

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Reclaiming what is ours: Elite continuity and revanchism

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Abstract

What explains the revanchism of (post-)imperial states? This question has renewed salience amid Russia's expanded war against Ukraine in 2022. In this article, we conceptualise revanchism as a foreign policy preference that involves reclaiming territory once controlled. We also advance a new explanation for revanchism that emphasises elite continuity in those states that experience territorial loss. Elite continuity matters because the ruling political class in (post-)imperial states, which was socialised under the old regime, preserves certain beliefs about world politics and the perceived legitimacy of their territorial claims. We show that elite continuity between the Soviet and post-Soviet political leadership in Moscow helps explain Russia's revanchism better than those alternative explanations that we derive from the International Relations literature. To substantiate our argument, we compile a novel dataset to operationalise elite continuity across regimes and use discursive evidence and other indicators of elite attitudes towards the desirability of reclaiming lost territory. We also discuss the applicability of our theory to other cases.

Keywords: Putin; revanchism; Russia; Ukraine; war

Introduction

Why do some (post-)imperial countries reconcile themselves to post-war or post-decolonisation territorial loss, while others do not? This question has renewed salience amid Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 – an action that many observers construed as an effort to resuscitate the imperial authority that Moscow once had over Ukraine. For their part, leaders of the French Third Republic accepted the loss of Alsace and Lorraine following defeat in the Franco-Prussian War. In contrast, during the interwar period, German and Hungarian leaders wished to reassert control over those territories that their countries lost in the treaties that settled the First World War. What explains this variation?

In this article, we analyse revanchism. We conceive revanchism in terms of preferences about political territoriality that, if translated into policy, directly impinge upon the sovereignty of at least one other state. We argue that (post-)imperial states – that is, modern countries that recently had colonies or other extraterritorial possessions – are more likely to be revanchist when their political system exhibits a pronounced continuity in the composition of their political elite despite suffering territorial reduction.¹ After all, those (post-)imperial states that lose territory through

¹See Benjamin E. Goldsmith and Baogang He, 'Letting go without a fight: Decolonization, democracy and war, 1900–94', *Journal of Peace Research*, 45:5 (2008), pp. 587–611.

war or decolonisation might experience a major domestic political crisis during that process. Such tumult could bring about a significant degree of elite discontinuity. However, this upheaval can end with elite continuity where, even after the turnover of specific individuals in key government positions, members of the governing elite retain their privileged status in society. Because these individuals were socialised when the old territorial order prevailed, they carry with them certain beliefs about territory and foreign policy. (Post-)imperial states that feature much elite continuity will display a stronger preference for revanchism than those states that do not.

Of course, we cannot explain whether a (post-)imperial state acts in a revanchist manner with exclusive reference to elite composition. Going about revanchism in practice often means war, an interactive and complex process that varies in form and intensity. We thus abstract away the military balance, which itself can depend on the size of the territory in question or the state controlling that 'lost' territory. Accordingly, when salient, revanchist ideas offer a permissive condition that elites draw on selectively, and possibly inconsistently, to justify aggression.

Our article proceeds as follows. The first section conceptualises revanchism, discusses its significance, and advances our main argument. The second section operationalises our notion of elite continuity. The third section illustrates our argument by discussing contemporary Russia. Using discursive evidence and latent indicators of elite attitudes towards the desirability of reclaiming lost territory, we demonstrate that elite continuity helps account for Russia's revanchism, thereby complementing other possible explanations. Our article engages primarily in theory development, with contemporary Russia constituting a theory-building case study. In the concluding discussion section, we highlight the applicability of our theory to other cases.

Revanchism in the study of International Relations

Though the term 'revanchism' sees wide use in popular discourse, particularly with reference to Russia, International Relations scholars give the term little attention.² Drawn from the French word for revenge (*revanche*), the term referred initially to those French nationalists keen on reversing the loss of Alsace and Lorraine to Germany following defeat in the 1870–1 Franco-Prussian War. With time, revanchism has come to mean not only a desire to overturn current arrangements, but also a desire to restore a status quo that purportedly once existed.

Revanchism is not identical to revisionism or irredentism. Revisionist states are interested in improving their own position, acquiring additional territory, or altering international institutions to extract greater benefits.³ Yet revanchism is primarily concerned with lost territory – specifically, territory once controlled by the (post-)imperial state. Whereas imperialism involves asserting new territorial control, revanchism does not denote an interest in claiming additional territory never previously controlled. Revanchism is reasserting territorial control once had. Finally, irredentist states seek foreign territory based on co-ethnicity – to make members of a common ethnic group living abroad subject to its jurisdictional and sovereign authority by taking the territory where they live.⁴ Co-ethnicity may not necessarily be the revanchist basis for recapturing foreign lands. Our definition of revanchism thus only encompasses states that were metropolises that had exercised jurisdictional and administrative authority over territory now controlled by other sovereign actors.

²See Matthew Sussex, 'From retrenchment to revanchism ... and back again? Russian grand strategy in the Eurasian "heart-land"', in Matthew Sussex and Roger E. Kanet (eds), *Russia, Eurasia and the New Geopolitics of Energy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 19–41; John Herbst, 'Assessing and addressing Russian revanchism', *PRISM*, 6:2 (2016), pp. 164–81; and Yuri Teper, 'Official Russian identity discourse in light of the annexation of Crimea: National or imperial?', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 32:4 (2016), pp. 378–96.

³Randall L. Schweller, 'Bandwagoning for profit: Bringing the revisionist state back in', *International Security*, 19:1 (1994), pp. 72–107. For a critical review of revisionism, see Jonathan M. DiCicco and Victor M. Sanchez, 'Revisionism in International Relations', in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies* (2021), available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.607>.

⁴On irredentism, see Stephen M. Saideman and R. William Ayres, *For Kin or Country: Xenophobia, Nationalism, and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

We cast revanchism as a preference, not a strategy, that concerns the territoriality and the sovereignty of other states.⁵ Strategy may be correlated with military spending and national power, whereas preferences relate to the first-order beliefs of the foreign policy executive. As Andrew Moravcsik writes, 'preferences are by definition causally independent of the strategies of other actors and, therefore, prior to specific interstate political interactions, including external threats, incentives, manipulation of information, or other tactics'.⁶ By casting revanchism as a preference, we concede that it is not a sufficient explanation of why states go to war. We cannot fully explain behaviour. Decisions to wage war reflect many factors, ranging from perceived windows of opportunity to the military balance to anticipated weather patterns. However, because revanchism might be pronounced for a particular set of elites, the existence of these sentiments means that members of the foreign policy executive can instrumentalise them to mobilise other elites for their initiatives abroad. The salience of revanchist ideas provides a permissive condition that elites use selectively, possibly inconsistently, to justify aggression abroad. Revanchism may be either active or latent.⁷ The movement to active revanchism will depend on those contextual factors that shape war-making.

By defining revanchism as a preference regarding territory once controlled, the set of potential revanchists narrows because, with our conceptualisation, they can only be those states whose main predecessors – the previous imperial state – governed directly and formally those territories that are no longer under their sovereign control due to war or some other decolonising event. The universe of cases in which modern (post-)imperial states lose territory and then engage in revanchist actions appears in Appendix I (Table A1). Accordingly, for the sake of analytical feasibility, our proposed theory does not cover every instance of territorial loss suffered by any political organisation.

Elite continuity and post-imperial states

Why might some (post-)imperial states have revanchist preferences and not others? We argue that one oft-ignored explanation for revanchism concerns the political elite and the continuity in its make-up during or in the immediate aftermath of a process of territorial loss. This territorial loss could result from war or some decolonisation process. We define elites as the minority of individuals who occupy leading political positions, wield power, and influence policymaking.⁸ Our unit of analysis is thus the elite class: our theory emphasises that, regardless of whether specific individuals are in government, members of the elite will have similar views on key issues precisely because they have the same pedigree.

Elite continuity matters for four reasons. First, elite continuity enables certain substantive beliefs to endure and to retain salience over their alternatives. Substantive beliefs are the 'norms and value orientations' occupying 'the analytic dimension that lies between deep philosophical beliefs about human nature and more narrow beliefs about what set of policies will maximize short-term interests'. Substantive beliefs 'guide state behavior and shape the agenda from which elites choose specific policies'.⁹ Studies find that politicians' belief systems endure for decades.¹⁰

⁵Kenneth A. Schultz and Henk E. Goemans, 'Aims, claims, and the bargaining model of war', *International Theory*, 11:3 (2019), pp. 344–74.

⁶Andrew Moravcsik, 'Taking preferences seriously: A liberal theory of international politics', *International Organization*, 51:4 (1997), pp. 513–53 (p. 519).

⁷Jeff Carter and Charles Smith, 'A framework for measuring leaders' willingness to use force', *American Political Science Review*, 114:4 (2020), pp. 1352–8.

⁸Harold D. Lasswell, Daniel Lerner, and C. Easton Rothwell, 'The elite concept', in Peter Bachrach (ed.), *Political Elites in a Democracy* (London: Routledge, 2017 [1971]), pp. 13–26.

⁹G. John Ikenberry and Charles Kupchan, 'Socialization and hegemonic power', *International Organization*, 44:3 (1990), pp. 283–315 (p. 289).

¹⁰See, e.g., Donald D. Searing, William G. Jacoby, and Andrew H. Tyner, 'The endurance of politicians' values over four decades: A panel study', *American Political Science Review*, 113:1 (2019), pp. 226–41. Admittedly, the effects of leaders' beliefs

Second, intra-elite socialisation can allow those substantive beliefs to persist across cohorts.¹¹ Elites can act as gatekeepers to political offices and key economic sectors; they can create material incentives for those individuals interested in their own professional advancement to support the substantive beliefs extolled by the elite.¹² Elites can also recalibrate media and educational institutions, thereby imparting more effectively their preferred values to newer cohorts without over-relying on coercion or material incentives. By holding sway over educational institutions where elites receive their schooling and training, especially in their younger, more formative years, older elites can ensure that their beliefs and ideological convictions remain dominant despite profound changes in the geopolitical environment, the political institutions making up their own country, or both. Studies show that intra-elite socialisation during the Cold War sustained US elites' beliefs amid major global changes.¹³ Being raised under communism has influenced popular ideas and perceptions in post-communist countries.¹⁴ By implication, a major discontinuity in the political ruling class likely would indicate a break from the previous regime, with the beliefs associated with that regime losing their privileged status.¹⁵ Amid elite continuity, beliefs are not fixed. They can change over time, but that change will probably be evolutionary and proceed slowly.

A third and related reason is that those elites who are also parents will impart their values and identities to their own children. Those children will be in a more privileged position, so that they are more likely to occupy leadership positions when they are older than those who do not have elite backgrounds.¹⁶ Studies have uncovered significant evidence of intergenerational transmission of political values, if not partisan identities.¹⁷ These findings should be unsurprising: many children spend significant time with their parents, who, through frequent discussions over the years, can socialise their children into adopting similar notions about how the world works. Moreover, children are likely to face the same material circumstances as their parents and so could have similar socio-economic motives for preferring the same ideology as well.¹⁸ All elites eventually grow old and die, but they can preserve their own value systems over time through their children.

Fourth, elite continuity matters because it constrains which leaders can assume power in any given political system. Recall that elites can mould institutions and be their gatekeepers. Moreover, any political system has a selectorate – the ‘set of people in the polity who can take part in choosing a leader’ – and a winning coalition – the ‘quantity of selectors whose support the leader must retain

on outcomes may be non-linear and temporally inconsistent. Robert Jervis, ‘Understanding beliefs’, *Political Psychology*, 27:5 (2006), pp. 641–63 (p. 646).

¹¹Maximilian Terhalle, ‘Revolutionary power and socialization: Explaining the persistence of revolutionary zeal in Iran’s foreign policy’, *Security Studies*, 18:3 (2009), pp. 557–86; and Ilia Nadporozhskii, ‘Influence of elite rotation on authoritarian resilience’, *Democratization*, 30:5 (2023), pp. 794–814.

¹²Amid elite discontinuity, those individuals tied with the previous regime could face incentives to adapt to the beliefs of new elites. Post-communist societies in East Central Europe exhibited such dynamics with former communist officials pursuing Westernising reforms in the 1990s and early 2000s. Cheng Chen, *The Return of Ideology: The Search for Regime Identities in Postcommunist Russia and China* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016).

¹³Shoon Kathleen Murray and Jonathan A. Cowden, ‘The role of “enemy images” and ideology in elite belief systems’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 43:3 (1999), pp. 455–81; and Patrick Porter, ‘Why America’s grand strategy has not changed: Power, habit, and the US foreign policy establishment’, *International Security*, 42:4 (2018), pp. 9–46.

¹⁴Grigore Pop-Eleches and Joshua Tucker, *Communism’s Shadow: Historical Legacies and Contemporary Political Attitudes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

¹⁵Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, ‘The durability of revolutionary regimes’, *Journal of Democracy*, 24:3 (2013), pp. 5–17.

¹⁶Comparative political scientists have uncovered evidence of ‘representational inequality’ in the political institutions of advanced democracies. See Nicholas Carnes and Noam Lupu, ‘The economic backgrounds of politicians’, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 26:1 (2023), pp. 253–70.

¹⁷M. Kent Jennings, Laura Stoker, and Jake Bowers, ‘Politics across generations: Family transmission reexamined’, *The Journal of Politics*, 71:3 (2009), pp. 782–99; Linus Aggeborn and Pär Nyman, ‘Intergenerational transmission of party affiliation within political families’, *Political Behavior*, 43:2 (2021), pp. 813–35; and Linet R. Durmuşoğlu, Sarah L. de Lange, Theresa Kuhn, and Wouter van der Brug, ‘The intergenerational transmission of party preferences in multiparty contexts: Examining parental socialization processes in the Netherlands’, *Political Psychology*, 44:3 (2023), pp. 583–601.

¹⁸Aggeborn and Nyman, ‘Intergenerational transmission’.

to remain in office'.¹⁹ In democracies, winning coalitions are larger, thereby diluting the ability of political elites to shape popular discourse and opinion. In autocracies, the political elite should have relatively more influence. Still, even if a leader has an outsized impact on the decision-making process because the political system is personalistic, that leader still needs the consent and the support of elites to implement policy.²⁰ Individual leaders are important, especially if they have personal characteristics that shape their diplomacy.²¹ However, they are not drawn randomly from society and so may reflect broader elite interests and values.

Elite continuity should thus be associated with revanchism. In those (post-)imperial, territorially reduced states where elites socialised in the previous regime retain power, those elites carry forward their substantive beliefs about their country's international role and constitutional arrangements, how world politics operates, and the relationships that their country should have with other countries. They regress to the previous constitutional order and so see the loss of territorial control to other sovereign actors as a temporary setback that must eventually be remedied. Their experience of territorial loss as a political class may make them prone to feel aggrieved and thus anxious to restore that control.²²

In contrast, states that have experienced a sharper disruption in elite composition relative to their territorially larger predecessor should demonstrate a much weaker penchant for revanchism. Their elites might have very different substantive beliefs about political order. Indeed, these elites may have had leading intellectual and cultural roles in the previously imperial society but were nevertheless political outsiders. They may be more open to alternative norms and ideals than those with a pedigree in the previous imperial regime. Of course, revanchist ideas may still circulate amid elite discontinuity. Extensive political science research highlights how policy concepts can survive major political change.²³ Our position is that policy ideas – particularly those relating to the territorial order – are far more likely to remain salient if the composition of their carriers – the elites – stays relatively intact. Note that we do not assume that all elites will hold the exact same beliefs with equal intensity. Like-minded individuals can still disagree on tactics, after all. Rather, we argue that certain beliefs will dominate among them.

We operationalise revanchism as a preference by considering different pieces of evidence. One relates to whether the elites – our unit of analysis – accept the revised territorial order. Do governing elites conclude some sort of settlement that formalises the losses? Even if a formal settlement exists, do members of the elite – in government or not – accept it as legitimate, or do they hope to repatriate that lost territory? Revanchism, with its clear connotations of revenge, implies a greater willingness to develop and to use military force.²⁴ We thus examine discursive evidence and latent indicators of elite attitudes towards the desirability of reclaiming lost territory. Statements made by members of the elite, especially those published prior to any outwardly aggressive behaviour, can reveal revanchist attitudes towards previously controlled territory (and the peoples living in it). Studies have established a strong, positive correlation between verbal aggressiveness and aggressive

¹⁹James D. Morrow, Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, Randolph M. Siverson, and Alastair Smith, 'Retesting selectorate theory: Separating the effects of W from other elements of democracy', *American Political Science Review*, 102:3 (2008), pp. 393–400 (p. 393).

²⁰Damian Strycharz, 'More than Putin: Managed pluralism in Russia's foreign policy', *International Affairs*, 100:2 (2024), pp. 655–74.

²¹Michael Horowitz and Matthew Fuhrmann, 'Studying leaders and military conflict: Conceptual framework and research agenda', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 62:10 (2018), pp. 2072–86.

²²See Andi Zhou, H.E. Goemans, and Michael Weintraub, 'Loss Framing and Risk-Taking in Territorial Disputes', working paper, 22 March 2024.

²³Valerie Bunce, 'The national idea: Imperial legacies and post-communist pathways in Europe', *East European Politics and Society*, 19:3 (2005), pp. 406–42; and Rachel Epstein, 'When legacies meet policies: NATO and the refashioning of Polish military tradition', *East European Politics and Society*, 20:2 (2006), pp. 254–85.

²⁴Robert Harkavy, 'Defeat, national humiliation, and the revenge motif in international politics', *International Politics*, 37 (2000), pp. 345–68; and Oded Löwenheim and Gadi Heimann, 'Revenge in international politics', *Security Studies*, 17:4 (2008), pp. 685–724.

behaviour at both the individual and group levels.²⁵ Before committing acts of aggression, group leaders often express anger, contempt, and disgust towards their opponent outgroups.²⁶ They generally adopt more polarising, violent rhetoric during wartime than during peacetime.²⁷ In the event of war, these elites may be too set in their own territorial aims that they cannot respond to adverse battlefield information, thereby foreclosing a war-terminating outcome and a negotiated settlement until a major shift in leadership takes place.²⁸

No one factor can determine whether a country that experiences significant territorial change will exhibit elite continuity or not. Instead, as Valerie Bunce observes in her assessment of post-communist transition in East Central Europe, a large host of variables will likely influence the political change that a country might experience.²⁹ These variables can include the maturity and organisation of the political opposition, nation-building tradition,³⁰ the timing of anti-government or nationalist mobilisation, the depth of economic reform, and the historical and sociological constraints on democratisation.³¹ Sometimes turnover in elite composition can take years. For example, monarchists kept power in the early years of the French Third Republic before experiencing elite replacement on the part of those Republicans who had few, if any, ties with the Second Empire.³² Strategic defeat in a major war could prompt a successful revolutionary moment, as in the case of the Tsarist Russia and the pre-Bolshevik Provisional Government. However, revolution might not succeed under similar circumstances. The failure of the German Revolution of 1918–19 allowed many elites to retain privileged access despite the political upheaval that German society experienced in the aftermath of the First World War.³³ In theory, elite continuity and discontinuity could be endogenous to several underlying factors, but we argue that the contingency that often marks regime change and territorial reduction would complicate any effort to model those factors systematically.

The case of contemporary Russia

We illustrate our argument with a theory-building case study of Russia. As the main inheritor of the Soviet Union, it is at least post-imperial.³⁴ Because our goal is to demonstrate the plausibility of the argument, we select on the dependent variable. We proxy elite continuity in Russia by focusing on, first, the share of the individuals in the leading political positions and influence policymaking in the new (post-)imperial state (that is, Russia) who have worked within the power structures of the previous imperial state (that is, the Soviet Union); and, second, the backgrounds

²⁵Robert J. Sternberg, 'A duplex theory of hate: Development and application to terrorism, massacres, and genocide', *Review of General Psychology*, 7:3 (2003), pp. 299–328; and Frank Gardner and Zella Moore, 'Understanding clinical anger and violence: The anger avoidance model', *Behavior Modification*, 32:6 (2008), pp. 897–912.

²⁶Dominic A. Infante and Charles J. Wigley, III, 'Verbal aggressiveness: An interpersonal model and measure', *Communication Monographs*, 53:1 (1986), pp. 61–9.

²⁷John Oddo, 'War legitimization discourse: Representing "us" and "them" in four US presidential addresses', *Discourse & Society*, 2:3 (2011), pp. 287–314; and Jeris Weldon Stice, 'Verbal Aggression in State of the Union Messages during Wartime and Non-Wartime', PhD diss., Florida State University, 1973.

²⁸See Elizabeth A. Stanley and John P. Sawyer, 'The equifinality of war termination: Multiple paths to ending war', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 53:5 (2009), pp. 651–76; and Elizabeth A. Stanley, 'Ending the Korean War: The role of domestic coalition shifts in overcoming obstacles to peace', *International Security*, 3:1 (2009), pp. 42–82.

²⁹Bunce, 'The national idea'.

³⁰Keith Darden and Anna Grzymala-Busse, 'The great divide: Literacy, nationalism, and the communist collapse', *World Politics*, 59:1 (2006), pp. 83–115.

³¹Grigore Pop-Eleches, 'Historical legacies and post-communist regime change', *The Journal of Politics*, 69:4 (2007), pp. 908–26.

³²Stephen Hanson, 'The founding of the French Third Republic', *Comparative Political Studies*, 43:8/9 (2010), pp. 1023–58.

³³Woodruff D. Smith, *The Ideological Origins of Nazi Imperialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 196.

³⁴Anatol Lieven, 'Russian opposition to NATO expansion', *The World Today*, 51:10 (1995), pp. 196–9; and Mark R. Beissinger, 'Soviet empire as "family resemblance"', *Slavic Review*, 65:2 (2006), pp. 294–303. Some would argue that it remains imperial.

of key decision-makers. The more ancient regime elites who remain in power, the more elite continuity.

Many analysts call Russia ‘revanchist’ to describe its aggression towards Ukraine without theorising deeply about that concept.³⁵ Observers highlight revanche as a key motivation for Putin as well as ‘a very extensive ... unseen layer of people’.³⁶ Crucially, Russian leaders have expressed revanchist preferences. The military campaign that Russia launched in 2022 consisted of the attempted conquest of Kyiv, the forcible annexation of Ukrainian territory, and the destruction of Ukrainian cultural patrimony. These efforts indicate active revanchism. However, the revanchist preferences of the Russian elites pre-date the invasion.

Consider the following discursive evidence. In 2005 during his annual address to the Federal Assembly, Russian president Vladimir Putin claimed that ‘the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical disaster of the century’.³⁷ In 2021, he lamented the 1991 break-up of the Soviet Union as ‘the disintegration of historical Russia under the name of the Soviet Union’.³⁸ In his view, Ukraine was a historical part of Russia lost as a result of the Soviet break-up. Tracing Putin’s speeches about Ukraine makes this clear. At the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest, Putin told then-US president George W. Bush that ‘Ukraine is not even a country’. He also claimed at the NATO–Russian council that Ukraine was an artificial state, with ‘seventeen million Russians’ living in southern and eastern Ukraine.³⁹ He similarly described Russians and Ukrainians as ‘one people’ in his March 2014 speech to the Russian Duma announcing the annexation of Crimea.⁴⁰ In July 2021, eight months prior to the full-scale invasion, Putin published an essay arguing that Ukrainians and Russians – as well as Belarusians – are historically one nation, that the present-day Ukrainian state occupies Russian lands, and that Ukrainian national identity is the product of foreign intrigues.⁴¹ In a speech given on 21 February 2022, Putin declared that modern Ukraine was artificially created.⁴² Beyond Putin, deputy chairman of the Security Council – and former president – Dmitri Medvedev in his 2021 essay charged that Ukrainian leaders have no actual national identity.⁴³ Shortly before the full-scale invasion, former presidential advisor Vladislav Surkov wrote an essay that cast Russia’s western – that is, Ukraine’s eastern – borders as illegitimate.⁴⁴ The thread connecting this revanchist rhetoric is that Ukraine is an artifice grafted by foreign enemies onto

³⁵ Sussex, ‘From retrenchment’; Herbst, ‘Assessing’; Andreas Umland, ‘Commentary: Should Washington have pressed Kyiv into a compromise with Moscow?’, *World Affairs*, 185:2 (2022), pp. 319–30; Sergiy Gerasymchuk, ‘Russian war against Ukraine: A window of opportunity for the CEE and Baltic region?’, *Ukraine Analytica*, 27:1 (2022), pp. 36–43; and Taras Kuzio, ‘Imperial nationalism as the driver behind Russia’s invasion of Ukraine’, *Nations and Nationalism*, 29:1 (2023), pp. 30–8.

³⁶ Brian Taylor, *The Code of Putinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 34.

³⁷ Vladimir V. Putin, ‘Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation’, 25 April 2005, Kremlin.ru, available at: <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931>.

³⁸ RFE/RL, ‘Putin laments Soviet breakup as demise of “historical Russia”, amid Ukraine fears’, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (13 December 2021), available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-historical-russia-soviet-breakup-ukraine/31606186.html>.

³⁹ Taras Kuzio, *Russian National Identity and the Russia-Ukraine Crisis* (Berlin: Bundesakademie für Sicherheitspolitik, 2016), p. 3; and Angela Stent, ‘Putin’s Ukrainian endgame and why the West may have a hard time stopping him’, *CNN* (8 March 2014), available at: <https://www.cnn.com/2014/03/03/opinion/stent-putin-ukraine-russia-endgame/index.html>.

⁴⁰ Vladimir V. Putin, ‘Address by the President of the Russian Federation’, 18 March 2014, Kremlin.ru, available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.

⁴¹ Vladimir V. Putin, ‘On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians’, 12 July 2021, available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

⁴² Vladimir V. Putin, ‘Russian President Putin Statement on Ukraine’, *C-Span*, 21 February 2022, available at: <https://www.c-span.org/video/?518097-2/russian-president-putin-recognizes-independence-donetsk-luhansk-ukraines-donbas-region>.

⁴³ Kommersant, ‘Почему бессмысленны контакты с нынешним украинским руководством’ [Why are contacts with the current Ukrainian leadership pointless?], *Kommersant* (10 November 2021), available at: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5028300>.

⁴⁴ Interfax, ‘Сурков заявил, что России тесно в границах “похабного” Брестского мира’ [Surkov said that Russia is cramped within the borders of the “obscene” Brest Peace Treaty], *Interfax* (15 February 2022), available at: <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/822172>.

what has historically been Russian territory (even if under the name of the Soviet Union), and that this territory must be taken back.

We move the literature on Russian revanchism forward by using our case study as a theory-building case. Our selection on the dependent variable allows us to demonstrate what we argue to be a connection between elite continuity and revanchist preferences.⁴⁵ We show that long-standing revanchist ideas, especially regarding Ukraine, were a permissive condition that Russian elites used selectively, even inconsistently, to justify aggression. We do not explain why Russia chose to escalate its war against Ukraine in 2022, let alone attack it in 2014. Nor does our argument mean that other influences on Russian foreign policy behaviour are unimportant. After all, foreign policy outputs often have many inputs. Our goal is modest: we show that scholars have overlooked elite continuity, both as an attribute of the post-Soviet Russian political system and as a key contextual variable for Russian foreign policy. Some explanations of Russian aggression abroad that emphasise NATO enlargement, domestic crisis, or Putin's own operational code make more sense if we incorporate elite continuity.

In showing the persistence of revanchism from President Boris Yeltsin's time into the Putinist present, our argument is not about the tactics and strategies involved in pursuing revanchism. Yeltsin and Putin confronted different international and domestic circumstances that we must abstract away.

Elite continuity in Russian politics

Despite the collapse of the Soviet system, the Soviet ruling class – the *nomenklatura*, which comprised only 1–3 per cent of the Soviet population – survived and retained leading positions under the new regime. The *nomenklatura* system, developed by the Bolsheviks in the 1920s to ensure centralised control over Soviet society, was a list of particularly important positions and offices that required the approval of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) for promotion into them. This list included all significant positions in government and state bodies, as well as top managerial positions in cultural, media, educational, and other spheres, including heads of universities, research institutes, factories, chief engineers, and newspaper editors.⁴⁶ To become a member of the *nomenklatura*, one had to meet a strict selection criteria – have the 'right' background and know the 'right' people – and undergo consistent indoctrination through a system of special educational institutions and programmes.⁴⁷ This indoctrination was further reinforced by a threat of losing *nomenklatura* status, which in turn would mean losing privileges (from special food stores and medical services, cars, and dachas to the ability to travel abroad) unavailable to ordinary Soviet citizens. These incentives helped foster a set of ideological beliefs, ensured the obedience and loyalty to the regime, and made the *nomenklatura* relatively monolithic in nature.⁴⁸

The collapse of the Soviet Union did not eliminate the influence of the *nomenklatura* members in post-Soviet Russia. Many *nomenklatura* elites survived inside the power vertical.⁴⁹ A true rotation of the Russian ruling elite never occurred. Elite renewal was mostly absent in early post-Soviet

⁴⁵See Andrew Bennett and Colin Elman, 'Qualitative research: Recent developments in case study methods', *Annual Review Political Science*, 9 (2006), pp. 461–3.

⁴⁶Thomas Henry Rigby, 'New top elites for old in Russian politics', *British Journal of Political Science*, 29:2 (1999), pp. 323–43 (p. 324); Sharon Werning Rivera, 'Elites in post-communist Russia: A changing of the guard?', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 52:3 (2000), pp. 413–32 (p. 419); and Maria Snegovaya and Kirill Petrov, 'Long Soviet shadows: The *nomenklatura* ties of Putin elites', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 38:4 (2023), pp. 329–48.

⁴⁷Olga Kryshтанovskaya, *Анатомия российской элиты* [Anatomy of the Russian elite] (Moscow: Zakharov, 2005); and Yorem Gorlizki and Oleg Khlevniuk, *Substate Dictatorship: Networks, Loyalty, and Institutional Change in the Soviet Union* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020).

⁴⁸Olga Kryshтанovskaya and Stephen White, 'From Soviet *nomenklatura* to Russian elite', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 48:5 (1996), pp. 711–33 (p. 713). Additional details on the coding of *nomenklatura* membership is offered in the Appendix II.

⁴⁹Kryshтанovskaya and White, 'From Soviet *nomenklatura*', pp. 722, 729.

Russia.⁵⁰ Almost all the officials who served in top foreign policymaking and security bodies had begun their careers in the CPSU, the Soviet government, or both. An overwhelming 80 per cent of Russia's political elites in 1993 were former CPSU members. Elite continuity was pronounced in top ruling circles, especially in the Presidential Administration, government, and regional leadership, where roughly 75–80 per cent of elite members had origins in the Soviet *nomenklatura*.⁵¹ Likewise, much of the Soviet government bureaucracy that handled foreign policy and national security was absorbed almost wholesale into the Russian Federation's new structures.⁵² These proportions contrast greatly to how post-communist transition proceeded elsewhere. Former party members comprised less than a third of the political stratum in Poland and Hungary, 44.3% in Estonia, 66.8% in Latvia, and 47.2% in Lithuania.⁵³ That other countries that had single-party systems exhibited more elite turnover than Russia suggests that the nature of the previous political system does not determine the future extent of elite continuity.

The continuity of those Russian elites with *nomenklatura* backgrounds persisted under Putin. By the early 2000s, the national and regional political elites in Russia (State Duma, Federation Council, and regional governments) were largely recruited from the former middle and higher leadership in the CPSU.⁵⁴ In 2010 and 2020, Putin-regime elites with Soviet *nomenklatura* origin (i.e. people with personal backgrounds in *nomenklatura* and their children) constituted approximately 60 per cent of top political elites.⁵⁵ The absolute majority of the top-100 Putin-era elites in 2020 were born in the 1950s and 1960s. They were in their late twenties and thirties when the Soviet Union collapsed. About 50 per cent of this group started their careers in Soviet *nomenklatura*; most held either managerial positions in Komsomol or lower-level *nomenklatura* positions. Children of individuals with Soviet *nomenklatura* backgrounds constituted an additional 10 per cent.⁵⁶

Figure 1 provides our estimates for the share of *nomenklatura*-linked elites in each consecutive Security Council, an autonomous body within the Presidential Administration 'responsible for managing the formulation and execution of Russia's security-related policies'.⁵⁷ Chaired by the Russian president, this deliberative body comprises members who are there *ex officio* (i.e. the minister of defence). Created in 1992, the Security Council brings the top foreign policy and national security officials together to deliberate and to prepare decisions for the president to implement. We use these individuals' career tracks in the late Soviet Union to estimate their *nomenklatura* background (see Appendix II for details). Over the last 30 years, the elites who originated from the Soviet *nomenklatura* have constituted a large majority (60–90 per cent) in each Security Council (and about 80 per cent on average across 30 years).

Some might object to our examination of the entire Security Council because only Putin and a small subset of Security Council members influence key foreign policy decisions like the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine.⁵⁸ Yet those specific members

⁵⁰ Maria Snegovaya, 'Why Russia's democracy never began', *Journal of Democracy*, 34:3 (2023), pp. 105–18.

⁵¹ Krysztanovskaya and White, 'From Soviet *nomenklatura*', pp. 727–8.

⁵² Mark Kramer, 'The Soviet legacy in Russian foreign policy', *Political Science Quarterly*, 134:4 (2019), pp. 585–609 (pp. 587–88).

⁵³ Ivan Szelenyi and Szonja Szelenyi, 'Circulation or reproduction of elites during the postcommunist transformation of Eastern Europe', *Theory and Society*, 24:5 (1995), pp. 615–38; and Anton Steen, *Between Past and Future: Elites, Democracy and the State in Post-Communist Countries: A Comparison of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania* (London: Routledge, 2019), p. 36.

⁵⁴ Anton Steen, *Political Elites and the New Russia: The Power Basis of Yeltsin's and Putin's Regimes* (London: Routledge, 2004).

⁵⁵ Snegovaya and Petrov, 'Long Soviet shadows'.

⁵⁶ Snegovaya and Petrov, 'Long Soviet shadows'; Snegovaya, 'Why Russia's democracy never began'.

⁵⁷ Mark Galeotti, 'Russia's Security Council: Where policy, personality, and process meet', *Marshall Center Security Insights*, 41 (2019), available at: <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/russias-security-council-where-policy-personality-and-process-meet-0>.

⁵⁸ Galeotti, 'Russia's Security Council'; and Max Seddon, Christopher Miller, and Felicia Schwartz, 'How Putin blundered into Ukraine – then doubled down', *Financial Times* (23 February 2023), available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/80002564-33e8-48fb-b734-44810afb7a49>.

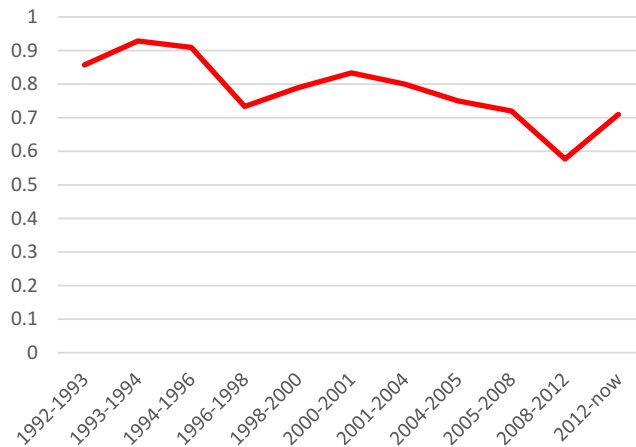


Figure 1. The share of permanent members with *nomenklatura* backgrounds in each of the Security Councils. All consecutive Security Councils included.

often include minister of foreign affairs Sergei Lavrov, former minister of defense Sergei Shoigu, and former Security Council secretary Nikolay Patrushev, who all had *nomenklatura* roots.⁵⁹

As we argue below, this persistence of elites with *nomenklatura* backgrounds at the top of Russia's power hierarchy helps account for their revanchist foreign policy outlook. Most of the officials placed in Russia's highest foreign policymaking and security bodies had worked for the Soviet regime before 1991.⁶⁰ Their socialisation in the Soviet *nomenklatura* shaped their foreign policy vision. Educational institutions fashioned in the Stalinist years created a relatively closed system that hived off the *nomenklatura* from most of society, instilling and reproducing particular beliefs about politics and administration that would inform graduates throughout their professional careers.

For these people used to commanding non-Russian societies, the transfer of hegemonic status to the Russian state felt natural. As former *nomenklatura* apparatchiks acquired medium- and high-level administrative posts in the new Russian system, their basic understanding of foreign policy persisted.⁶¹ Accordingly, despite some influx of younger elites who have come of age after the Soviet Union disintegrated, their foreign policy preferences and perceptions of Russia's legitimate place in the world tended to replicate certain Soviet beliefs.

An enduring belief system

Revanchism has at least been latent among members of the Russian elite precisely because of the continuity in elite composition. In the discussion below, we show that those revanchist preferences expressed in the run-up to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine thus have a long pedigree.

In the early 1990s, Russia's liberal Westernisers attempted to espouse a more pro-Western foreign policy. However, the pro-Western euphoria of the early 1990s among President Boris Yeltsin's colleagues was exceptional, brought about by the excitement of political change and the struggle against Mikhail Gorbachev. Although the composition of the Russian political elites

⁵⁹Patrushev has arguably more *silovik* (security-sector) roots owing to his KGB background, but he did have managerial functions as a member of the *nomenklatura*. Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) director Sergey Naryshkin has both *silovik* and *nomenklatura* roots. On his and Patrushev's belief systems, see Martin Kragh and Andreas Umland, 'Putinism beyond Putin: The political ideas of Nikolai Patrushev and Sergei Naryshkin in 2006–20', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 39:5 (2023), pp. 366–89.

⁶⁰Kramer, 'The Soviet legacy', p. 588.

⁶¹Nikolay Mitrokhin, 'Elite of the "closed society": MGIMO, the international departments of the apparatus of the CPSU Central Committee and the prosopography of their employees', *Ab Imperio*, 4 (2013), pp. 145–86.

largely remained unchanged following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Yeltsin also brought to the top a small group of liberal-democratic reformers, most of whom had non-*nomenklatura* backgrounds.⁶²

Yet at most levels of government and public institutions, the *nomenklatura* remained in power and showed scant interest in reforms. With the Bosnian conflict erupting in 1993, the Russian position towards Serbia and the Bosnian Serbs clashed with that of the United States and its European allies. Russian nationalists, such as Yeltsin's advisers Sergei Stankevich and Andranik Migranyan, Communists, and the newly elected, far-right nationalist Liberal Democratic Party became increasingly vocal. These groups originated in the Soviet *nomenklatura*.⁶³ Their beliefs markedly differed from those of Yeltsin's early reformers.

One basic idea espoused by this group was that Russia needed to re-establish its great power status by reclaiming control of, and ownership over, parts of the former Soviet Union.⁶⁴ During the Cold War, Moscow was the pole of the bipolar world that led the socialist camp. In the post-Cold War era, Moscow now had to preserve as much of what it once had, if not retain a decisive role in shaping the transformation of the international order. Accordingly, having 'lost' East Central Europe to the West, Moscow hoped to claim at least its special rights for the newly independent states that the former Soviet Union had absorbed. The term 'near abroad' captures the special status of this region. This term describes the non-Russian post-Soviet space, implying that these countries were not 'as foreign' as others and, therefore, may be subject to different rules or treatment – that is, a sphere of influence.⁶⁵ The foreign policy thinking remained influenced by the Soviet tendency to view allies and partners in paternalistic terms, where friends and followers are virtually synonymous. Since the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia's security services had sought to maintain control over the former Soviet republics.⁶⁶ For much of this period, issues relating to post-Soviet countries remained under the main control of the Presidential Administration (rather than the Ministry of Foreign Affairs).⁶⁷ Russian elites also thought that in preserving a sphere of influence over the territories that made up the former Soviet Union, they were acting defensively and not offensively, even if the restored and newly independent states that emerged now had international legal rights.⁶⁸

Because of its special role in Russian history and strategic location vis-à-vis Europe, Russian elites from all parts of the political spectrum prioritised control over Ukraine.⁶⁹ Arguably, their focus on Ukraine may be due to their personal and ethnic Russian origins. They were more attuned to how a relatively large ethnic Russian population found itself within Russia's borders, particularly in Crimea (with it being about 70 per cent Russian) as a result of Russian colonisation.⁷⁰ Soon after Ukraine declared independence in August 1991, Yeltsin's then press secretary Pavel

⁶² Andrey Kolesnikov, 'A snake hill: A group of scientists becomes a team of reformers', *Bulletin of Europe: XXI Century*, 57 (2021), pp. 6–13.

⁶³ Andrei Kozyrev, *The Firebird: The Elusive Fate of Russian Democracy* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019), pp. 191–222.

⁶⁴ Bobo Lo, *Russian Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era: Reality, Illusion and Mythmaking* (New York: Springer, 2002), p. 164.

⁶⁵ Paul Kubicek, 'Russian foreign policy and the West', *Political Science Quarterly*, 114:4 (1999), pp. 547–68 (p. 556).

⁶⁶ Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, *The New Nobility: The Restoration of Russia's Security State and the Enduring Legacy of the KGB* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2010), pp. 211–12.

⁶⁷ Maria Kucherenko, 'The "border cooperation" Project', *LB.ua* (22 December 2020), available at: https://lb.ua/world/2020/12/22/473632_proekt_prigranichnoe.html.

⁶⁸ Lieven, 'Russian opposition', p. 197.

⁶⁹ Serhiy Plokhy, *Lost Kingdom: The Quest for Empire and the Making for the Russian Nation* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

⁷⁰ Heinz Timmermann, 'Russian foreign policy under Yeltsin: Priority for integration into the "community of civilized states"', *The Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 8:4 (1992), pp. 167–9. On Russian national myth-making about Crimea, see Austin Charron, 'Whose is Crimea? Contested sovereignty and regional identity', *Region*, 5:2 (2016), pp. 230–4.

Voshchanov made territorial claims against it. More liberal politicians with *nomenklatura* ties espoused similar ideas. Thus, in 1992, Vladimir Lukin, who worked in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the late Soviet Union but later became a leading member of the liberal Yabloko Party, initiated the first votes in the Russian parliament that advocated using the Black Sea Fleet to pressure Ukraine regarding Crimea.⁷¹ In 1992 and 1993, the Russian Supreme Soviet passed two resolutions claiming that the 1954 transfer of Crimea to Ukraine was invalid and Sevastopol was part of the Russian Federation. Russian diplomats between 1992 and 1993 intimated that Western countries had no need to upgrade their facilities in Kyiv given that the days of Ukrainian independence were numbered.⁷² Even Yeltsin, formerly a candidate to the Soviet Politburo, asked for Crimea to be returned to Russia in one of his conversations with the then-president of Ukraine, Leonid Kravchuk.⁷³ Until 1997, Yeltsin personally resisted signing a basic treaty with Ukraine that would formally renounce all territorial claims. Under his rule, Russia also insisted on keeping its Black Sea Fleet headquartered in Ukraine's Sevastopol, which often created tensions between the two countries.⁷⁴

Beyond Ukraine, these revanchist ideas also covered other areas of the former Soviet Union. For example, Yeltsin was reluctant to withdraw Red Army soldiers from the Baltic countries.⁷⁵ Moreover, although his power struggle against Gorbachev led to him dissolve the Soviet Union, Yeltsin then immediately attempted to restore Russia's control over its former territories by creating the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which he called the only alternative to the 'further uncontrolled decay of the Union'.⁷⁶ He also claimed that the CIS was necessary 'to quickly reinforce centripetal tendencies in the decaying Union, to stimulate a treaty process. The CIS offered at the time the only chance of preserving a unified geopolitical space'.⁷⁷ Russia attempted to support 'loyal leaders' in Transnistria and Abkhazia. It forced Moldova and Georgia to join the CIS in return for a Russian-brokered peace and assistance in areas of contested control.⁷⁸ Even Andrei Kozyrev, the Westernising foreign minister – albeit one with *nomenklatura* links – declared at a December 1992 meeting of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) that 'the area of the former Soviet Union cannot be considered as a zone where CSCE norms fully apply. It is a post-imperial space where Russia has to defend its interest by all possible means, including economic and military ones'.⁷⁹ Kozyrev's advisor Galina Sidorova admitted that 'there is a psychological barrier preventing us from treating other CIS members as absolutely independent'.⁸⁰

The notion of Russian primacy in the CIS was popular with Yeltsin and the Russian government throughout the 1990s. The General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces unveiled a draft military doctrine in May 1992 that, as one observer noted, 'was based on the assumption that the Commonwealth was going to be a cohesive military entity'.⁸¹ Though Russia's military doctrine

⁷¹Taras Kuzio, 'Borders, symbolism and nation-state building: Ukraine and Russia', *Geopolitics and International Boundaries*, 2:2 (1997), pp. 36–56 (p. 46).

⁷²Kubicek, 'Russian foreign policy', p. 558.

⁷³Yegor Gaidar, quoted in Andrei Kolesnikov. 'I'm flying to you, Belovezhskaya Pushcha...', *Gazeta.ru* (7 December 2021), available at: {<https://www.gazeta.ru/comments/column/kolesnikov/14285593.shtml?updated>}.

⁷⁴Thomas Graham. *Getting Russia Right* (Cambridge: Polity, 2023), pp. 64–6.

⁷⁵J. R. Beyrle, *Case Study: The Withdrawal of Russian Military Forces from the Baltic States* (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 1996).

⁷⁶'Yeltsin Addresses Russian Parliament on 25th December', *British Broadcasting Corporation*, 28 December 1991, SU/1264/C3/1. Referenced in Graham, *Getting Russia Right*, p. 66.

⁷⁷Boris Yeltsin, *Zapiski Prezidenta* (Moscow: Ogonek, 1994), p. 152.

⁷⁸Kozyrev, *The Firebird*, p. 153; and Kubicek, 'Russian foreign policy', p. 563.

⁷⁹Quoted in Taylor, *The Code of Putinism*, p. 190.

⁸⁰Timmerman, 'Russian foreign policy', p. 167.

⁸¹Charles J. Dick, 'The military doctrine of the Russian Federation', *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 7:3 (1994), pp. 481–506 (p. 498).

would be subsequently modified, Kozyrev declared in an October 1993 interview with *Izvestia* that ‘in the future, our foreign policy will continue to defend Russia’s vital interests, even in these cases where it is contrary to the interests of the West and to the interests of our partners within the CIS and the former Soviet republics.’⁸² In 1995, Yeltsin issued a presidential decree titled the ‘The Establishment of the Strategic Course of the Russian Federation with Member States of the CIS’. As Andrei Tsygankov explains, this decree had its intellectual pedigree in reports produced by Yevgeny Primakov-led Foreign Intelligence Service (Primakov was a former Chairman of the Soviet of the Union). This decree envisioned how Russia would assume a leadership role among former Soviet countries by way of political and economic integration.⁸³

Raising the stakes involved with lost territory are beliefs about international competition. In the 1990s, many Russian elites were aggrieved that Russia had become subordinate to the West and abandoned its traditional ally in Serbia, thus compelling Yeltsin to adopt a more assertive stance on NATO’s operations in Yugoslavia. Yeltsin adviser Sergei Stankevich, for example, even claimed that NATO’s 1999 air campaign against Yugoslavia would make it impossible for Russia to be a partner to the West.⁸⁴ As NATO enlargement in East Central Europe proceeded in the mid-to-late 1990s, Russian elites concluded that NATO had effectively ‘conquered’ large territories that until very recently had been dominated by Moscow.⁸⁵ Influencing this belief was a Soviet vision that the major Western powers were exploiting Russian weakness to advance their own interests. Sergei Rogov, director of the Russian Academy of Sciences’ USA and Canada Institute, argued that Russia’s acceptance of Washington’s global leadership had ‘led to a situation whereby Russia is presented with faits accomplis.’⁸⁶ Vladimir Lukin suggested that if NATO were to incorporate former Soviet republics, then Russia should position tactical nuclear weapons in Kaliningrad.⁸⁷ Published recordings of his negotiations with Bill Clinton in 1999 hint at the extent of Yeltsin’s ambition. In his conversation with the US president, he said: ‘I ask for one thing: give Europe to Russia. The United States is not in Europe. Europe should be the business of Europeans. Russia is half European and half Asian.’⁸⁸

This foreign policy outlook differed sharply from those held by individuals without *nomenklatura* backgrounds, mainly the liberals in Yeltsin’s government such as Galina Starovoitova, Sergey Shakhrai, Boris Nemtsov, and Anatoly Chubais.^{89,90} They shared pro-Western views and advocated stronger Russia’s integration with the West. For example, early on, Yeltsin-aligned liberals attempted to develop a vision for Russia’s Europeaness and civic society, offering Russia’s deeper integration into Europe.⁹¹

⁸² Emphasis added. Dick, ‘The military doctrine’, p. 499.

⁸³ Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia’s foreign policy: change and continuity in national identity* (Lanham MA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), p. 116.

⁸⁴ Kubicek, ‘Russian foreign policy’, p. 552.

⁸⁵ Lo, *Russian Foreign Policy*, p. 105.

⁸⁶ Lo, *Russian Foreign Policy*, p. 59.

⁸⁷ Lieven, ‘Russian opposition’, p. 197.

⁸⁸ Alexey Uvarov. ‘The just and the guilty: The tragedy of 1993 and the problem of the “good guys”’, *Riddle* (28 May 2024), available at: {<https://ridl.io/the-just-and-the-guilty-the-tragedy-of-1993-and-the-problem-of-the-good-guys/>}.

⁸⁹ Andrey Kolesnikov, *Unknown Chubais: Pages from the Biography* (Moscow: Zakharov, 2003); and Andrey Kolesnikov, *Five Five-Year Plans of Liberal Reforms: The Origins of Russian Modernization and the Legacy of Yegor Gaidar* (Moscow: NLO, 2022).

⁹⁰ Yegor Gaidar’s background is somewhat puzzling here. Russia’s prominent reformer was a long-time member of the CPSU and an editor of the CPSU journal *Communist* during the perestroika period. Technically, because that was not a political or a managerial position, he would not qualify as a *nomenklatura* member under our selected criteria (see Appendix II). However, he belonged to an established well-known *nomenklatura* family since both his father and grandfather were prominent Soviet writers.

⁹¹ Oxana Shevel, ‘Russian nation-building from Yel’tsin to Medvedev: Ethnic, civic or purposefully ambiguous?’ *Europe-Asia Studies*, 63:2 (2011), pp. 179–202; and Kathleen E. Smith, *Mythmaking in the New Russia: Politics and Memory in the Yeltsin Era* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

Interchangeability of elites

Because of elite continuity and the persistence of key substantive beliefs, the importance of any one leader is easy to exaggerate. Putin has a significant impact on Russian politics due to the centralisation of Russian state power. Many thus focus on him to the exclusion of other elites.⁹²

Yet many members of the Russian elite in the 1990s shared those revanchist attitudes that Putin would express much later.⁹³ Besides Putin, most plausible contenders for the Russian presidency in 1999 had *nomenklatura* backgrounds. They all supported a combative approach in the post-Soviet region, whether or not they had KGB links as Putin did.⁹⁴ As prime minister (1998–9), Yevgeny Primakov sought to enhance Russia's influence in the former Soviet space.⁹⁵ When giving his first news conference as foreign minister, Primakov said, 'despite the present difficulties, Russia was and is a great power and its foreign policy should correspond with that.'⁹⁶ Both Primakov and Sergey Stepashin (prime minister, May–August 1999) argued that Russia must reassert itself as a great power, reorient its foreign policy towards other former Soviet republics, and establish some distance between itself and the West.⁹⁷ Yuri Luzhkov, the mayor of Moscow, actively favoured a more assertive policy in the post-Soviet space.⁹⁸ Luzhkov also raised Russian claims to Crimea and Sevastopol. Communist Party leader and second-place presidential contender in the 1996 presidential election Gennady Zyuganov prioritised stopping NATO's eastward expansion in his foreign policy agenda and focused on possible countermeasures, such as the creation of a forward security zone on former Soviet, non-Russian territory.⁹⁹ He also advocated restoring Russia's great power status by reunifying Russia with Ukraine and Belarus.

In sum, even when Russia's system was much more democratic and before Putin became president, revanchist ideas proliferated among Russian elites and correlated strongly with *nomenklatura* backgrounds. Focusing too much on Putin as being the single main driver of Russian revanchism ignores the elite context in which his substantive beliefs developed.¹⁰⁰

Other arguments

We argue that revanchism is a fundamental preference because it reflects substantive beliefs about territory once controlled. Other popular arguments about Russian policy towards its Western neighbours instead argue that any such rhetoric is strategic and instrumental, whether to go about international competition more effectively or to manage a domestic political crisis.

Some argue that what appears to be revanchist rhetoric is simply normal great power politics. From this perspective, Russia has a bona fide desire to establish a security zone in the

⁹²See, e.g., Michael McFaul, 'Putin, Putinism, and the domestic determinants of Russian foreign policy', *International Security*, 45:2 (2020), pp. 108–13; and Amy Knight, 'The enduring legacy of the KGB in Russian politics', *Problems of Post-Communism*, 47:4 (2000), pp. 3–15.

⁹³McFaul, 'Putin', p. 113; and Tuomas Forsberg and Christer Pursiainen, 'The psychological dimension of Russian foreign policy: Putin and the annexation of Crimea', *Global Society*, 31:2 (2017), pp. 220–44.

⁹⁴Elias Götz, 'Putin, the state, and war: The causes of Russia's near abroad assertion revisited', *International Studies Review*, 1:2 (2017), pp. 228–53 (pp. 231–32).

⁹⁵Jeff Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009); and Andrej Krickovic and Igor Pellicciari, 'From "Greater Europe" to "Greater Eurasia": Status concerns and the evolution of Russia's approach to alignment and regional integration', *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 12:1 (2021), pp. 86–99.

⁹⁶Julia Gurganus and Eugene Rumer, 'Russia's global ambitions in perspective', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (20 February 2019), available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/02/20/russia-s-global-ambitions-in-perspective-pub-78067>.

⁹⁷Kubicek, 'Russian foreign policy', p. 549.

⁹⁸Oleg Alexandrov, 'The city of Moscow in Russia's foreign and security policy: Role, aims and motivations', Regionalization of Russian Foreign and Security Policy Working Paper No. 7, Center for Security Studies and Conflict Research, 2001.

⁹⁹Peter Truscott, *Russia First: Breaking with the West* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1997), pp. 171–2.

¹⁰⁰This observation also applies to another commonly made argument about the domination of individuals with security service backgrounds – the *siloviki* – in Russia's ruling circles. Under Putin, their presence in Russian government bodies and top leadership significantly increased. However, the elites with *nomenklatura* ties represent a conceptually distinct category and constitute a much larger proportion of the elites than the share of *siloviki*.

face of growing external pressures. These pressures are mostly manifest in NATO's inclusion of countries once part of the Warsaw Pact (e.g. Poland) or the Soviet Union itself (i.e. the Baltic countries). Russian belligerence towards its neighbours – Ukraine and Georgia, mainly – is thus a response to Western perfidy and abuse. In this view, the United States never accepted Russia as a potential stakeholder in the international order after the Cold War, reneging on alleged promises not to enlarge NATO while extolling values that the Kremlin finds dangerous and politically unacceptable.¹⁰¹ This argument works with our emphasis on the latent revanchism of the elites. If Russian leaders lean towards revanchism, they are more likely to regard NATO enlargement into Moscow's former zones of control as threatening. This observation illuminates why the Kremlin much more peacefully accepted Finland and Sweden joining NATO than Ukraine and Georgia having their own membership prospects.¹⁰²

Other observers may yet argue that the Kremlin engages in active revanchism out of a sense of political opportunism to instigate crises that divert citizens' attention away from internal difficulties. Politicians might try to gain support as they face challenging political circumstances. They could dig up or invent revanchist histories and so have an incentive to launch diversionary conflicts.¹⁰³ Lilia Shevtsova observes that Russia's war against Georgia in 2008 'marked the revival of the old tactic of rallying the population around a common foreign enemy, thus distracting them from their real problems.'¹⁰⁴ Scholars write that, after he became president again in 2012, the strength of the political opposition worried Putin. Accordingly, 'to mobilize his electoral base and discredit the opposition, Putin recast the United States as an enemy' and so interpreted events in Ukraine in late 2013 and early 2014 through this lens.¹⁰⁵ Similarly, given the latent revanchism of Russian elites, they could have been more likely to be provoked by what they viewed as US interference in the 'near abroad' – Russia's rightful (from their perspective) sphere of influence.

These arguments work alongside our proposed framing. Elite continuity as a permissive condition helps explain the willingness of elites to support a war – a risky proposition for any regime. Elite continuity can contextualise why Russian elites might see NATO enlargement into specific countries as a threat or why they might resort to revanchism in order to sidestep domestic challenges. Revanchist ideas – expressed in the 1990s – prefigure much of the anti-Ukrainian rhetoric broadcast by Russian leaders in 2021 and thereafter. The perseverance of those ideas reflects the continuity in the composition of the Russian elite and the belief system that they would have as regards to matters of territoriality.

In emphasising elite continuity, we do not imply that different leaders with similar elite profiles will make identical tactical or strategic choices, let alone hold identical beliefs with the same intensity. Yeltsin faced different circumstances from those faced by Putin: the former had fewer military capabilities or economic resources at his disposal and had to depend more on cooperation with Russia's Western neighbours to elicit much needed economic assistance. Nor do we claim that Yeltsin would have endorsed Putin's actions against Ukraine. Rather, we argue that members of Yeltsin's circle were disinclined to see Ukraine as a sovereign actor worthy of

¹⁰¹ John J. Mearsheimer, 'Why the Ukraine crisis is the West's fault: The liberal delusions that provoked Putin', *Foreign Affairs*, 93:5 (2014), pp. 77–89; and Joshua R. I. Shiffrin, 'Deal or no deal? The end of the Cold War and the U.S. offer to limit NATO expansion', *International Security*, 40:4 (2016), pp. 7–44. For a counter-argument, see Alexander Lanoszka, 'Thank goodness for NATO enlargement', in James Goldgeier and Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin (eds), *Evaluating NATO Enlargement: From Cold War Victory to the Russia–Ukraine War* (Cham: Springer, 2023), pp. 307–39.

¹⁰² Samuel Charap, Sean M. Zeigler, Irina A. Chindea, et al., 'Anticipating Flashpoints with Russia: Patterns and Drivers', RAND Corporation, 25 September 2023, available at: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA791-1.html.

¹⁰³ V. P. Gagnon, 'Ethnic nationalism and international conflict: The case of Serbia', *International Security*, 19:3 (1994/5), pp. 130–66; and Stuart J. Kaufman, 'Symbolic politics or rational choice? Testing theories of extreme ethnic violence', *International Security*, 30:4 (2006), pp. 45–86.

¹⁰⁴ Lilia Shevtsova, *Lonely Power: Why Russia Has Failed to Become the West and the West Is Weary of Russia* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2010), p. 53.

¹⁰⁵ Michael McFaul, Stephen Sestanovich, and John J. Mearsheimer, 'Faulty powers: Who started the Ukraine crisis?', *Foreign Affairs*, 93:6 (2014), pp. 167–78 (p. 170); and Keith Darden, 'Russian revanche: External threats and regime reactions', *Daedalus*, 146:2 (2017), pp. 128–41.

territorial integrity – an attitude shaped by a common elite background. Indeed, Yeltsin's government had trouble accepting the revised post-1991 territorial order given its hesitation to withdraw Red Army forces from several post-Soviet states and to recognise Ukraine's international borders.

Discussion and conclusion

Our contributions are several-fold. We conceive revanchism as a foreign policy preference to restore a lost territorial status quo. We then argue that (post-)imperial states are more likely to become revanchist following territorial losses when a new regime is characterised by pronounced elite continuity despite the political transition that territorial contraction often entails. Institutional change in a country's domestic politics might not matter for foreign policy if the change in elite cadre is low. Our study thus moves beyond examining individual leaders, something that many analyses of foreign policy tend to do. Contemporary Russian foreign policy illustrates our argument. In analysing the composition and foreign policy preferences of Russian elites, this theory-building case demonstrates the salience of certain beliefs, including the notion of spheres of influence being foundational to international politics and a sense of ownership of Ukraine.

Though they warrant deeper study due to the range of potential confounding factors, other possible cases fit our explanation. For example, despite having experienced political revolution in late 1918 around the time of its military defeat, the German Reich saw much elite continuity with the Kaiserreich. Historian Woodruff Smith states plainly that 'a great many of the founders of the Weimar Republic ... were former *Weltpolitiker*'.¹⁰⁶ Junkerdom – the landed gentry based east of the Elbe River – kept its monopoly on top positions in the military and the public administration.¹⁰⁷ Perhaps no data point highlights the elite continuity better than former field marshal Paul von Hindenburg having the presidency – constitutionally the most powerful position in the German Reich – for the period between 1925 and 1934.¹⁰⁸ Key personnel and power in diplomatic decision-making in the German Reich – chief among them, the president, the chancellor, foreign affairs minister, and the defence minister – had held positions of influence under the Kaiserreich. The 1919 Treaty of Versailles caused much grievance due to the restrictions placed on the German military and the allied occupation of the Rhineland as well as the war guilt clause and the associated issue of reparations. Nevertheless, the German Reich was not simply revisionist: it was revanchist insofar as a key complaint concerned the loss of territory, especially as regards to the eastern border with Poland. For example, Reichswehr chief of staff Hans von Seeckt (former wartime chief of staff to Field Marshal August von Mackensen) was not only committed to regaining the lost territories but also to the destruction of Poland as a state, having favoured the Bolsheviks in the Polish–Soviet War.¹⁰⁹ Besides the border with Poland, German leaders expressed an interest in repatriating the districts making up Eupen–Malmédy that Belgium acquired after the First World War.¹¹⁰ Moreover, the German Foreign Office aimed to restore Germany's colonial rights in what once was German East Africa, a suggestion that provoked Sir Eyre Crowe's comment that it was 'incurably foolish'.¹¹¹ This stated interest in rekindling Germany's colonial ties in Africa highlights that the desire

¹⁰⁶ Smith, *The Ideological Origins*, p. 196.

¹⁰⁷ Ursula Hoffmann-Lange, 'Elite research in Germany', *International Review of Sociology*, 11:2 (2001), pp. 201–17 (p. 210).

¹⁰⁸ Peter C. Caldwell, 'The Weimar Constitution', in Nadine Rossol and Benjamin Ziemann (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the Weimar Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 119–39 (p. 124–26).

¹⁰⁹ Paul Hehn, 'The collapse of the Weimar Republic and the National Socialist revolution, 1923–33: The view from Warsaw and Moscow', *The Polish Review*, 25:3/4 (1980), pp. 28–48; and Ian Ona Johnson, *Faustian Bargain: The Soviet–German Partnership and the Origins of the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 37.

¹¹⁰ Robert Grathwol, 'Germany and the Eupen–Malmédy affair 1924–26: "Here lies the spirit of Locarno"', *Central European History*, 8:3 (1975), pp. 221–50 (pp. 224–5, 232).

¹¹¹ Andrew J. Crozier, 'The colonial question in Stresemann's Locarno policy', *The International History Review*, 4:1 (1982), pp. 37–54 (p. 244).

for territorial recovery was not merely irredentism as regards to ethnic Germans in neighbouring countries but revanchism more broadly.

Another example is the Kingdom of Hungary, which emerged from the First World War as an independent state no longer joined with Cisleithania in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It lost almost three-quarters of its pre-war size following the 1919 Treaty of Saint-Germain and the 1920 Treaty of Trianon.¹¹² Undoing the post-war territorial settlement became a national and official preoccupation throughout the interwar period. Correlated with this revanchism was elite continuity. Many key political leaders of interwar Hungary had links with the erstwhile Habsburg regime. Admiral Miklós Horthy was regent and head of state, having exercised significant influence over domestic and foreign policy. He had briefly been the commander-in-chief of the Fleet of the Austro-Hungarian Navy in 1918. His longest-serving prime minister and head of government was Count Istvan Bethlen. Bethlen came from a noble family and had been a member of the overwhelmingly ethnically Hungarian House of Representatives between 1901 and 1918.¹¹³

The opposite is also appears to hold: when a (post-)imperial state experiences major elite turnover, revanchism is less likely. A possible example is the French Third Republic, which experienced major turnover from the Second Empire, albeit in a process that took time. Stephen Hanson writes that ‘French democracy did not emerge “all at once” in a single revolutionary moment but instead required sustained attention by the republican leadership to the building of key institutions such as political parties, a democratic bicameral parliament, and a democratic executive branch – in a bitter political struggle that took nearly a decade to win.’¹¹⁴ In the French Third Republic, none of the key elite members who influenced main foreign policy decisions (the president and the minister of foreign affairs in particular) held any authoritative, pro-regime positions in the Second Empire. Most of the 28 ministers of foreign affairs between 1875 and 1914, including Léon Gambetta, Charles de Freycinet, and Jules Ferry, had a republican affiliation.¹¹⁵ In accordance with our theory, French Third Republican leaders were largely not revanchist. Historian Bertrand Joly argues that despite some cultural appeals to repatriate the lost territories of Alsace and Lorraine, ‘France never wanted the Revanche, not even in the first months that followed the defeat [to Prussia].’¹¹⁶ President Adolphe Thiers – who had been a vocal critic of Second Empire policies – himself stated that ‘people who speak of revenge, of revanche, are fools, charlatans of patriotism whose declamations remain without echo.’¹¹⁷ Proclaimer of the French Third Republic, Léon Gambetta (prime minister, 1881–2) renounced any effort to recover the lost territory or to abrogate the 1871 Treaty of Frankfurt with Germany using military force. When French Republicans fully came to power by the end of the 1870s, they presided over a foreign policy centred on rapprochement with Germany.¹¹⁸ Their attitudes towards those lost provinces were at best ambivalent: they regretted losing Alsace and Lorraine but abjured the use of military force to recover them. French leaders did not care much for revanchism. Even French nationalist opinion regarding Alsace and Lorraine is easy to exaggerate, with one historian noting that ‘hardly fifteen years after the big shock of 1871, [French] nationalism was less and less focused on the “Revanche”.’¹¹⁹ To be sure, given

¹¹²Zoltán Kovács, ‘A city at the crossroads: Social and economic transformation in Budapest’, *Urban Studies*, 31:7 (1994), pp. 1081–96 (p. 1082).

¹¹³Thomas Sakmyster, ‘István Bethlen and Hungarian foreign policy, 1921–1931’, *Canadian-American Review of Hungarian Studies*, 5:2 (1978), pp. 3–16 (pp. 3–4).

¹¹⁴Hanson, ‘The founding’, p. 2017.

¹¹⁵Freycinet served the Second Empire, but as a mining engineer and a researcher on industrial safety. See Patrick Fournier, ‘Charles de Freycinet, théoricien et acteur de l’assainissement à l’âge de l’hygiénisme’, *Bulletin de la SABIX*, 58 (2016), pp. 19–29.

¹¹⁶Bertrand Joly, ‘La France et la revanche (1871–1914)’, *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 46:2 (1999), pp. 325–47 (p. 327).

¹¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 327.

¹¹⁸Elie Halévy, ‘Franco-German relations since 1870’, *History*, 9:33 (1924), pp. 18–29 (p. 21).

¹¹⁹Józef Laptos, ‘La paix armée et le problème d’Alsace-Lorraine dans l’opinion française (1871–1914)’, *Rocznik Naukowo-Dydaktyczny, Prace Romanistyczne*, 113:2 (1987), pp. 209–28 (p. 214).

that space constraints preclude a deeper study of the French case, confounding factors could be at play.

Another case of non-revanche is post-1945 Germany. Although de-Nazification was eventually reversed in the bureaucracy, many West German foreign policy leaders in the 1950s and 1960s – Konrad Adenauer, Willy Brandt, and Walter Hallstein – were outsiders to the previous Nazi regime. For most of the Cold War, West German foreign policy was not revanchist, especially when *Neue Ostpolitik* came to define it once Brandt became chancellor in 1969. This policy recognised European borders and normalised diplomatic relations between West Germany and its Soviet bloc neighbours.¹²⁰

Other cases are admittedly more ambiguous. One such case is Kemalist Turkey, which arguably saw elite continuity with the Ottoman Empire despite the Young Turks Revolution.¹²¹ Mustafa Kemal Atatürk did command the Ottoman Seventh Army during the First World War, but he also had been briefly imprisoned for his anti-monarchist activities against Sultan Abdulhamid. Interwar Turkish foreign policy did not have aggressive, revanchist aspirations. It did not seek to achieve greatness by regaining lands once ruled by the Ottomans, even in the areas still inhabited by considerable Turkish minorities.¹²² That said, one can argue that Atatürk had already overturned the short-lived 1920 Treaty of Sèvres and restored control over Eastern Anatolia. Revanchism was possibly a more passing phenomenon for post-Ottoman Turkey because of Atatürk's early successes. Elite continuity also characterised the post-1919 First Austrian Republic. However, instead of revanchism, pan-Germanism became a dominant political idea among the conservative right.¹²³ Pan-Germanism smacked of revanchism, but the point should not be pressed. Still, one unambiguous exception is post-1945 Japan, because a substantive continuity of elites in power did not result in revanchism. Military occupation and Cold War politics likely dispelled revanchist attitudes.

These ambiguities suggest future avenues of research. We advance no claims about when exactly states might act in a revanchist fashion and so aggress against their former possessions. That would require a theory of war. Foreign policy and war are never the product of one factor, however elite continuity might matter. Research regarding revanchism should address how and when revanchist preferences affect war initiation and military escalation. Of course, such a theory of war must grapple with complexity: many known and unknown factors may be operative, and these factors could shape decisions in a non-linear manner. Moreover, we offer no strong theory about the very direction of revanchism or its primary target.¹²⁴ For example, we do not explain why the Russian case focuses more on attitudes about Ukraine than those on Central Asian or Baltic countries. We speculate that this focus may be due to the perceived ethnic links in Ukraine on the part of Russian elites. Yet we concede that a deeper connection may exist between those perceptions and the role that Ukraine has for conservative Russian national identity.¹²⁵ Finally, our argument might be most relevant for those (post-)imperial states that had land empires as opposed to maritime ones. Territorially reduced (post-)imperial states are, by definition, weaker and smaller than their predecessors. They possess fewer military capabilities and thus fewer means for going about conquest than they had previously. Reasserting political control over territories located overseas is much more demanding – and possibly harder to imagine – than it is for territories located directly

¹²⁰ Gottfried Niedhart, 'Ostpolitik: Transformation through communication and the quest for peaceful change', *Journal of Cold War History*, 18:3 (2016), pp. 14–59.

¹²¹ Erik J. Zürcher, *The Young Turk Legacy and Nation Building: From the Ottoman Empire to Atatürk's Turkey* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

¹²² Ali Rıza Güney, 'The Westernization Paradigms of the Committee of Union and Progress and Atatürk: Rupture or Continuity?', PhD diss, Bilkent University, 1998.

¹²³ Julie Thorpe, 'Pan-Germanism after empire: Austrian "Germanism" at home and abroad', in Günter Bischof, Fritz Plasser, and Peter Berger (eds), *From Empire to Republic: Post-World War I Austria* (New Orleans, LA: University of New Orleans Press, 2010), pp. 254–72.

¹²⁴ See Charap et al., 'Anticipating Flashpoints'.

¹²⁵ Plokhy, *Lost Kingdom*.

adjacent on land: hence why many Western European countries like the United Kingdom might not have pursued revanchist policies despite exhibiting high elite continuity.

With these limitations in mind, our analysis illuminates how states go about foreign policy change. That elite continuity is correlated to states' more revanchist policy orientations implies that elite disruption may produce a different foreign policy. This observation leaves some hope for the future of Russia's foreign policy if elites with different backgrounds and preferences were ever to acquire power. However, one implication of our study is that, barring a significant transformation of the elite class, Russia will remain hostile towards Ukraine and its Euro-Atlantic partners for the foreseeable future.¹²⁶

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2024.28>.

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¹²⁶On how the Putinist regime is instilling particular values among members of the younger generation in Russian society, see Ian Garner, *Z Generation: Into the Heart of Russia's Fascist Youth* (London: Hurst, 2023).