September 30, and Lavrov made similar remarks on September 20 (PoR, September 18, 2008; PoR, September 19, 2008; PoR, September 30, 2008; RMUN, 20 September 2008).

Finally, Medvedev continued to outline future implications of the Georgia situation in his statements on October 1 and October 8 when he insisted that unilateral Russian intervention had contributed to an emergence of a better world order (PoR, October 1, 2008; PoR, October 8, 2008). According to the Russian President, Georgia’s actions revealed something deeply flawed in the international world order: “a world where peacekeepers are shot at, where the regular army carries out ethnic cleansing, where criminal regimes can obtain protection and information about the real state of affairs is constantly blocked is an absolutely unreliable world” (PoR, October 1, 2008). However, this “unreliable world” had shown improvement since August, largely because of the Russian intervention in Georgia: “We have witnessed the collapse of the old world order and we are now seeing the emergence of a new and we hope safer and fairer world order” (PoR, October 8, 2008). At the same time, Medvedev spoke of the importance of protecting Russian citizens and Russian national interests in South Ossetia.

In sum, Russia expended much effort describing the situation in Georgia as a grave humanitarian crisis and detailing its own involvement through the need to protect life and stop atrocities—common language of R2P—while it officially justified the intervention under Article 51 of the UN Charter, a strikingly different rationale. However, Russian deception and disinformation was countered by the international community as there was no reliable evidence of imminent or committed atrocity crimes (Allison 2009, 184–85; Badescu & Weiss 2010; Green 2010). In fact, after initially claiming that there were casualties in the thousands, Russia later revised the estimated death toll on the Russian and South Ossetian side to 150 casualties (Green 2010, 57). While Russia conducted the intervention unilaterally and did not call for UNSC authorization, it also endorsed the implementation of the OSCE principles for conflict resolution afterwards—signaling a limited embrace of a multilateral approach. Although Russia was quick to articulate the importance of protecting human life, the elegant façade was effortlessly lifted as the government repeatedly and predominately emphasized the protection of Russian-speakers and “compatriots” in Georgia.

Early Russian Military Involvement in Ukraine (February 2014–2016)

Almost six years after its military incursion in Georgia, Russia began to make several advances into Ukrainian territory. In late 2013, long-standing tensions between those seeking deeper ties with the European Union and those seeking closer relations with Russia reached a climax when Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich abandoned an agreement on closer trade ties with the European Union, instead seeking closer cooperation with the Kremlin. As a result, widespread protests and violence broke out across Ukraine, with rioters occupying regional government offices in Kyiv. On February 20, Kyiv saw its worst day of violence in over seventy years, with at least 88 people killed and 622 injured in a span of 48 hours (Traynor, 2014).

At this time, unidentified “little green men” in combat uniforms began to take control of strategic positions and infrastructure within the Crimean Peninsula, particularly in the capital city of Simferopol. Although President Vladimir Putin admitted that there were “several dozen C-300 units, several dozen air-defense missile systems, 22,000 service members and a lot more” troops in the region, he outwardly denied that they were sent by the Kremlin (Flikke 2015, 12). In his now-infamous comment, while commenting on the situation in Crimea, Putin claimed that he was unaware of the troops’ nationality: “Why don’t you take a look at the post-Soviet states? There are many uniforms there that are similar. You can go to a store and buy any kind of uniform” (Wood et al. 2016, 114). However, on March 1, the Russian parliament formally authorized Putin’s request to use force in Ukraine to “protect Russian interests” in the region and deliver “humanitarian aid” to nationals and native speakers—referred to as “fraternal people and a fraternal country” (Wood et al. 2016, 111).

On March 16, Crimea held a highly-disputed secession referendum that gained over 96.7% popular support for a union with Russia on a suspiciously high turnout of 83.1% (Wilson 2014, 113). According to observers around the world, this vote did not meet international standards for a free and fair election. More importantly, over 25,000 Russian troops were stationed in Crimea at the time, which led to criticism of the secession vote as a referendum held at gunpoint. Crimea was officially absorbed into the Russian Federation on March 18, and subsequent pro-Russian demonstrations in the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine escalated into a full-blown conflict between the Ukrainian government and separatist coalitions of the self-declared Donetsk and Lugansk People’s Republics. Protesters occupied government buildings and demanded an independence referendum for a “New Russia.” On May 11, unrecognized referendums were held in Donetsk and Luhansk in which separatist leaders asserted that 89% and 96% voted “yes” for independence on a 75% turnout (Wilson 2014, 132).

Amidst this turmoil, Petro Poroshenko, a known pro-westerner, was chosen to replace Yanukovich as President of Ukraine in a special election on May 25, 2014. Pro-Russian forces responded violently, escalating their presence in eastern Ukraine throughout the summer of 2014. Torture and kidnappings became commonplace, and the UN Human Rights Monitoring Commission estimated that 222 cases of abduction had occurred between April and June (Wilson 2014, 135). In August, Russian combat troops and military vehicles were reported to have crossed the border in several locations of the Donetsk Oblast under the guise of “humanitarian convoys.” By the end of the month, Russia amassed enough personnel in the region—at least 1,000 by a NATO estimate—to support a full-scale counteroffensive (Wilson 2014, 142).

Ukrainian forces were defeated by early September, but Russian military activity in Eastern Ukraine continued. Eventually, the Minsk Agreement of September 5 was signed as a temporary cease-fire granting limited self-rule for three years to the Donbas region. A buffer zone was created to separate government troops and pro-Russian fighters in an attempted de-escalation of the conflict. Nevertheless, movements of troops and heavy equipment from Russia into East Ukraine was still reported in November 2014 (OSCE 2014).

An overwhelming majority of global actors and international organizations including Amnesty International condemned Russia for its actions in post-revolutionary Ukraine. In a December 2015

press conference, Putin belatedly admitted for the first time that Russian military intelligence officers were indeed operating in Ukraine: “We never said there were not people there who carried out certain tasks including in the military sphere” (Walker 2015). Early on, Putin lied outright about Russian presence in Crimea to annex the peninsula (Toal 2017, 221), and more than 3,300 people perished in the conflict as of 2019.

Russian Rhetoric on Intervention in Ukraine

The Russian strategic narrative on Crimea and East Ukraine (2014–16) initially focused on delegitimizing the Ukrainian government by castigating it for the alleged atrocity crimes and constantly drawing linkages between fascism and anti-Russian groups in Ukraine. Early on, Russia deceived and fully denied its own involvement in East Ukraine, yet called for a need to protect civilians and provide humanitarian aid. Russia justified its annexation of Crimea through appeals to self-determination of the Crimean people, who allegedly sought to join Russia. Later in the conflict (2015–16), Russia called for multilateral solutions to resolve the conflict in East Ukraine, and celebrated the annexation of Crimea. Russia used deception and disinformation when camouflaging the Crimean annexation as a case of self-determination, when equating anti-Russian groups with fascism, and when purposefully exaggerating the seriousness of the humanitarian situation on the ground.

Similar to Russian rhetoric used during the 2008 intervention in Georgia, Russian rhetoric heavily described the situation in Ukraine as a humanitarian crisis warranting intervention. Coicaud (2015, 177–78) asserts that Putin manipulated R2P norms to advance his own national interests and influence abroad, employing R2P to justify Russia’s involvement in Ukraine. For example, Russia utilized references to R2P during the annexation of Crimea, claiming that “the authorities in Kyiv were preparing to commit mass atrocities against the Russian-speaking population in South-eastern regions” (Snetkov and Lanteigne 2014, 124). Similarly, during a press conference on March 4, 2014, without making any direct references, Putin invoked the R2P when he claimed that Russia’s humanitarian mission was to protect Russian-speaking populations in Ukraine against violence from the government in Kyiv (Coicaud 2015, 175–76). The same is true of when Putin drew parallels between the 1999 NATO intervention in Kosovo and the 2014 Russian intervention in Crimea (Coicaud 2015, 147). Additionally, Russian authorities consistently linked anti-Russian groups in Ukraine to fascism—which was widely accepted within the Russian Federation (Gaufman 2017).

At the same time, Russia vehemently denied that it violated international law by annexing Crimea and drew parallels to Kosovo, claiming that the allegedly oppressed people of Crimea rose up in the name of self-determination and decided to join the Russian Federation. Allison (2014) observes that Russia has ardently defended its involvement in the former Soviet Republic on the following grounds: (1) Russia needed to protect Ukraine’s ethnic Russian minority from harm in both Crimea and Eastern Ukraine; (2) Russia responded to an invitation to intervene by the democratically-elected government of Victor Yanukovich;⁵ and (3) Russia’s intervention in Ukraine was comparable to the Kosovo intervention (1259). Notably, Russia called for a multilateral approach and the implementation of negotiated agreements in resolving the tensions in the Donbas. Putin also argued that Russian forces in Crimea and the Black Sea Fleet faced a direct security threat, due to the upheaval in Ukraine in 2014, and could be confronted with a potential refugee crisis if Russia did not intervene (Allison 2014, 1263–4).

A nuanced analysis of the Russian statements describing the Ukrainian conflict and providing justifications for the Russian intervention reveals that Russia largely focused on outlining the perceived humanitarian crisis and atrocity crimes being committed in Ukraine. Early in the conflict, Russia denied its military presence in Ukraine⁶ and repeatedly drew connections between anti-Russian forces in Ukraine and fascism. Russia articulated the need to protect journalists, compatriots, and vulnerable Russians living abroad, as well as the need to address the refugee flow

into Russia and to provide humanitarian assistance. Later statements (2015–2016) emphasized multilateral solutions such as implementing the Minsk Agreements. While Russia sought to present to the world the seriousness of the perceived humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, in contrast to the Georgian conflict, Russia did not use references to R2P to justify military involvement. Even during the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, Russia explained its actions through appeals to the self-determination of the Crimeans—who allegedly voluntarily sought to join the Russian Federation. The final statements celebrated the annexation of Crimea as a historic and just affair.

When anti-government protests erupted in Kyiv during the early months of 2014, Russian rhetoric focused heavily on describing atrocities taking place in Ukraine and the alleged rebirth of fascism. On February 20, 2014, Russia's Ambassador to the UN, Vitaly Churkin, referred to anti-government activists as "fascist inspired radicals" in an interview with CNN (RMUN, February 20, 2014). Churkin asserted that there is "a large segment of opposition protest [against the Yanukovich government] among the population," and surmised that fascists had taken over the protests. Churkin outlined attacks on the government's security forces, sniper fire, and Molotov cocktails. He further noted that "we need for Ukraine to be stable and to go through political process" (RMUN, February 20, 2014). On March 6, Churkin recalled the Ukrainian-Nazi collaborations during World War II and asserted that fascist sympathizers "are openly marching these days in Ukraine, displaying ... fascist insignia, and are wielding considerable political power in Kyiv" (RMUN, March 6, 2014). Similar sentiments about the rise of fascism in Ukraine were expressed in Churkin's statement on May 2 (RMUN, May 2, 2014).

After former Ukrainian president Yanukovich fled Ukraine for Russia on February 22, Churkin mentioned that "we [Russia] do not recognize the current Ukrainian authorities as legitimate," and stressed that journalists were being beaten in downtown Kyiv amidst a barrage of sniper fire (RMUN, March 6, 2014). Churkin also denied that there were Russian soldiers in Crimea. Furthermore, Yanukovich issued a letter following his departure for Russia on February 28, allegedly making a request for Russia to use its armed forces to "establish legitimacy, peace, law and order and stability" in Ukraine (UN 2014), which has led some to assert that Russia's actions were justified as intervention by invitation (Allison 2014). However, this rationale did not appear in the statements obtained through an exhaustive search and reviewed for this analysis. Thus, by drawing connections between fascism and anti-Yanukovich forces, Russia attempted to delegitimize successive Ukrainian governments.

In a lengthy speech in front of a joint legislative session two days after the March 16 referendum during which Crimea joined Russia, Putin expressed that "Crimea has always been an inseparable part of Russia," and stressed the important role of the naval base in Sevastopol to Russia (PoR, March 18, 2014; also see PoR, May 9, 2014). Much of Putin's statement, however, was focused on defending Russian actions in Crimea and denying Russian involvement. He argued that Russian Armed Forces "... never entered Crimea; they were there already in line with an international agreement. True, we did enhance our forces there; however ... we did not exceed the personnel limit of our Armed Forces in Crimea, which is set at 25,000, because there was no need to do so" (PoR, March 18, 2014). Putin rejected the claim that Russia acted as an aggressor in Crimea: "They keep talking of some Russian intervention in Crimea, some sort of aggression. This is strange to hear. I cannot recall a single case in history of an intervention without a single shot being fired and with no human casualties" (PoR, March 18, 2014). Through these public appeals, Russia attempted to claim that it had not violated international law and that it was not involved with the ensuing turmoil in Crimea and Ukraine.

In qualifying the annexation of Crimea with international law jargon, Russia drew upon the Kosovo precedent, referenced the right to self-determination, and stressed the protection of human rights. Putin asserted that the separation of Kosovo from Serbia set a precedent for the separation of Crimea from Ukraine, and referenced a July 22, 2010 International Court of Justice ruling that "general international law contains no prohibition on declarations of independence" (PoR, March 18, 2014). Putin also dismissed the counterargument that Kosovo was distinguishable because of

notable casualties. He stated that “if the Crimean self-defense units had not taken the situation under control, there could have been casualties as well,” and criticized Western states as hypocrites for violating international law during military operations in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq (PoR, March 18, 2014).

On March 28, Ambassador Churkin added that the Article 1 of the UN Charter is about self-determination, which is exactly what the people of Crimea sought (RMUN, March 28, 2014). In a subsequent statement, Putin explained the importance of protecting compatriots: “In Ukraine, as you may have seen, at threat were our compatriots, Russian people and people of other nationalities, their language, history, culture and legal rights, guaranteed, by the way, by European conventions” (PoR, July 1, 2014). In addition, Putin offered a pragmatic reason for Russia’s interest in Crimea: “we could not allow our access to the Black Sea to be significantly limited” (PoR, July 1, 2014). Overall, the key Russian argument justifying the annexation remained grounded in international law and self-determination by stating that the allegedly oppressed people living in the Crimean region requested the intervention themselves.

Following the annexation of Crimea but prior to the commencement of hostilities in the Donbas in late May and early June, Churkin described the depth of the humanitarian crisis in the region and endorsed international, multilateral solutions (RMUN, May 21, 2014; RMUN, June 2, 2014; RMUN, June 24, 2014). Churkin noted the possibility that chemical weapons were used in Odessa and called for an OPCW investigation. He supported resolving the conflict in the Donbas according to the principles of the Geneva Statement of April 17, and emphasized nonviolence, disarmament, and the proposed OSCE “Road Map” for peace in the Donbas. Churkin later referenced the new Joint Berlin Declaration of July 2 on sustainable ceasefire (RMUN, July 11, 2014; RMUN, July 24, 2014). Russia also expressed its objections to the criticism received from other countries and to the OHCHR report on human rights in East Ukraine, which Russia perceived as biased in favor of the Ukrainian government.

Meanwhile, much of the Russian rhetoric throughout the conflict focused on the alleged atrocities committed by the Ukrainian government and echoed R2P language. Churkin asserted that Ukrainian forces had committed war crimes by targeting “the most vulnerable populations—old-age retirees, persons with disabilities” and shared his apprehension about the rising numbers of refugees to Russia (RMUN, June 16, 2014). Particularly, the alleged violence against journalists was repeatedly denounced in several public statements from Churkin, who expressed concerns about assaults, kidnappings, torture, and killings of journalists (RMUN, May 21, 2014; RMUN, June 16, 2014; RMUN, June 17, 2014; RMUN, June 24, 2014). Nevertheless, one year later, Churkin vetoed a Security Council resolution condemning the Srebrenica massacre as an act of genocide, calling it “not constructive, confrontational and politically motivated” (*The Guardian* 2015).

As the fighting intensified in the Donbas in late August and early September 2014, Putin called for “Ukrainian authorities to immediately stop military actions, cease fire, sit down at the negotiating table with Donbas representatives and resolve all the accumulated problems exclusively via peaceful means” (PoR, August 29, 2014). Putin expressed a similar sentiment on September 3 (right before the September 5 ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine), when he requested excluding military aircrafts from civilian areas and opening humanitarian corridors for refugees (PoR, September 3, 2014). In his speech to the UN General Assembly on September 27, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov suggested implementing the ceasefire according to the agreement reached between Poroshenko and Putin, and moreover recommended that the OSCE monitor the peace process (RMUN, September 27, 2014). These statements called for a bilateral cessation of hostilities between the Kyiv government and the Donbas separatists, while welcoming multilateral involvement in this process. Interestingly, no notable references to conflicts in Ukraine can be found in Russian rhetoric for some six months between the end of September 2014 and mid-March 2015.

In 2015, Russia once again stressed the importance of protecting compatriots in Crimea. In a March 2015 concert celebrating Crimea and Sevastopol’s reunification with Russia, Putin reiterated

the importance of providing support to “the millions of Russian people, millions of compatriots who needed our help” in Crimea (PoR, March 18, 2015). In the 70th session of the UN General Assembly in September 2015, Putin blamed Western powers for the escalation of conflicts in Ukraine directly. As Putin described it, a “logic of confrontation” sparked a “major geopolitical crisis” in Ukraine “where the people’s widespread frustration with the government was used for instigating a coup d’état from abroad” (PoR, September 28, 2015). In the World Congress of Compatriots, Putin lauded the reunification of Crimea and Sevastopol with Russia as a “historic event” (PoR, November 5, 2015).

In 2016, there were very few notable Russian references to the conflicts in Ukraine beyond celebrating the annexation of Crimea and calling for the implementation of international agreements aiming to stop fighting in the Donbas. Putin reiterated the historical significance of the event on the second anniversary following reunification in March 2016: “It is no exaggeration to say that millions of people looked forward to and desired this historical justice. It took place following the people of Crimea and Sevastopol’s free expression of their will in a referendum two years ago” (PoR, March 18, 2016). Putin also called for the implementation of the Minsk Agreements of February 12, 2015 (PoR, September 28, 2015; PoR October 20, 2016)—a statement reiterated by Russian representatives to the UN on several occasions in 2016 (RMUN, January 19, 2016; RMUN, April 28, 2016; RMUN, August 11, 2016). Throughout 2016, Russia called for a permanent OSCE presence in the region and insisted that Crimean annexation would never be revisited (RMUN, April 28, 2016; RMUN, August 11, 2016).

Overall, Russia oftentimes colorfully portrayed the situation in Crimea and the Donbas as instances of grave human rights crises, regularly invoking the language of R2P. It used deception and disinformation to portray tensions in Ukraine as representing a grave humanitarian crisis while outright denying its own involvement in East Ukraine. Nevertheless, there exists a near consensus among experts that the situation in Ukraine did not meet the conditions for R2P intervention because—as in the Georgia intervention—there was no evidence of imminent genocide or similar atrocity crimes. In an apparent attempt to delegitimize post-Yanukovich Ukrainian leaders, Russia alleged that fascism was taking root in Ukraine among anti-Russian protesters and spoke about the need to protect journalists that were being targeted.

However, unlike in Georgia, Russia did not attempt to publicly justify the presence of its own troops in Ukraine. Instead, Russian leaders made myriad references to requests for self-determination from Crimeans to justify the annexation, drew parallels to Kosovo, and largely avoided discussing involvement in the Donbas at all. Furthermore, while some have pointed to Russian legitimization of intervention by invitation of the former president Yanukovich, references to this invitation did not appear prominently in the analyzed statements. This suggests that it may be the case that language utilized in strategic narratives, and aimed at persuading broader audiences both abroad and at home, may be slightly different than Russian language used in diplomatic venues. Although Russian rhetoric regarding Ukraine never called for an UNSC authorization, it did endorse a multilateral approach to solving the conflict in the Donbas. Finally, while Russia commonly discussed perceived transgressions against all people in Ukraine (as it did in Georgia), it was particularly focused on articulating the importance of the protection of compatriots and journalists—along with addressing fears of large refugee flows from Ukraine to Russia.

Conclusion

While emphasizing the principle of sovereign responsibility and non-intervention in Kosovo, Russian strategic narratives were diametrically opposed on Georgia and Ukraine, where its military involvement could enable it to acquire more influence and/or territory. Although Russia provided slightly different reasoning for the legality of the interventions in Georgia and Ukraine, the outcomes were strikingly similar: Russia intervened militarily in support of separatists while describing the situation as a grave humanitarian crisis. For the most part, Russia utilized R2P

language to describe the perceived humanitarian crises in these two conflicts as opposed to choosing other framing, or stretched R2P concepts, as in using the language referencing the need to defend compatriots or “save lives” in South Ossetia. Moreover, looking at Russian strategic narratives aimed at audiences both at home and abroad allows examination of the rhetoric more broadly, rather than being limited to the specific language used in specialized diplomatic settings. For example, in contrast to Russia’s more legal rhetoric, delegitimization of the perceived adversary features rather prominently in Russian strategic narratives referencing the rise of fascism and targeting of journalists in Ukraine. While generally rejected in the West, such narratives have been commonly internalized in Russia (Gaufman 2017).

It is important to highlight Russia’s use of deception and disinformation in strategic narratives. While Russia claimed that it intervened in both conflicts for humanitarian purposes to protect certain peoples, the level of violence and casualties on the ground—though tragic—cannot be classified as grave human rights violations, mass killings, disappearances, or torture. Previous studies on propaganda and deception suggest that in order to successfully counter them, it is important to understand how states develop disinformation strategies and how they use them (Romerstein 2001). During the Cold War, Soviet propaganda, when it was identified as such, could then be effectively countered by the politicians in the West. A similar approach could be effective at countering propaganda in current Russian strategic narratives and ensuring that they are not reported as objective facts in the media globally. In fact, it may be the case that because of generally successful Western repudiation of the Russian frame for intervention in Georgia under the guises of R2P, Russia did not seek to publicly justify its military involvement in Ukraine through referencing R2P.

Furthermore, while in the past Russia (along with China) were the two UNSC members who rather consistently opposed attempts to intervene in sovereign states for the purposes of protecting life, the existence of a humanitarian crisis as a cause for intervention featured prominently in Russian rhetoric on Georgia. Perhaps, consistent with its prior support for non-intervention in sovereign states, in both cases Russian rhetoric heavily focused on delegitimization of the national governments by outlining their alleged international law violations and atrocity crimes committed—as well as by drawing parallels between the Ukrainian government and fascism (see Kuhrt 2014). In some statements, Russia even claimed that it no longer saw these governments as legitimate, an assertion that was used to further support claims that Russian military actions should be seen as legitimate. At the same time, references to its own self-defense under Article 51 also featured prominently in Russian justifications for the Georgia intervention. In Ukraine, Russia initially denied it had intervened in Crimea, later claiming that the occupation of Crimea was done in reaction to requests for self-determination by the people living there who desired and requested to break away from Ukraine and join Russia. Furthermore, Russian rhetoric generally avoided making any references to its involvement in Donbas altogether. Overall, Russia attempted not to steer too far away from its traditional support for state sovereignty by delegitimizing Georgian and Ukrainian governments and partially justifying interventions: in Georgia with references to self-defense, and in Ukraine with references to the self-determination of Crimeans.

Russia supported only limited multilateralism in resolving crises in Georgia and Ukraine. In both countries, Russia’s military intervention was conducted unilaterally and without a UNSC authorization. This challenges the common understanding that virtually every legitimate military humanitarian intervention since the 1971 Indian intervention in East Pakistan was conducted in a multilateral manner, with more than one country contributing the troops. However, Moscow did support greater involvement of the international community in conflict resolution after the main hostilities ended—it called for a greater role of the OSCE in Georgia and for the implementation of the Minsk Agreements to resolve the conflict in Ukraine.

However, the most important Russian contribution to the contemporary understanding of legitimate military humanitarian intervention is placing the protection of compatriots and native Russian speakers at the center of its justifications. The notion of Russian compatriots abroad first arose in the 1990s, but it became more prominently featured in Russian foreign policy from the

2000s on (Ziegler 2016, 352). Importantly, Russian rhetoric consistently emphasized the importance of protection of compatriots and native Russian-speakers, echoing claims made to justify interventions in the pre-R2P era.⁷ For example, during WWII, post-Trianon Hungary tried to occupy areas outside of Hungary where Hungarians constituted a majority; in the 1930s, Germany justified the annexation of Sudetenland by alleging suffering of Germans living there; and in the 1990s, Serbia articulated the need to protect ethnic Serbs living outside of Serbia as a key reason for military involvement in the Yugoslav Wars of Succession.

To conclude, of course we should not take Russia's claims at face value, yet the country's rhetoric has implications for international relations. Russia's notable focus on protecting one homogeneous group—compatriots and Russian-speakers—runs contrary to recent international relations scholarship that emphasizes inclusivity and the need to protect all people regardless of their religious, ethnic, or linguistic affiliations. As a result, the international community should remain vigilant about the fact that Russia could make similar “humanitarian” claims in instances where Russia could believe that such interventions could lead it gaining more influence, such as in the Baltic States, with the sizeable Russian minorities in Estonia and Latvia (Treisman 2016, 47). While the fears of conflict spillover to the Baltics are largely unfounded (Dahl 2018), broader concerns about Russian foreign policy are not.

Acknowledgements. We thank Grant Dawson, Andrei Stsiapanau, Nikolas Rajkovic, Ieva Karpaviciute, Stefan Kroll, Natalia Piscunova, Jessica Boscarino, Elizaveta Gauzman, David Tavern, Lionel Beehner, and the anonymous peer reviewers for their comments on earlier drafts of this manuscript. Versions of this article were presented at the annual conferences of the *Association for the Study of Nationalities*, *International Studies Association*, *European Consortium for Political Research*, *European International Studies Association*, and at the University of Nottingham Ningbo China. The authors would like to thank the following Marist College students for valuable research assistance: Alexandra Miskulin, Patrick Hickey, and Alexandra Cirovic.

Supplementary Material. To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/nps.2020.54>

Disclosures. None.

Notes

- 1 However, many argue that the NATO intervention in Kosovo—which was not authorized by the UN—was an example of a legitimate military humanitarian intervention.
- 2 In our analysis, the different statements will be cited using the acronym RMUN or PoR and the date of statement.
- 3 As well as because the UN Headquarters in NYC focus on issues related to security, which is the focus of this article.
- 4 The analyzed statements date from February 2014 to October 2016, as there were no notable references to Ukraine in the statements issued in November and December 2016.
- 5 However, there are no substantial references to such intervention by invitation to be found on the documents analyzed in this article.
- 6 The presence of Russian troops in Crimea and the Donbas was later acknowledged.
- 7 In the Ukrainian case, there were also consistent references to the need to protect journalists.

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