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| Talking Heads: Forecasting Russian Aggression in 'Frozen' Separatist Conflicts

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In the last 14 years, Russia has militarily intervened in three 'frozen' separatist conflicts where hostilities have ceased without a resolution in sight: Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Ukraine. These conflicts have caused mass casualties, disrupted countless lives, unsettled regional security and acquired global significance by risking outbreak into wider international crises. To prevent such escalation, policy makers need ways to anticipate Russian intervention. This project uncovers how analyzing Russian elites' rhetoric can forecast Russian aggression in frozen conflicts. It compares Russian elites' quotes in news articles regarding the separatists regions in Georgia and Moldova between 1992-2002, 2003-2008, 2009-the present, and through computer-assisted text analysis, clarifies that their rhetoric could have forecasted the Russo-Georgian War during the Rose Revolution (2003-2008). In doing so, this paper provides a mechanism to forewarn Russian military aggression using the growing revolution of political science text analysis, which unlocks the analytical potential of meta-texts whose utility would be otherwise inaccessible or labour intensive.

Au cours des quatorze dernières années, la Russie a mené des interventions militaires lors de trois conflits séparatistes « gelés » – en Géorgie, en Azerbaïdjan et en Ukraine – dans lesquels il y a une cessation d'hostilités sans avoir de résolution à l'horizon. Ces conflits sont à l'origine des pertes massives et de la perturbation de la vie de nombreuses personnes, troublant la sécurité régionale et en même temps, ils ont acquis de l'importance à l'échelle mondiale puisqu'ils risquent de déborder en crise internationale. Afin d'éviter une telle intensification, les dirigeant.e.s doivent trouver des moyens pour prévoir les interventions

de la Russie. Ce projet met à jour la façon dont l'analyse de la rhétorique des élites russes pourrait pronostiquer l'agression russe dans les conflits gelés. Nous comparons des citations des membres de l'élite russe dans des articles de nouvelles qui touchent aux régions séparatistes en Géorgie et en Moldavie entre 1992 et 2002, 2003 et 2008, et en 2009 jusqu'au présent. En nous servant d'une analyse textuelle assistée par l'ordinateur, nous clarifions que leur rhétorique aurait pu prévoir la guerre russo-géorgienne pendant la révolution des Roses (2003-2008). Ce faisant, cet article démontre le fonctionnement d'un mécanisme qui pourrait prévoir l'agression militaire russe par le biais de la révolution croissante de l'analyse textuelle en science politique, qui dévoile le potentiel analytique du métatexte, sans quoi l'utilité serait inaccessible ou alors exigeant une forte intensité de travail.

Introduction

On December 30th, 2021, Vladimir Putin stated that Russia would act if NATO crossed Russia's 'red lines' in Ukraine (Reuters n.d.); less than 2 months later, Russia invaded Ukraine. The last time an elite Russian politician warned of crossing Russian 'red lines' was in Georgia in 2007 (Dawn 2007). Russia invaded Georgia almost a year later in support of Georgia's separatist provinces, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In the seven weeks after Putin's 'red line' warning in December 2021, the world stood wondering whether Russia would invade Ukraine. Would policy makers have reacted differently if Russian aggression towards Ukraine had been forecasted earlier?

Despite world leaders' shock over the invasion, Russia signalled its intentions in many of the same ways it did prior to its invasion of Georgia in 2008. Russian elites' rhetoric has had a consistent presence surrounding such 'frozen' separatist conflicts in the former Soviet Union (FSU); that is, separatist conflicts which have no end in sight, but also little to no violence. This presents a question: can Russian military interventions in frozen separatist conflicts in the FSU be forecasted based on negative Russian elite rhetoric in cases where there is heightened power and ethnic concerns? Answering this question has significant regional and global implications. If Russian elite rhetoric can help to explain Russian aggression in certain former Soviet States, but not others, it would indicate that we could forecast these aggressive Russian actions. This paper will therefore help forecast future Russian aggression in the FSU. If policy makers could anticipate Russian aggression with greater accuracy, they could more decisively resolve conflicts and prevent future humanitarian and political crises.

Since their recognition of Kosovo in February 2008, Russia has militarily intervened in three frozen separatist conflicts: Georgia, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan. Russian intervention has further fractured these states, caused heavy casualties, and stunted any reconciliation efforts with

separatist regions. It has also created humanitarian challenges. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre estimated that in 2022, 305,000 Georgians remained internally displaced 14 years after the Russian invasion (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2021). In Ukraine, the Russian invasion displaced 12.8 million people—the largest number in Europe since World War Two (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner, 2022).

Russian intervention in frozen separatist conflicts is also a threat to international stability. The risk of wider international conflict increases with Russian aggression in the FSU. Recently, violence in Nagorno-Karabakh saw Turkey supporting Azerbaijan and Russia supporting Armenia. With NATO aligned states and Russia geopolitically posturing in separatist conflicts, the risk of a more serious conflict increases. Furthermore, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has brought Russian aggression closer to a NATO member's border than ever before. The result of an accidental misstep by either NATO or Russia could turn a regional conflict into a much more serious international conflict and, potentially, a nuclear war. If policy makers are able to predict when Russia will intervene in frozen separatist conflicts they will be able to react more decisively and prevent more serious conflict. My work seeks to answer the question of whether elite rhetoric is a viable mechanism for forecasting such Russian aggression.

This paper will not test the causal relationship between power and ethnicity in elite rhetoric nor does it attempt to identify why Russia intervenes in separatist conflicts. My contribution only identifies a mechanism to forecast such aggression. While previous scholarship has used elite rhetoric as a tool to explain conflict and political violence, this paper will attempt to use elite rhetoric to forecast aggression by examining the Russian Federation's involvement in frozen separatist conflicts in Georgia and Moldova (Jackson and Dexter, 2014; Gubler and Kalmoe, 2015). What makes the Russian Federation a unique case, is that it is a major world power involved in multiple frozen separatist conflicts within what it terms as its own 'sphere of special interest'.

This study begins with a short literature review followed by a theory section and a detailed explanation of my research design and methods. The final section presents my results, discusses their implications, and concludes by explaining why analysis of elite rhetoric is such an important tool for forecasting Russian aggression in a time where separatist conflicts have become integral to Russia's foreign policy goals.

Literature Review: Why Do Foreign States Intervene in Separatists Conflicts?

Why do states choose to intervene? Literature specific to Russian involvement in separatist conflicts in the FSU is sparse. Hence, a comparatively large body of scholarship surrounding

other states' motivations to intervene forms this study's theoretical foundation. Within the literature on foreign intervention in separatist conflicts, there are three main schools of thought: vulnerability, ethnicity, and power. These three schools correspond with the leading international relations theories of Realism, Liberalism, and Neo-Realism. Thus, they provide three explanations for why states may intervene in separatist conflicts. Understanding elite Russian government figures' motivations and decision-making around intervention is important for determining whether their rhetoric can forecast aggression.

Vulnerability Constraining Foreign States—The Realist Approach

Scholars have long regarded the vulnerability school of thought as conventional wisdom for understanding foreign intervention (Pavković and Radan 2011, 268-9). Vulnerability theory holds that states do not intervene in separatist conflicts to ensure the maintenance of existing borders and the international norm of non-intervention (Herbst 1989; Englebert 2005; Heraclides 1990; Griffiths 2016). The large majority of this school of thought was born through case studies of the African continent, which had relatively strong international borders despite internal conflicts in many African nations.

Beginning in the 1980s, schools studying secessionist and ethnic conflict were puzzled as to why Africa saw remarkably stable international borders, and relatively minor secessionist conflict (Herbst 1989; Englebert 2005). Attempting to make sense of this, Herbst (1989) argued that weak central governments and regional agreements affirming international sovereignty deterred political actors in Africa from intervening in separatist conflicts. Englebert (2005, 424) built on this work by asserting that norms of international sovereignty created material incentives against intervention.

Following the initial use of vulnerability to explain Africa's experiences with secessionist conflict, the vulnerability school of thought was expanded to other regions of the world and refined. Heraclides (1990, 374) through multiple case studies of secessionist conflict covering Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia, confirmed the conventional wisdom surrounding vulnerability, but added a few notable caveats to the theory, namely that states would intervene on behalf of the side that is adjacent to their territory. In *Age of Secession* (2016), Griffiths argues the international system has acted as an insurance policy for weak states against foreign intervention in secessionist movements. While the vulnerability school of thought was once the dominant school of thought in the literature on foreign intervention in separatist conflicts, increasing challenges have arisen through the ethnicity and power schools of thought.

According to vulnerability theory, domestic separatist ambitions and international norms of non-intervention should have constrained Russia. This was, of course, not the case. Russia intervened in Georgia in 2008, Crimea in 2014, Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020, and Ukraine in 2022.

We must therefore seek other understandings of Russian intervention in separatist conflicts.

Ethnicity in Foreign Intervention in Separatist Conflict—The Liberal Approach

According to the ethnicity school of thought, ethnic ties motivate foreign intervention in separatist conflicts. Numerous scholars have suggested that domestic political incentives influence political elites to pursue a policy of intervention along ethnic lines (Saideman 2002; 2007; 1997; Nome 2013; Littlefield 2009). The most dominant scholar in pioneering and advancing the ethnicity school of thought has been Stephen M. Saideman. He argues that intervention in separatist conflict on behalf of ethnical kinship becomes a significant domestic political consideration for the intervening nation (Saideman 2002, 28).

More recently, scholars have gone beyond Saideman's work. For example, Nome (2013, 755-756) finds that ethnic composition is a better predictor of what side a state will support in a separatist conflict. Scott Littlefield (2009) adds to the ethnicity school of thought by highlighting that Russia used 'ethnic identity', in the form of passport distribution, to advance its geopolitical interest to involve itself on behalf of Georgia's regions in the Russo-Georgian War. The ethnicity school of thought explains, in part, Russia's decision to invade Georgia in 2008. Then Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin stated that Russian military operations in Georgia were "well-founded and legitimate and moreover necessary", in order to prevent what he interpreted as genocide by the Georgian government against South Ossetins (Shields 2008). Russia has not however intervened on behalf of separatists in other former Soviet states. For example, Moldova has seen pro-Russian separatism since the early 1990s but Russia has not intervened there. Such instances expose the ethnicity's schools limitations, especially in the FSU.

Power in Foreign State's Involvement in Separatist Conflict—The Neo-Realist Approach

The power school of thought sees states' motivations for intervening in separatist conflicts resulting from self-interest to maximize their power (Huddleston 2021; Abushov 2021; Sterio 2013; Sari 2019). The power maximization school of thought is divided on the scope of states power maximization goals. One group of scholars see power maximization being centered on a state's international power position (Sterio 2013; Huddleston 2021). However, a second group of scholars see power maximization as resulting from regional power concerns (Sari 2019; Abushov 2021). This school of thought has emerged as a rising challenge to conventional

wisdom on foreign intervention in separatist conflict and the primary challengers to the ethnicity school of thought.

Scholars have advanced power in two distinct forms. The first form asserts that power maximization is centred on the international system. Sterio (2013) advances that sovereignty is unequal, with major powers imposing 'conditional' sovereignty on weaker states. Sterio (2013) further advances that when states deny self-determination movements freedom and crush these rebellions, major powers are justified to act in secessionist conflicts to prevent human rights abuses. On the other hand, Huddleston argues that third parties intervene in separatist conflicts out of self-interest, in order to maintain the stability of the international system (2021, 1208). While power maximization through the international system has partly explained the reasons for states' support of foreign separatist conflicts, a set of scholars argue that the international system is too broad to cover the entirety of states' decisions to support foreign separatists.

The idea of regional power maximization has been advanced by some scholars as the reason for states support for foreign separatist groups. Sari (2019) advances that ethnicity is not an accurate predictor of foreign intervention in separatist conflict. Sari's (2019) analysis of Indonesia's involvement in multiple separatist conflicts reveals that Indonesia intervened in separatist conflicts to maximize its regional power instead of on ethnic and religious lines. Abushov (2021) applies power maximization to Russia's recognition of Georgia's separatist provinces—South Ossetia and Abkhazia—as Abushov (2021, 18) found that Russia recognized the separatist regions out of self-interests, as bilateral relations with Georgia broke down. Regional power maximization explains states' decisions to intervene in separatist conflicts not explained by the power maximization school's international system argument. However, what both these sets of scholars agree on is that power maximization is an important tool for understanding why states support separatist groups in foreign separatist conflicts.

Power maximization has become an emerging school of thought in the literature on foreign intervention in separatist conflicts, challenging both the vulnerability and ethnicity schools of thought. The power and ethnicity schools of thought have emerged as the most relevant schools of thought in my study on Russian elite rhetoric, forming the basis of the concepts I use in this paper.

Theory

Studies using elites' behaviour to understand foreign intervention in conflict have been undertaken in the past. Keller et al (2020, 289) uses US presidents' risk perception as a way to explain foreign intervention in conflicts. My work uses elite behaviour—rhetoric—to show that Russia's more assertive actions in frozen separatist conflicts in the FSU can be forecasted. While

my work is pioneering in the context of using elite rhetoric to forecast Russian aggression, previous literature has shown elite rhetoric to be a valuable tool in understanding foreign policy decisions (Keller, Grant, and Foster 2020; Sagarzazu and Thies 2019; Teles Fazendeiro 2018).

The literature on rhetoric explaining foreign policy behaviours has been used to describe a wide variety of international phenomena. Sagarzazu and Thies (2019, 212) found that increasing oil prices explained increasing anti-imperialist rhetoric from Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, which thus indicates the ability to pursue a more antagonistic foreign policy. Teles and Fazenderio (2018) found that as international pressures increased on Uzbekistan in the early 2000s, Islam Karimov's rhetoric became more exclusionary towards the West. Those pressures therein precipitated Uzbekistan's disengagement with the West (Teles Fazendeiro 2018). While some scholars in political science may not be convinced that rhetoric is an effective tool in foreign policy analysis, Teles and Fazenderio (2018), and Sagarzazu and Thies (2019) show that elite rhetoric can potentially be a valuable tool in understanding foreign policy decisions. My work will advance the literature that uses elite rhetoric in foreign policy analysis, through analyzing Russian elite rhetoric's ability to forecast Russian aggression in frozen separatist conflicts—an untapped field in text analysis research in the Russian studies field.

The use of text analysis methods in research relating to Russian foreign policy is extremely thin, and the literature that is available is concentrated on Russia's attempts to interfere in the 2016 US Presidential election (Badawy et al. 2019; Deb et al. 2019; Dutt, Deb, and Ferrara 2019; Ghanem, Buscaldi, and Rosso 2019). Further all of these studies centre their text analysis solely on Russia's social media campaigns directed at the 2016 US Election, neglecting Russian elites' rhetoric (Badawy et al. 2019; Deb et al. 2019; Dutt, Deb, and Ferrara 2019; Ghanem, Buscaldi, and Rosso 2019). My work intends to use the utility of elite rhetoric to understand the context of foreign policy decisions, while forming a new direction for text analysis research relating to the Russian federation.

To test whether Russian elite rhetoric can forecast Russian aggression in frozen separatist conflicts in the FSU, I have developed two hypotheses:

> H1: Russian elite rhetoric will be most concentrated on power and ethnic concerns surrounding Georgia between 2003-2008, compared to my other case studies.

I would expect to see references to NATO and humanitarian concerns to be prevalent in Russian elite rhetoric during the Rose Revolution in Georgia. If Russian elite government figures are increasingly talking about NATO and the abuses faced by Russian citizens living in Georgia's separatist provinces, it would signal Russian governmental figures' concerns over Russia's loss of control of this region. If Georgia during the Rose Revolution is my only case study to

experience increased rhetoric over power and ethnic concerns, then it will indicate that when Russian elites increase their rhetoric on power and ethnic concerns, we can forecast future Russian aggression.

> H2: Russian elite rhetoric relating to Georgia's separatists between 2003-2008 will be most negative out of my case studies.

I expect an increase in negative rhetoric by Russian elite government figures during the Rose Revolution in Georgia, as Russia felt threatened by potential NATO membership and access to peoples it says are ethnic Russians. I expect that due to these considerations, Russian elite rhetoric aimed at Georgia over its policy to its separatist region would be significantly more negative than any other case study I examine. If Russian elite rhetoric is significantly more negative during the Rose Revolution in Georgia, it will suggest that Russian elite rhetoric can signal future Russian aggression and thus can be used as a forecasting mechanism.
These hypotheses will allow me to test whether Russian elite rhetoric is able to forecast Russian aggression in frozen separatist conflicts, as it happened when Russian power and ethnic concerns were at a heightened period in Georgia—during the Rose Revolution. This is the only period in my cases that Russia militarily intervened.

Methods and Data

In order to test whether Russian elite rhetoric can forecast Russian military interventions in frozen separatist conflicts with heighted power and ethnic concerns, I have conducted various forms of text analysis. Text annotation has always been an important tool to political science research, but the rapid rise in the availability of text as data and the growing interest in text annotation has provided new opportunities for text analysis projects (Cardie & Wilkerson 2008). Despite the growing shift towards research methods involving text analysis in political science research, few research projects focusing on Russia have included text analysis in their research design. My project intends to fill a gap in the literature and provide a platform for the feasibility of subsequent research projects centered on elite Russian rhetoric.

To test whether Russian elite rhetoric can forecast Russian military aggression in frozen separatist conflicts, I collected 180 news articles containing elite Russian government figures' quotes, that relate to either Georgia or Moldova's separatist regions. The articles were selected based on the criteria of whether they included a quote from a Russian elite. These articles were found on Nexus Uni, Factiva, and Russia Today's websites. All articles are in English and contain quotes from Russian elite government figures that held senior executive, legislative, military posts, or represented governmental ministries—some articles include quotes from multiple Russian elite government figures. Some quotes have been adapted to include material the news articles authors included to provide context to the quote.

To account for the quotes' regional variations, I have divided them into two categories—Western origin and Russian origin. Quotes that are determined to be of Western origin are from North America and European Union countries. The quotes are focused on my two chosen case study regions—Moldova and Georgia—covering three time periods for each region: 1992-2002, 2003-2008, 2009-2022, forming a total of 6 case studies. The distribution of the news articles are as follows, 14 from each regional source regarding Moldova from 1992-2002, 11 from each regional source regarding Moldova from 2003-2008, 15 from each regional source from 2009-2022. In Georgia there are 19 from each regional source from 1992-2002, 17 from each regional source from 2003-2008, and 14 from each regional source from 2009-2022. The news articles I have collected were manually scraped for their text and inputted into a spreadsheet in order for computer assisted text analyses to test my hypotheses.

In order to test the collected elite Russian quotes, I have conducted various forms of computer assisted text analyses performed on the integrated development environment, R Studio. In order to test my first hypothesis, I graphically displayed the word frequency in the language used by Russian elites. I compare the word frequency that Russian elites used in their quotes across my case studies to determine whether certain Russian elite rhetoric was more prevalent during the Rose Revolution in Georgia from 2003-2008. This test will help to identify if certain words are more indicative of aggressive Russian intentions, as if certain words were more prevalent or only used frequently during the 2003-2008 Georgian case study, this would indicate those words could potentially identify future Russian aggression. This test will also be able to identify whether alternative explanations—domestic or international—explain Russian aggression or an increase in rhetoric, through the increased prevalence in the mention of certain words. I have also visually represented the results of the word frequency graphs, through word clouds to visually clarify Russian elites' rhetoric.

In order to visually represent the results of the word frequency graphs, I have taken the results of the word frequency tests and displayed the results in word clouds for each case study. Word Clouds have allowed me to graph the results in a more intuitive manner, as words are sized proportionately to their frequency. When combined with the results of the word frequency graphs, word clouds clarify which words I should take a deeper look into for my sentiment and bigram analyses.

I also employ bigram analysis of Russian elite quotes in each case study to better understand how Russian elite governmental figures signal aggressive intentions. Bigram analyses compare the relationships between words, by identifying the most common pairs of words within bodies of text (Silge & Robinson, 2017). This allows researchers to identify words that have been frequently used with one another, allowing for the potential identification of trends in the text

examined. I have performed two bigram analyses of the corpus of Russian elite quotes. First, I looked at what combinations of bigrams are most prevalent in Russian elite rhetoric and if this can identify trends in how Russian elites signal aggressive intentions. I only included word combinations that appear more than one time, in order to show the word combinations that appear most frequently. I hope to identify if pairs of words, or certain points of focus in Russian elites' word combinations in the Georgian case study differed from the five other case studies. This will help test hypothesis one (H1) as I will be able to further identify pairs of words that are connected providing further insight into the issues Russian elites focus on.

Second, I use bigram analysis to identify how Russian elites talk about the regional challenges Russia faced. By using the bigrams of 'NATO', 'Georgian', 'Leadership', and 'Russian', we can contextualize these politically charged words and better analyze their use.. Understanding key words relating to power challenges to Russian influence in the FSU will potentially provide insight into how Russian elites perceived these key words relating to power challenges. Understanding the words that are most associated with Russian aggression will allow me to refine my understanding of my second hypothesis and help determine whether Russian elite rhetoric's sentiment can potentially forecast Russian aggression.

To test my hypothesis of whether Russian elite rhetoric was most negative towards Georgia during the Rose Revolution, I have conducted a sentiment analysis of elite Russian quotes with the focus on negative sentiment. I have used the Bing Dictionary to compare sentiment scores within the corpus of Russian elite quotes for each case study. I have chosen the Bing Dictionary, as it classifies words in a binary fashion into positive and negative categories (Silge & Robinson, 2017). If I find that Russian elites' rhetoric was significantly more negative in sentiment during the Rose Revolution, this will offer evidence in support of my hypothesis that Russian elite rhetoric can forecast Russian interventions in frozen separatist conflicts. I am also conducting secondary analyses in addition to word frequency, sentiment, and bigram analyses, but these will be less generalizable than the previous methods.

I have analyzed the distribution of Russian elite governmental figures' rhetoric over my time periods. In order to do this, I have graphically displayed the distribution of Russian elite quotes, divided each case study region into separate categories, and displayed them within the corresponding time periods. I have only included cases where instances of elite rhetoric were greater than two to avoid cluttering the visualization of the distribution of the Russian elite rhetoric. I suspect that increased rhetoric by elite Russian governmental figures in important posts—such as the presidency, prime minister, and foreign minister—is likely during the Rose Revolution. Understanding not only what elite Russian government figures say, but who is saying it is extremely valuable for creating an effective forecasting mechanism for Russian aggression in frozen separatist conflicts. I will not be able to generalize any results I find in this

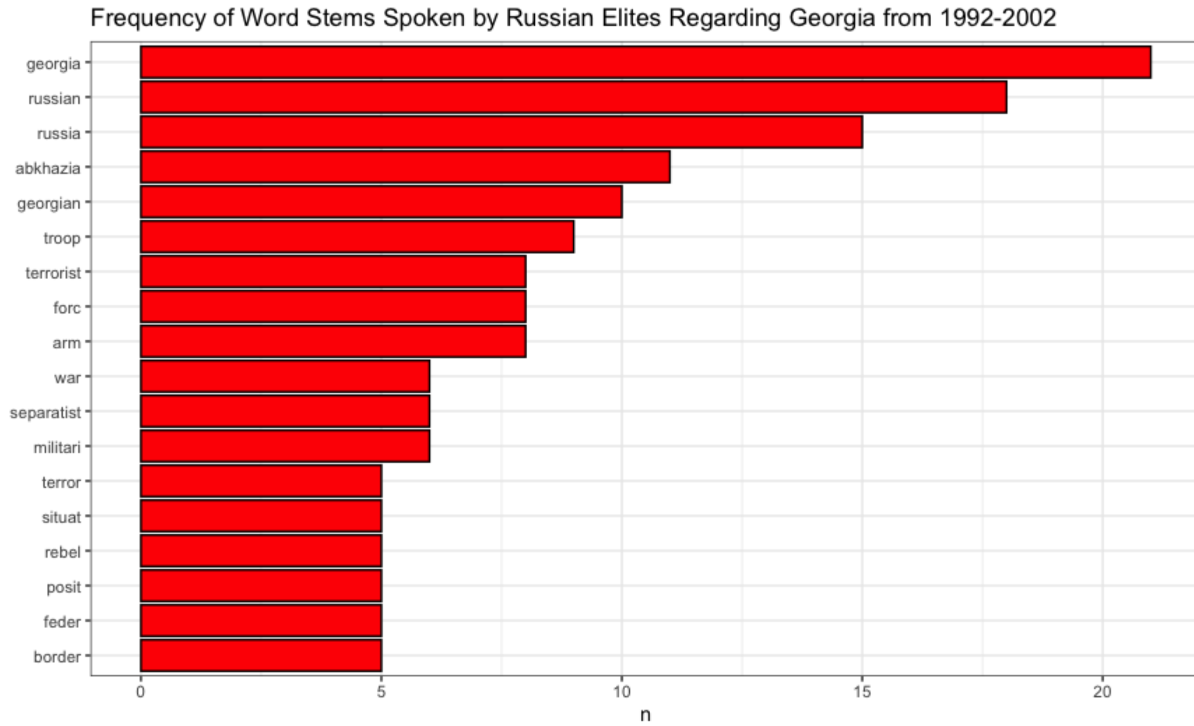
analysis, as my sample size is not adequate in covering the entirety of statements made by elite Russian governmental figures, but I predict that in future works my findings will hold.

The last major secondary analysis I have conducted is the overall sentiment difference between Western and Russian news sources. Understanding whether Russian and Western news sources cover Russian elites' interaction with frozen separatist conflicts differently could be a valuable tool in forecasting Russian aggression. If news articles from either source were significantly different in sentiment during the Rose Revolution in Georgia than in other periods and case studies, this could provide another avenue for forecasting Russian aggression in frozen separatist conflicts. While I have attempted to show the potential ability of Russian elite rhetoric in forecasting future Russian aggression, I do have to be careful with the selected data I am using.

A potential bias that comes to mind in my research design is an interpretation bias. My research design inevitably includes the selection criteria and biases of the journalists that publish Russian elites' quotes. The omission of select portions of these quotes could alter the meaning or the way in which my text analysis interprets the quotes. A better source of data would have been Russian Duma transcripts, as they would have allowed me to analyze elite Russian rhetoric in Russia's legislative branch. However, these are only available in Russia, which is unfeasible for me to access due to budget, time, geopolitical conditions, and language constraints. Nonetheless, quotes published in news media offer the comparative advantage of including statements made outside the Duma and therein offer a more representative dataset. Hence, while the data sources I have chosen are inferior to Duma transcripts, the current data is sufficient for understanding the potential ability of Russian elite rhetoric to forecast Russian aggression in frozen separatist conflicts in the FSU. In future works I hope to access Duma transcripts as I expect my findings to hold with that data.

Results

Russian elite rhetoric in news articles concerning Georgia and Moldova's separatist region from 1992-2022 showed significant trends which prove useful for identifying future Russian aggression.



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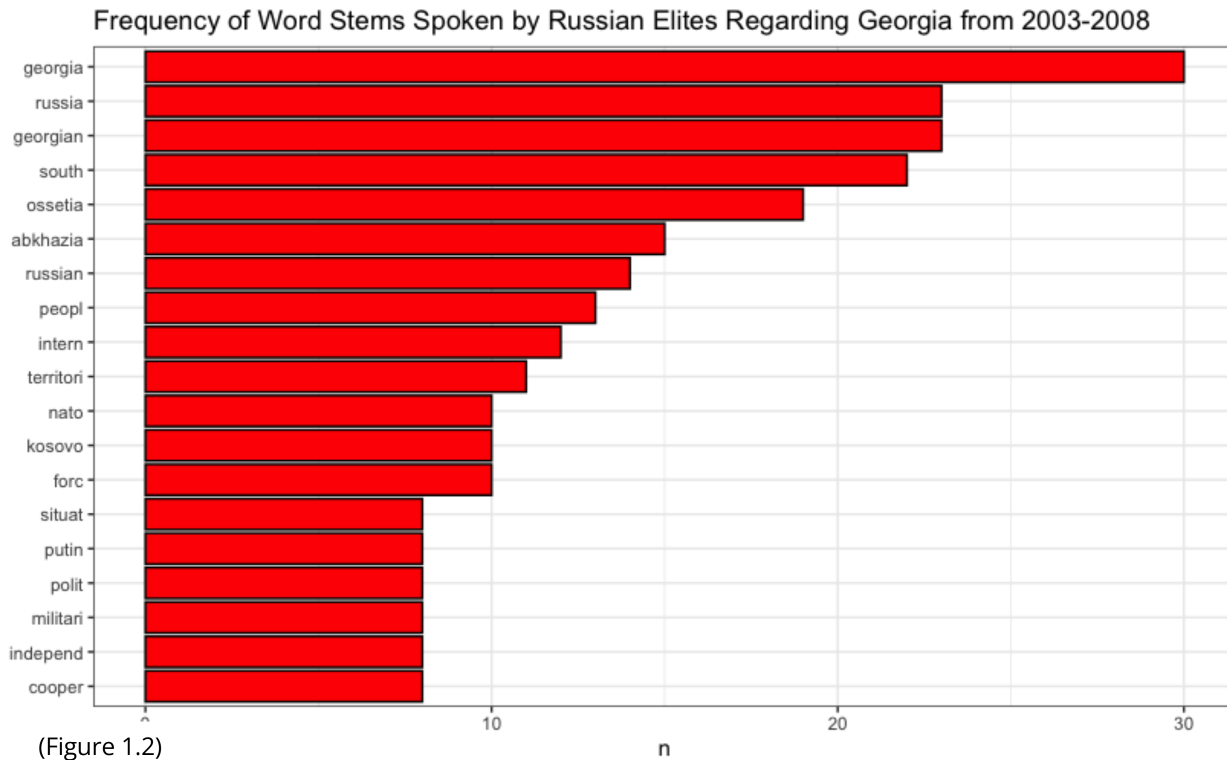

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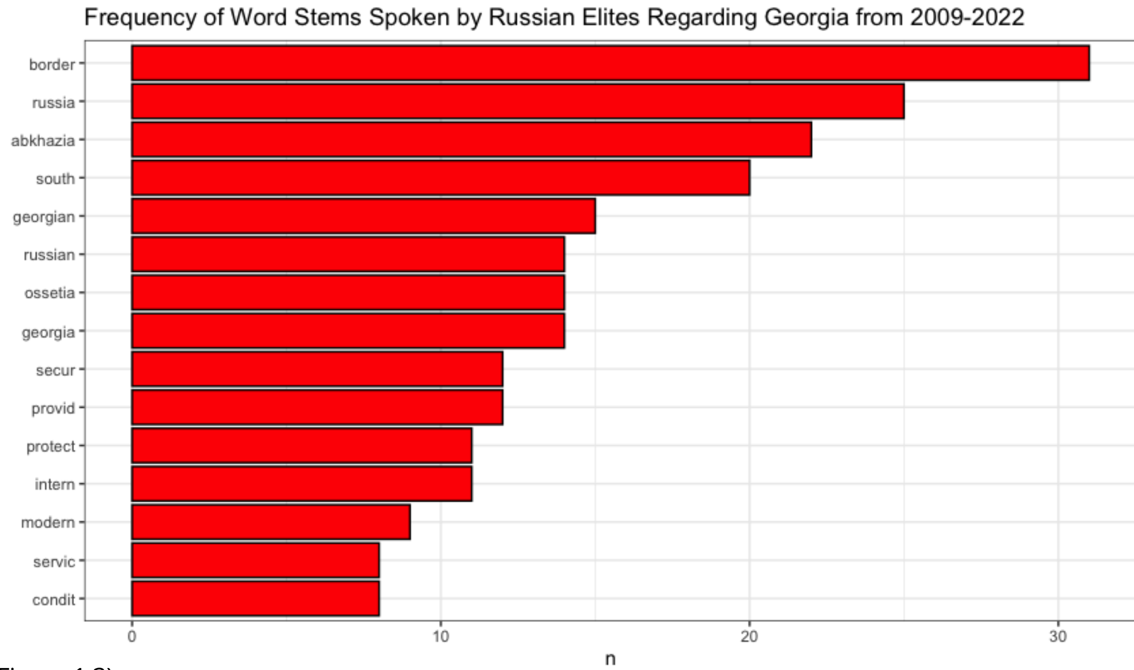

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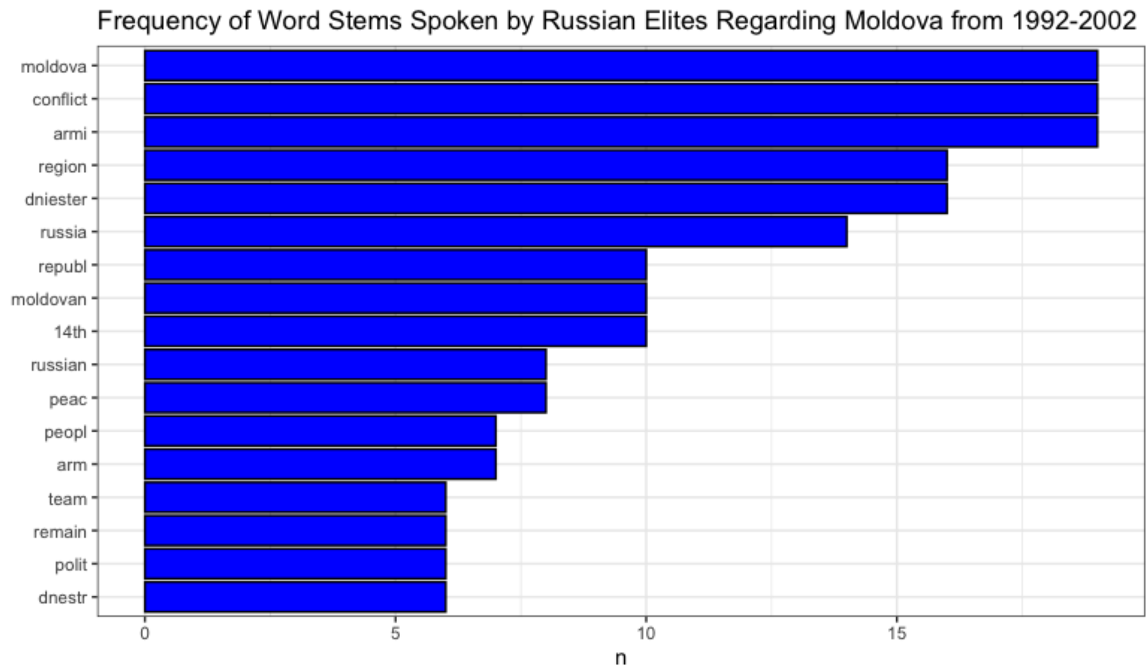

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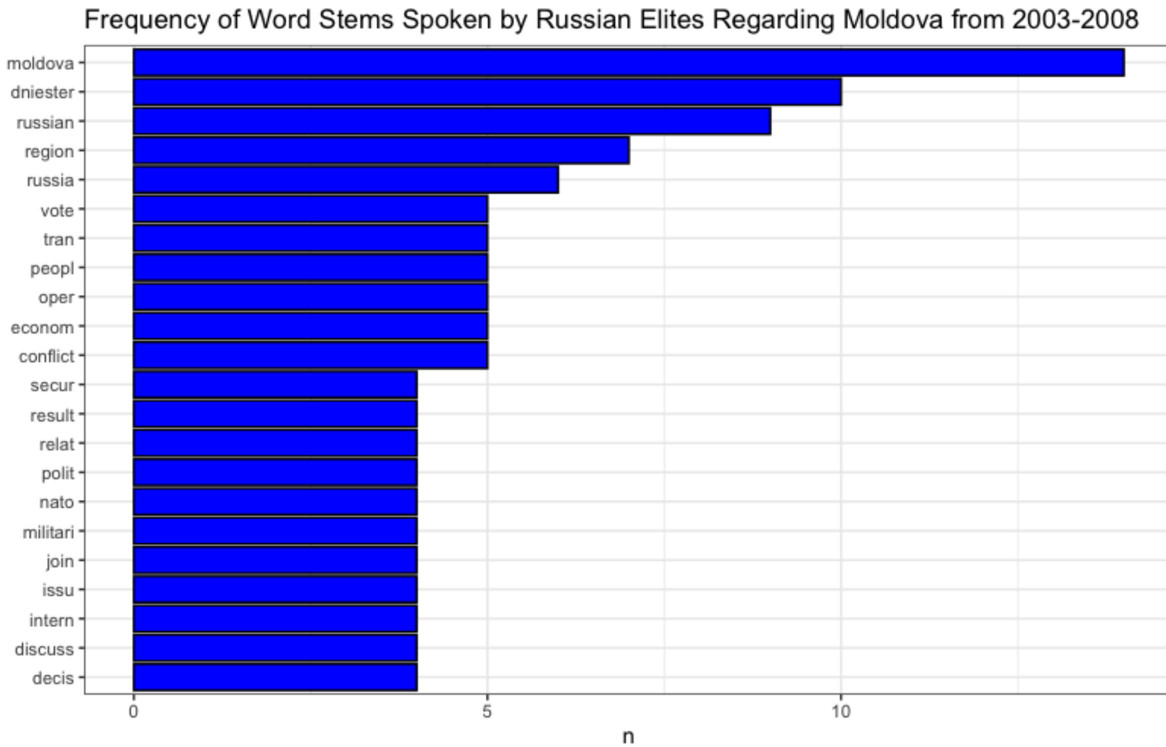

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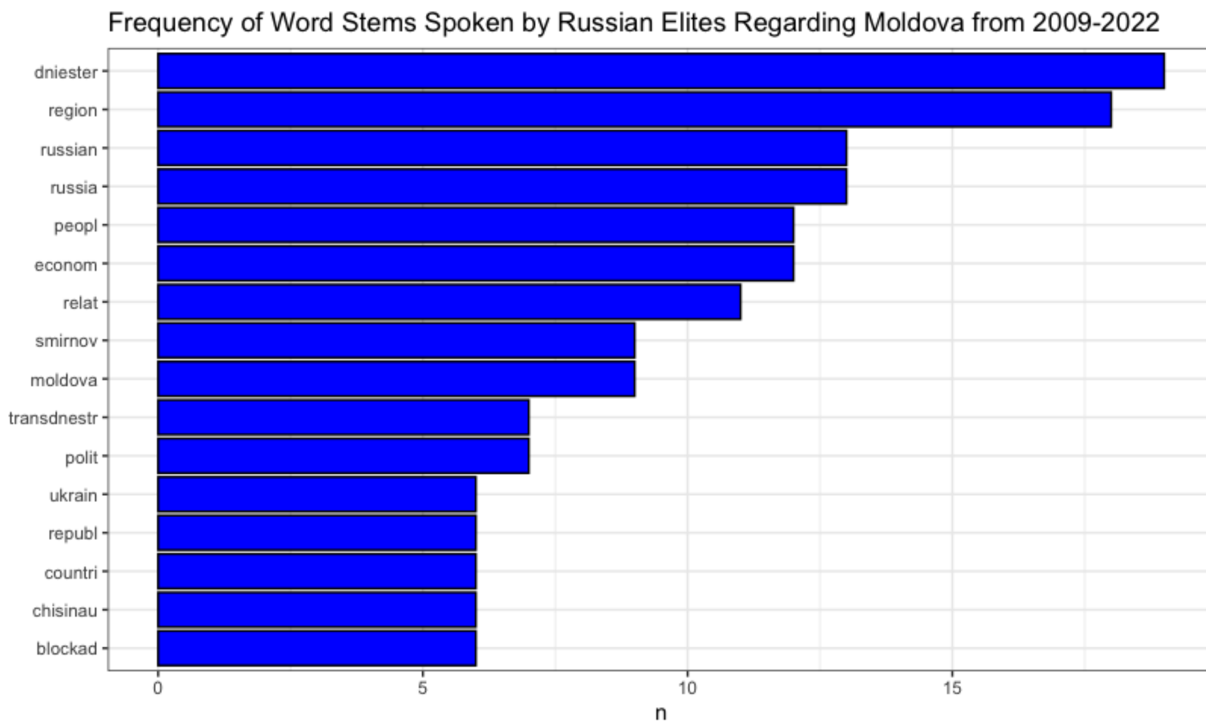


(Figure 1.6)

Figure 1.2 displays that Russian elite rhetoric centered mostly on power concerns during the period of 2003-2008 in Georgia out of any case study (See Figures 1.1-1.6). The prominent

presence of the stems of "NATO" and "Kosovo" in Russian elite rhetoric regarding Georgia between 2003-2008 highlights Russian elites' concerns over Western challenges to Russia's geopolitical power within the region. Geopolitical concerns for Russian elites such as "NATO" and "Kosovo" did not appear in any other word stem graph at close to the same frequency as the 2003-2008 Georgian case study. Instead, every other case study focused on domestic challenges. For example, in Figures 1.1 and 1.4, the majority of Russian elite rhetoric focused on the civil wars in Moldova and Georgia. In Figures 1.3 and 1.6, Russian elite rhetoric focused on economic relations between Russia and the separatists regions in Moldova and Georgia. These findings are reflected in the word clouds, as power concern words only dominate Russian elite rhetoric in the 2003-2008 Georgian case study.

(Figure 2.1)

(Figure 2.2)

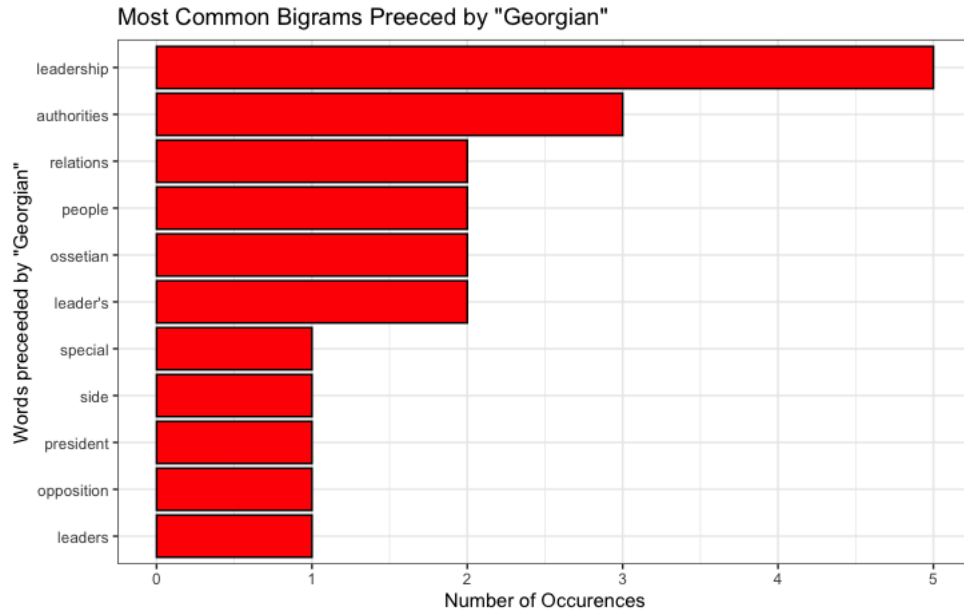
(Figure 2.3)

(Figure 2.4)

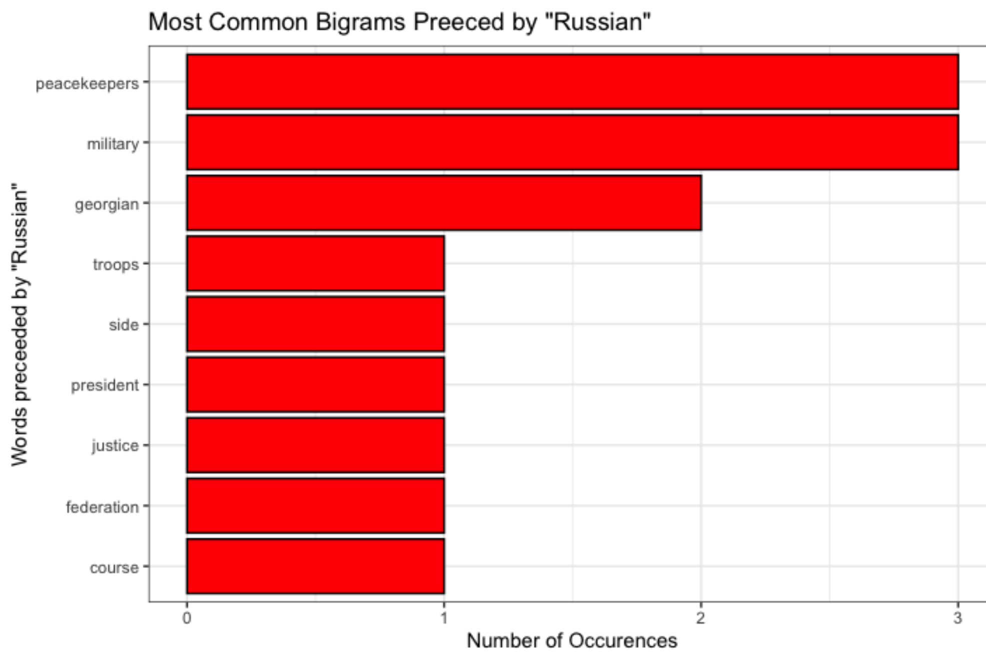
(Figure 2.5)

(Figure 2.6)

Figure 2.2 shows Russian elites' fear of challenges to its regional power, as stems like NATO and Kosovo continue to be highly represented. An interesting note from Figure 2.2 is the presence of "Independ" and "Recognit", as these words appear in a greater frequency—as highlighted by their size—than any other case study. This is a notable finding as it potentially shows Russian elites' actions to counteract Western challenges to its regional power in Georgia, through the recognition of its separatist regions. In combination with Figure 1.2, Figure 2.2 highlights a trend of Russian concern over regional power in elite rhetoric, which I further explore through understanding how Russian elites use these words.



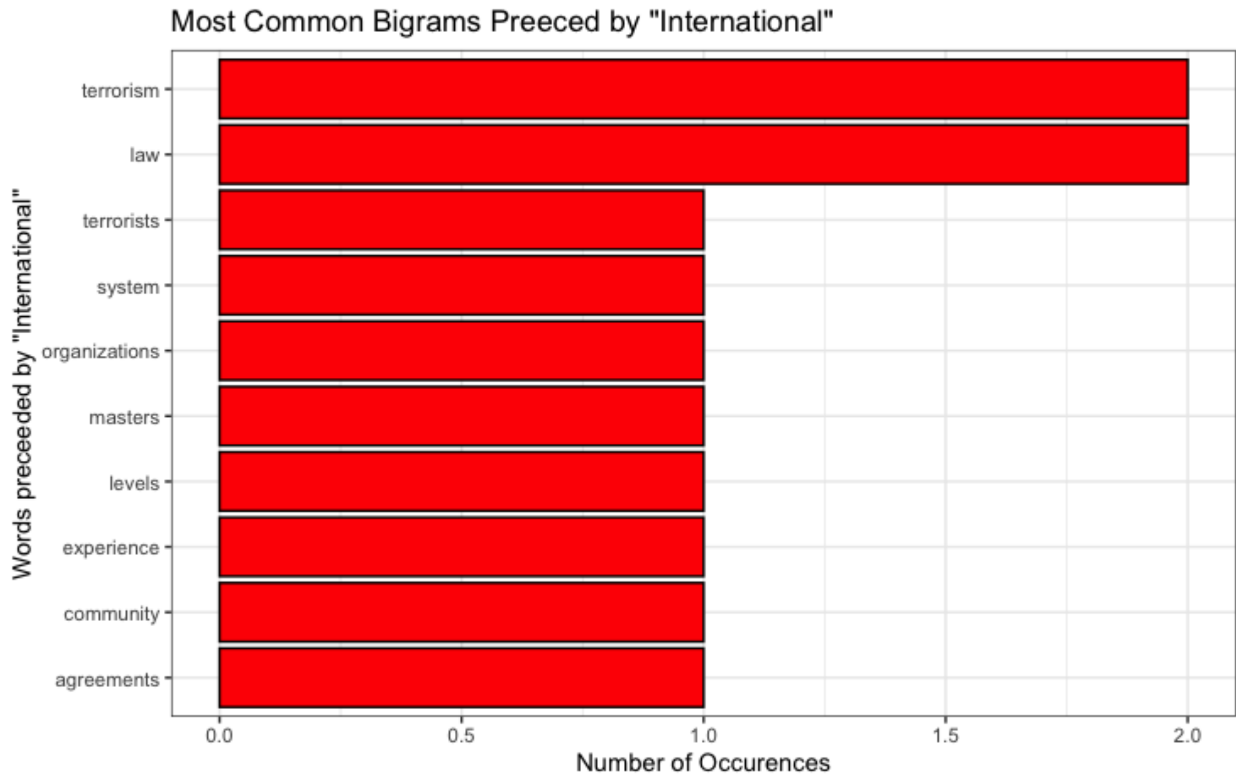
(Figure 3.1)



(Figure 3.2)

To further understand the intricacies of the Georgian case study, I analyzed words that were preceded by words related to Russian power concerns. Figures 3.1—3.4 display words related to key challenges against Russian power in the region. In Figure 3.1 Russian elites' rhetoric when using the word "Georgian" was most concentrated on Georgia's leadership. This most

likely results from Russian elites seeing Georgian leaders actions as detrimental to Russian interests in the region. Figure 3.2 saw a dominant focus on Russian peacekeepers. This makes sense as Russia maintains a military presence in regions where separatist conflicts are frozen, in order to strengthen Russia's presence and balance against Western expansion (Sagramoso 2020). These figures highlight Russian elites' focus on the regional actors and their effects on Russian power within the region, whereas Figures 3.3—3.4 focus on international actors' effects on Russian power within the FSU.



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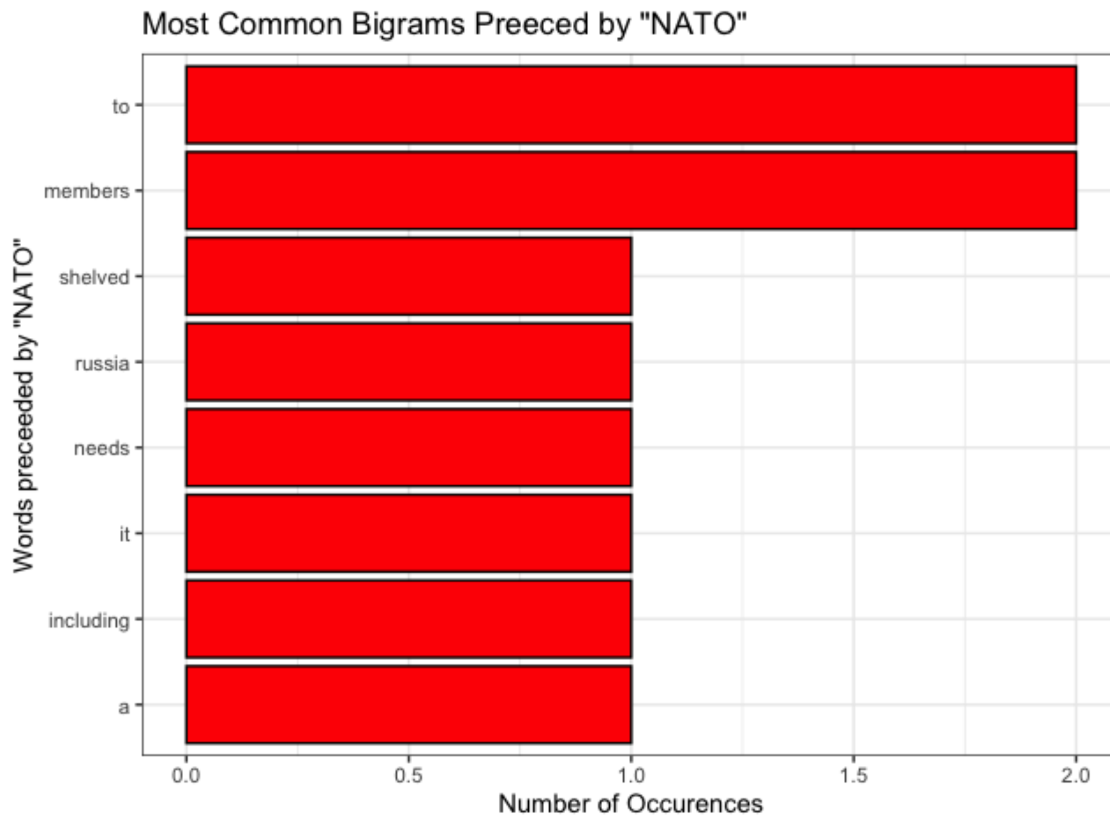
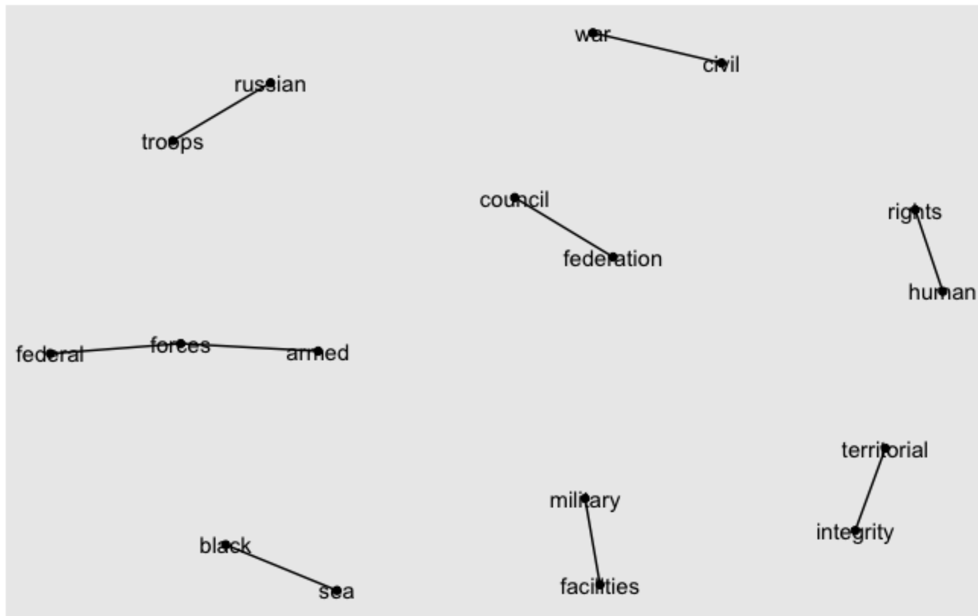
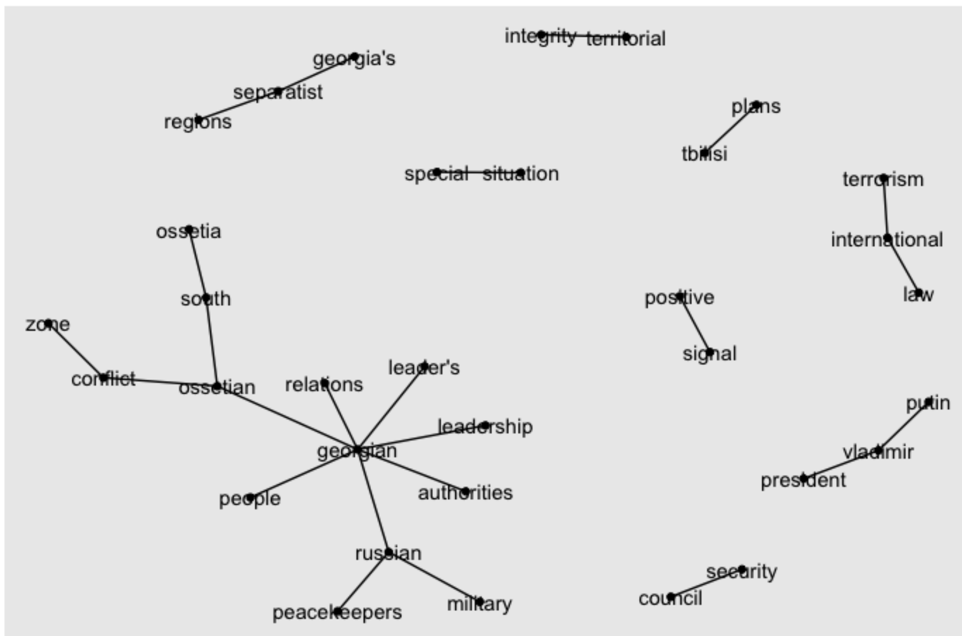


(Figure 3.4)

Figure 3.3 saw two areas of focus, the international community and law, as well as international terrorism. Russian focus on the international community and law again reinforces Russian fears of their geopolitical influence being undermined. An interesting note is that terrorism appeared frequently in Russian rhetoric regarding the international community. However, I did notice in the text scrapping of the articles that Russia continually criticized Georgian leadership over security threats regarding potential Georgian terrorist attacks against Russia, which relates back again to Russian criticism of Georgian leadership seen in Figure 3.1. Figure 3.4 highlights Russia's concerns with NATO members, as well as what I interpreted as shelving of NATO expansion. It is no surprise to see NATO expansion as a dominant focus for Russian elites, as Russia is extremely fearful of the alliance. Figures 3.1—3.4 shows that Russian elite rhetoric was concentrated on geopolitical concerns, which is further supported by the bigram chart for the Georgian case study between 2003—2008.



(Figure 4.1)



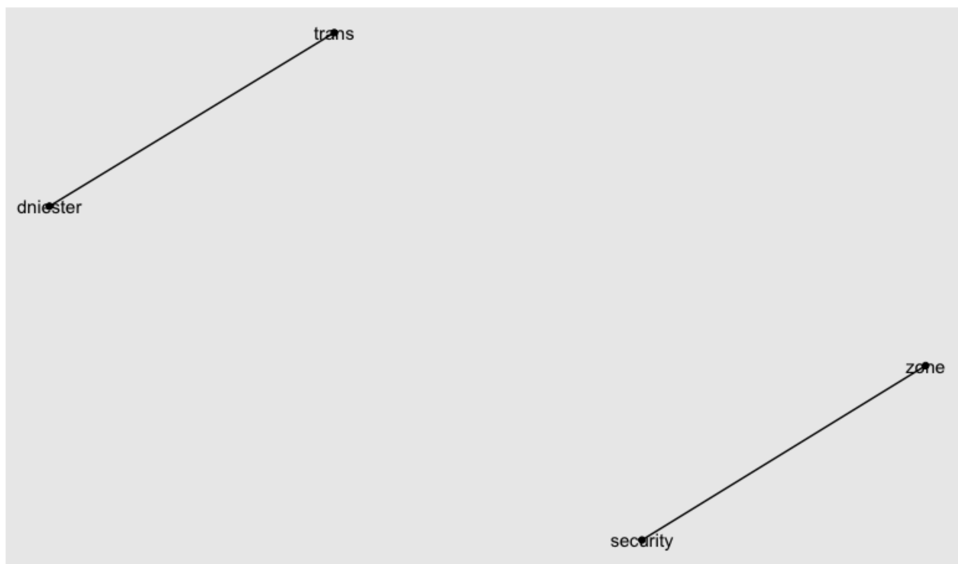
(Figure 4.2)

Bigram Network for 2009-2022 Russian Elite Rhetoric Towards Georgia

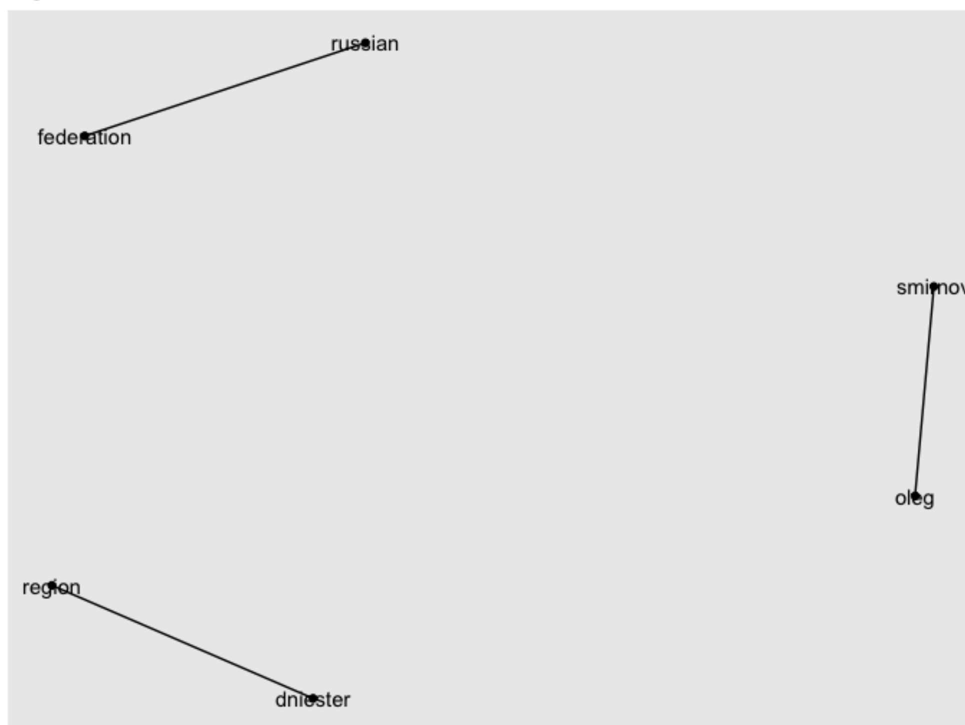
(Figure 4.3)

Bigram Network for 1992-2002 Russian Elite Rhetoric Towards Moldova

(Figure 4.4)



(Figure 4.5)

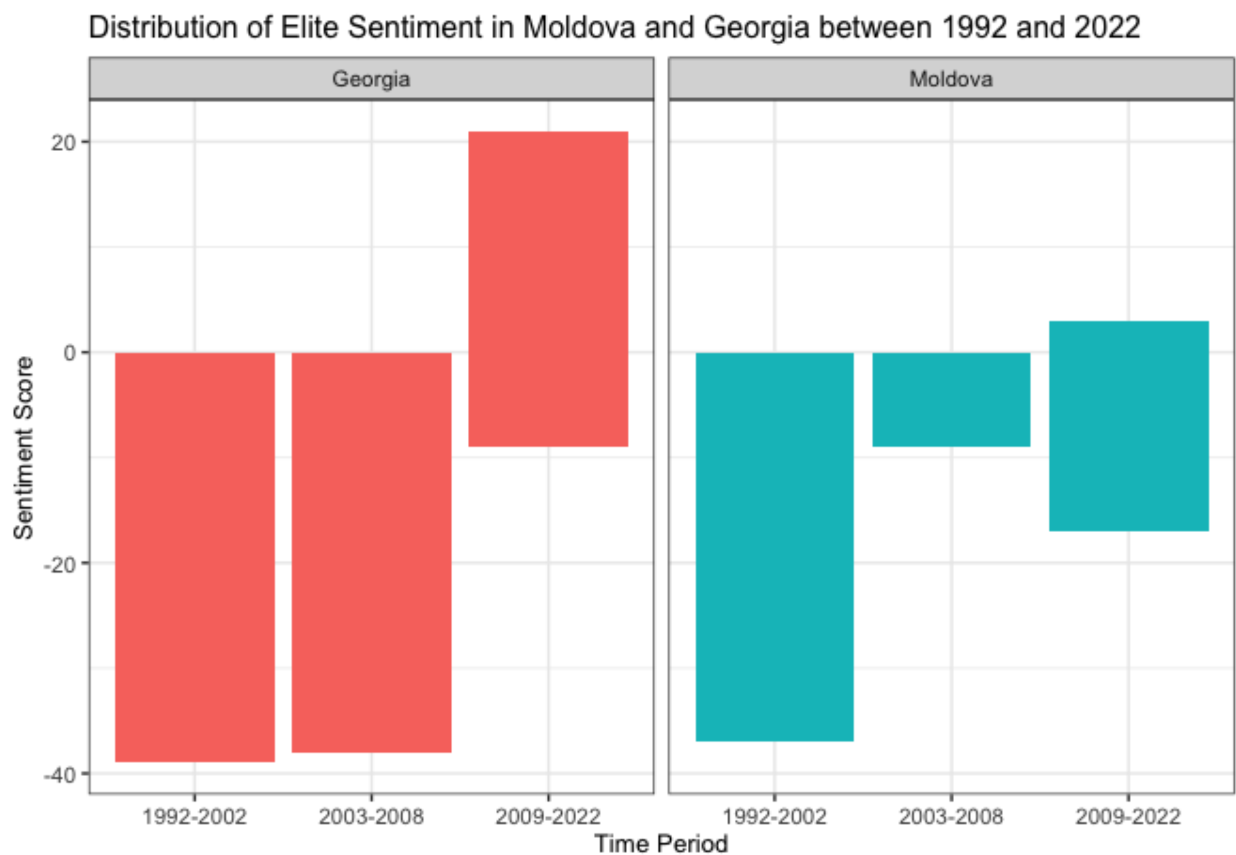


(Figure 4.6)

Using bigram analysis, Figure 4.2 identifies that the most frequent combination of Russian elite rhetoric regarding Georgia between 2003—2008 focuses on the lead—up to the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. Reading the bigram links on the graph, key topics such as Georgia's leadership, the United Nations Security Council, international law, and Russian peacekeepers are highlighted as the most frequently used combinations of words by Russian elites. These topics

do not appear in any other links in bigram charts for the other case studies covered (see Figures 4.1, 4.3—4.6). Russian elites in the other bigram charts instead focus on topics such as the civil wars in Moldova and Georgia in the early 1990s and focus on domestic security and society in the 2009—2022 case studies.

The results of both Figures 1.2 and 4.2 in part confirms hypothesis one (H1), since Russian elite rhetoric between 2003—2008 centered on power concerns regarding Georgia. However, I am not fully able to confirm my hypothesis one, as the data does not provide conclusive links between Russian elite rhetoric and increased ethnic concerns. Understanding that Russian elite rhetoric showed increased concerns over power between 2003—2008 regarding Georgia is valuable in helping to verify whether Russian elite sentiment was most negative within the case studies examined.



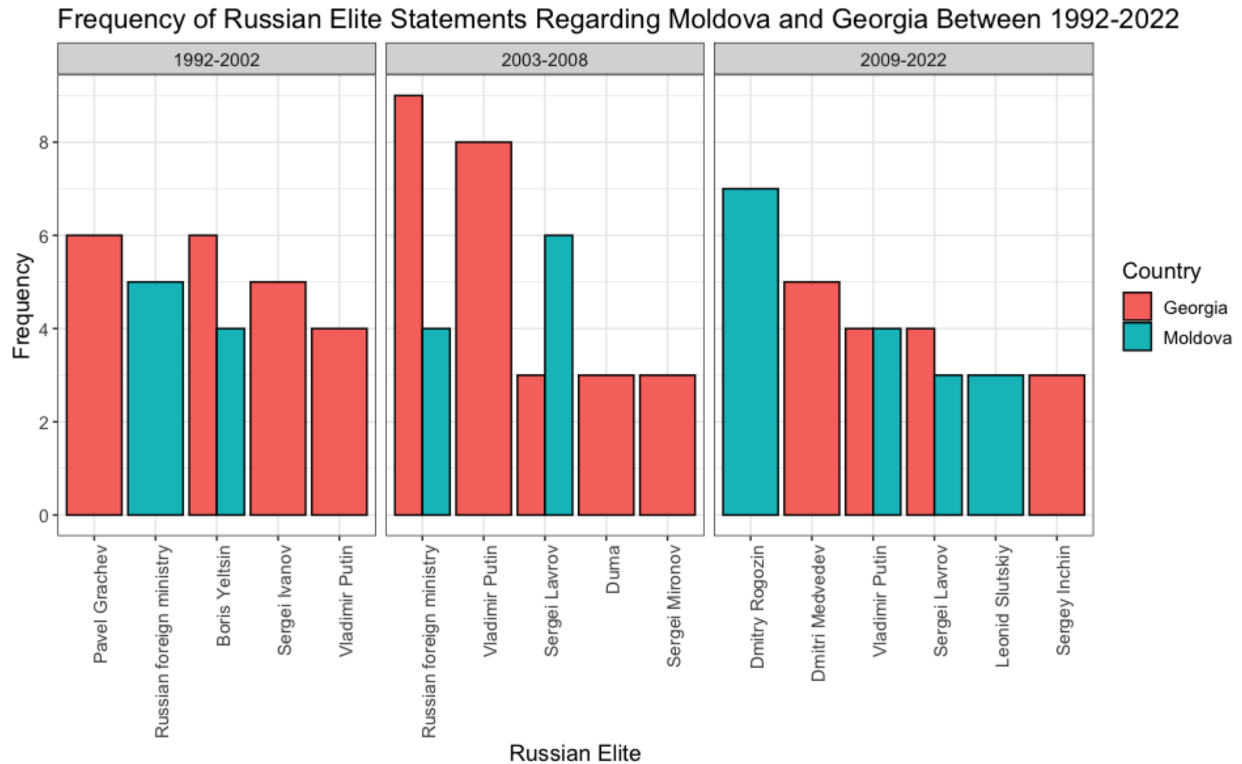
(Figure 5.1)

In testing hypothesis two (H2), Figure 5.1 shows that Russian elite rhetoric sentiment was actually most negative in Georgia from 1992—2002, with sentiment levels of around the same negativity level in Georgia from 2003—2008 and Moldova from 1992—2002. While the data does not completely confirm hypothesis two (H2), it nonetheless suggests that Russian elite

rhetoric can predict Russian aggression in frozen separatist conflicts. Moldova experienced a significant drop off in rhetorical attention after its separatist conflict reached a frozen state in the 1990s, while Georgia between 2003—2008 did not. Russia went to war with Georgia in 2008, while military conflict in Moldova deescalated after 1992 alongside a cooling in Russian elite rhetoric. Further, the fact that the 1992—2002 case study periods showed extremely significantly negative elite rhetoric is a positive finding for using elite rhetoric to predict Russian aggression in frozen separatist conflicts. The 1992—2002 case studies saw periods of separatist conflict in both Moldova and Georgia, as well as the introduction of a limited number of Russian 'peacekeepers'. These results are an interesting trend for identifying Russian aggression forecasted by elite Russian rhetoric, but as I have noted previously, understanding the content of what Russian elites are saying is needed for this to be effective.

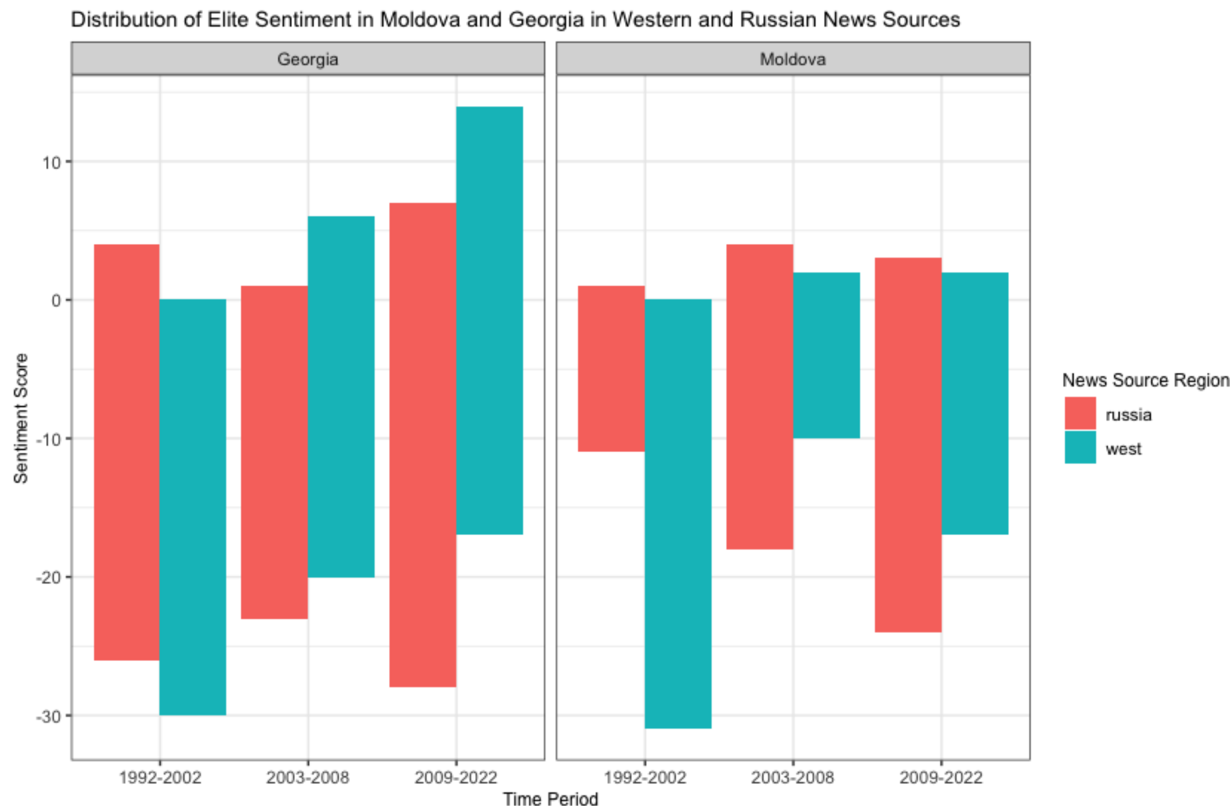
In Figure 4.1, Russian elite rhetoric is focused largely on two topics in Georgia between 1992—2002: The Georgian Civil War (1991—1993) and Russia's remaining military facilities following the war's conclusion. In comparison, Figure 4.2 shows that in Georgia between 2003—2008, Russian elite rhetoric focused on a multitude of topics associated with the lead up to the 2008 war. Russian elite rhetoric on Georgia between 2003—2008 focussed primarily on Georgian leadership, as illustrated by the bigram network in Figure 4.2. Russian elites' focus on Georgian leadership at that time signalled their growing frustration with Georgia's pull towards the West, which when combined with the results of Figure 5.1 allows for the identification of a potential forecasting mechanism of Russian aggression based on elite rhetoric.

To strengthen the forecasting capabilities of Russian elite rhetoric, more complete scrutiny of secondary tests undertaken in this paper is needed. Currently, these tests are not generalizable as they do not fully capture Russian elite rhetoric. The addition of documents that cover a more complete representation of statements from Russian elites needs to be undertaken in further work to determine whether these results will hold. A second way to increase these findings' utility is to analyze the independence that Russian political elites have in making these statements. I would expect limited autonomy in Russian elites' statements due to the authoritarian nature of the Russian political system. However, the results of these analyses provide some interesting findings, which I suspect will still hold with a more representative sample size.



(Figure 6.1)

In the first secondary test examining the distribution of elite Russian rhetoric, Figure 6.1 shows that Russian elite rhetoric regarding Georgia during the period of 2003—2008, was most concentrated between then President and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, and the Russian Foreign Ministry. This is notable, as it is the only period in which Figure 6.1 demonstrates any discernible difference in the frequency of statements by both the Presidency, Prime Minister, and Foreign Ministry. This finding presents the possibility that when attempting to create a forecasting mechanism for Russian aggression it is necessary to consider which elites speak and how often.



(Figure 6.2)

In testing whether Russian and Western news sources covered Russian involvement in frozen separatist conflicts differently, Figure 6.2 shows no clear differences in regional variation of news coverage. The only time period in which Figure 6.2 shows significant variation between regional sources was Moldova between 1992—2002. During that time, Western media coverage was significantly more negative than Russian sources. This highlights that differences in the sentiment scores between Western and Russian news sources is a poor data source when seeking to forecast Russian aggression in frozen separatist conflicts since there was only marginal variation between the news source regions—barring Moldova between 1992—2002.

The figures presented in this paper show some notable observations regarding elite Russian rhetoric and its potential to forecast military intervention. If these findings are further expanded to other instances of Russian aggression towards states with frozen separatist conflicts, it may be possible to identify when and where the next instance of Russian aggression may strike.

Discussion

Russian elite rhetoric may be a method for forecasting future Russian aggression in frozen separatist conflicts. Key trends in my 2003—2008 Georgian case study point to this conclusion. When Russian elite rhetoric centred around concerns over Russia's regional power, sentiment scores turned negative and signalled intervention. Further, I found that Russian elite rhetoric distribution is potentially significant in forecasting future aggression. However, in order for my findings to be confirmed, the scope of my current project needs to be expanded to include more case studies and more sources of Russian rhetoric.

While my work does not cover enough case studies or include enough observations to be generalizable for all Russian intervention in frozen separatist conflicts in the FSU, some key trends signal the potential for Russian elite rhetoric to forecast such aggression. Russian elite rhetoric during the period of 2003—2008 regarding Georgia became increasingly centered on geopolitical power concerns, when compared to the other case studies. Russian elite rhetoric also showed significant variation in the Georgian case study between 2003—2008 when compared to the Moldovan case study covering the same time period. Combining these trends, Russian elite rhetoric's sentiment showed that it could forecast Russian aggression but is dependent on certain conditions.

Russian elite rhetoric that is centred on concerns that relate to geopolitical standing and power are potentially valuable tools for forecasting Russian aggression in frozen separatist conflicts. During the case study of Georgia between 2003—2008, Russian elite's rhetoric was more highly concentrated on NATO, Kosovo, and the international community. During this time, Russia was concerned over future NATO expansion and the recognition of Kosovo. The concentration of Russian elite rhetoric on these topics highlights Russian concerns over its perceived regional hegemon status. Russian hegemonic status has been a contentious issue for Russian elites since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 expounded these concerns. Russia felt threatened by the NATO military action and worried that its inability to prevent it meant being sidelined to a lesser power in world affairs. future NATO military action and perceived that Russia was being sidelined to a lesser player in world affairs (Pavković 2020, 86-87). The shift of Russian elite rhetoric to a focus on geopolitical concerns in the 2003—2008 Georgian case study underscores this fear of the West. This is further highlighted by the fact that Russian elites began using combinations of language related to their concerns over the challenge to Russian control over the region.

As highlighted by Figure 4.2, bigram links show increasingly concentrated elite Russian rhetoric on Russian power concerns. When compared to the 1990s case studies of Moldova and Georgia, the 2003—2008 case study focuses on international actors—such as the UN Security Council—and primarily on Georgian leadership. Russian elite rhetoric also became more

centered on international law, as Russia saw the recognition of Kosovo as contrary to international law (Saradzhyan 2006). The recognition of Kosovo was a particularly polarizing event for Russian elites, as it further brought fears of future Western domination to a key strategic ally in Serbia. These fears date back to NATO's bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and its intervention in Kosovo. From that point, Russia increasingly saw NATO as an aggressive military alliance expanding eastward into the former Soviet Republics—something Russia understood as a direct security threat. Russia felt the need to counterbalance NATO's influence in the FSU (Thorun 2009). These bigram links combined with the increased frequency of words relating to power concerns in the 2003—2008 Georgian case study seems to be a part of how Russian elite's signalled their intent to respond to NATO's apparent power challenges through recognition of Georgia's separatist regions.

The 2003—2008 Georgian case study saw the most significant reference to recognition of separatist regions by Russian elites out of any case study examined. This is a notable finding because Russia recognized Georgia's separatist regions following the Russo-Georgian War. However, during the scraping of text, I observed that calls for recognition of these regions increased following the recognition of Kosovo in February of 2008. If Russian elites are frequently calling for recognition of separatist regions in the FSU, it again may point to Russia feeling geopolitically challenged. Thus, Russia is likely to militarily intervene in order to balance against this threat. Geopolitical power concerns were notably heightened in the bigram, word frequency graphs, and word clouds of the 2003—2008 Georgian case study, unlike any other case study I examined. This presents a potential combined mechanism of word frequency and sentiment negativity to potentially forecast future Russian aggression towards states in the FSU with frozen separatist conflicts.

While Russian elite sentiment was not the most negative during the 2003—2008 case study, the fact that it was the only case study that shows heightened negative sentiment and word frequency centred on geopolitical concerns presents potential viability of a combined mechanism for forecasting Russian aggression. Both Moldova and Georgia fought civil wars with separatist groups in the early 1990's, which has produced a large portion of the negative sentiment in Russian elite rhetoric—as highlighted by the bigram networks, word frequency, and sentiment contribution tests. These tests show that while Russian elite rhetoric was at similar scores for sentiment negativity, it was focused on different aspects related to the civil conflicts in both Moldova and Georgia. Further, when compared within the same time period, the Georgian case study highlights an interesting trend among the sentiment score of Russian elite rhetoric.

Between 2003—2008, Russian elite rhetoric regarding Georgia was significantly more negative than regarding Moldova. Russian elite rhetoric's significant drop in sentiment score for Moldova

between 2003—2008 is a notable trend because the 2003—2008 Moldovan case study shares similar characteristics to the Georgian case study for that time period but lacks the regional power threat to Russian hegemony and subsequent Russian invasion. We also see Russian sentiment rapidly improve in the 2009—2022 Georgian case study, as full NATO membership was taken off the table for Georgia and Russia-Georgian relations improved after the war. The fact that there was a significant drop in sentiment score in Russian elite rhetoric, when the presence of geopolitical power challenges were removed as well as the lack of Russian aggression in both the 2003—2008 Moldovan and 2009—2022 Georgian case studies, suggests that Russian elite rhetoric's sentiment score may be a viable tool in forecasting Russian aggression in frozen separatist conflicts.

When combined with the word frequency and bigram networks centred on regional power concerns, Russian elite rhetoric proves to be a viable framework for forecasting Russian aggression in frozen separatist conflicts in the FSU. This framework needs to be centred on the combination of both negative Russian elite rhetoric and the increased use of words relating to geopolitical challenges. Furthermore, forecasting Russian aggression in frozen separatist conflicts in the FSU based on Russian elite rhetoric can potentially be strengthened by looking deeper into Russian elites' language.

While the small sample size in this study is limited, the spike in rhetoric from both the Russian Foreign Ministry and then-Prime Minister and President Vladimir Putin is a notable trend that could add utility to a forecasting mechanism for Russian aggression in frozen separatist conflicts. Spikes in rhetoric out of such highly positioned Russian elites and their offices, are seen only in the Georgian case study between 2003—2008. No other case study examined saw such heightened elite rhetoric. If we are able to track when Russian elites are more active in addressing certain separatist regions within the FSU it could indicate increasing negative sentiment and signal potential intervention. Doing so equally requires analyzing which Russian elites are speaking.

Yet we must generalize these findings with caution. This study's sample size is too limited to reliably predict all Russian intervention. A robust forecasting methodology would have to pay greater attention to a greater number of variables. It would, for instance, have to more closely consider which Russian elites were speaking. It would also have to include Russian language media and interpret differences between Russian and non-Russian news sources.

Still, the lack of major regional variation in the coverage of Russian elite rhetoric was a surprising finding from my work. There were minimal differences between all the Moldovan and Georgian case studies in sentiment score, and hence my work did not identify regional variation as an accurate predictor of Russian aggression. I would have expected much stronger negative

sentiment scores from Russian news coverage than their Western counterparts given the different narratives that emerged during the build-up to Russian aggression in Georgia. I was also surprised to see a large difference in the sentiment score difference in the Moldovan 1992-2002 case study between Russian and Western news sources.

It is reasonable to assume that Western news sources would have covered the introduction of Russian peacekeepers more unfavourably than Russian media. Yet the fact that Russian news organizations saw such a significant variation in sentiment scores between the case studies is surprising. However, this may be a result of the spillover of terrorism from Russia's wars with Chechen separatists in the 1990s, which saw terror attacks in major Russian cities. Chechnya borders Georgia and during the scraping of text from the news articles I noticed where Russian elites made claims of Chechen terrorists crossing the border between Russia and Georgia. Scholars have found that since 1999, Russia had taken issue with Georgian leadership's position on the Chechen conflict and accused Georgia of hosting Chechen terrorists (Wilhelmsen and Flikke 2005, 397-398). The high levels of negativity seen from Russian elites towards Georgia in the 1990s and the early 2000s makes sense in this context of feeling challenged by Georgian positions on Chechnya, which would have been further reinforced as Georgia began its westward pull after the Rose Revolution. Hence, the results of the case studies suggest that regional variation in the coverage of Russian elite's rhetoric may not be significant for forecasting future Russian aggression in frozen separatist conflicts.

Rather than a robust mechanism of predicting aggression, this study serves as a framework for future studies. The trends identified through my findings provide a future path for research involving a greater number of observations, case studies, and new forms of data.

To build on my findings, future studies must attempt to replicate these case studies in other instances of Russian intervention in frozen separatist conflicts in the FSU. Another key case study that needs to be examined is Ukraine. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, and Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea share similarities with the Georgian case study. After Russia's initial invasion of Crimea in 2014, the conflict moved into a 'semi frozen' state in 2015. Additionally, the Russian invasion of Ukraine was carried out against the backdrop of Ukraine joining NATO much like the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008. If my findings from the Georgian case study hold in the case study of Ukraine, it would strengthen the case for using elite rhetoric to forecast Russian intervention is frozen separatist conflicts.

Conclusion

Russian aggression in 'frozen' separatist conflicts will continue to be a significant regional and international security problem, as Russia has shown no intention of stopping its use of frozen separatist conflicts as a foreign policy tool. Forecasting Russian intervention to better anticipate

and react to future aggression is therefore of great importance to policymakers globally. This paper has demonstrated that Russian elite rhetoric can potentially be used as a forecasting mechanism to identify when Russia is likely to involve itself in a frozen separatist conflict within the FSU. While this paper does not include enough cases and data to conclusively determine whether Russian elite rhetoric can be used to forecast future Russian aggression, it does highlight an interesting trend that—if holds true in other case studies—could be an invaluable tool in responding to future Russian military expansion.

The primary predictors of aggression identified in the case studies were increased negative sentiment and references to geopolitical power concerns in the language elite Russians use. Ultimately, these vocal concerns about Russia's geopolitical situation distinguished the 2003—2008 Georgian case study from the Moldovan and other Georgian case studies. During this time, Russian elite rhetoric regarding Georgia focused on geopolitical power struggles with the increased usage of the stems of "NATO", "Kosovo", and "Intern". This unique language is a significant variable in the forecasting mechanism because it preceded the only instance of military intervention studied. It indicates that significantly negative Russian elite rhetoric that references concerns over Russia's geopolitical standing within the FSU can anticipate aggressive Russian intentions.

Future research needs to be undertaken in order to determine whether my findings were an isolated case. However, if my findings do hold, the next time Russian elite rhetoric shows aggressive intentions, policy makers will be better suited to act and prevent brutal conflicts like the one currently unfolding in Ukraine.

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