



LAIDLAW UNDERGRADUATE LEADERSHIP AND RESEARCH PROGRAMME

APPLICATION – 2022 COHORT

Name	<i>Martha McKinney-Perry</i>
Programme	<i>Law and Political Science</i>
Year of Study	<i>2nd year</i>
Research Project Title	<i>Russia's Long Shadow: A Comparative Analysis of Russian Military and Political Interference in Post-Soviet States</i>
Proposed Supervisor(s)	<i>Noah Buckley, Political Science Department of Trinity College Dublin</i>

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Research Project Proposal (1000 words max.)
<p><u>Research Project Summary</u> (1000 words)</p> <p>Research Question: Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation has repeatedly attempted to interfere with the political affairs of other post-Soviet states. From invading Georgia in 2008 to the current crisis taking place on the Ukrainian border, Russia has time and again weaponised its military force to force favourable outcomes. Election interference, such as Russia's suspected involvement in the 2020 Belarusian presidential elections, has also been a tool used for this purpose.</p> <p>This project aims to identify the common causal factors of these events. It will first analyse cases where Russia has interfered with the political affairs of post-Soviet states. Russian media coverage of these events will then be assessed to extrapolate the Russian government's incentives in these cases.</p> <p>This research will help to predict future aggressive interference from Russia by identifying useful signals of imminent Russian action, thus allowing these actions to be pre-empted.</p> <p>Detailed Explanation: It is submitted that cases of aggressive interference may be fuelled by the same incentives of the Russian government. This research project aims to explore these incentives and assess the degree to which they have influenced Russia's actions on a case-by-case basis. It aims to expand our understanding of the Russian government's decision calculus in these situations. This understanding will increase the effectiveness of diplomatic negotiations and allow for increased cyber and military preparedness in advance of Russian action.</p> <p>Three potential areas of incentives have been identified in advance of this research project, and it is expected that detailed research will reveal more. Firstly, many cases of Russian intervention in post-Soviet states are motivated by the protection of national interests. Both</p>



the 2008 invasion of Georgia and the current crisis in Ukraine were attempts by the Russian government to prevent the other state from joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). NATO is a military alliance that, when originally formed in 1949, prompted the Soviet Union to create another military alliance known as the Warsaw Pact. In 2022, the Warsaw Pact has been dissolved and NATO has expanded its borders east; many ex-Warsaw Pact states are now NATO members. This perceived NATO expansionism has led Russia to intervene militarily in would-be NATO states to protect its national interests and ensure the security of its sphere of influence.

Secondly, another potential motivation is a sense of shared identity with other post-Soviet states. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 and subsequent Russian-backed protests by separatist groups in the Donbas region of Ukraine are both examples of this. The Donbas region and Crimea are both home to many ethnic Russians, meaning that military interference was likely to be accepted by locals. Nationalist rhetoric from President Vladimir Putin and other Russian government officials immediately before the conflict indicated a view that Ukraine remained an extension of Russia. The areas targeted favoured Russian invasion due to the number of ethnic Russians, which indicates that this sense of shared identity was reciprocated.

Thirdly, it is submitted that the Russian government is also opportunistic and interferes when convenient opportunities arise. Suspected Russian interference in the 2020 Belarusian presidential election is one example of this. The election interference was likely to be supported by President Alexander Lukashenko and would benefit Russia by preventing a presidential candidate with Western sympathies from taking on the position. It is expected, however, that all three areas of incentives will apply to varying degrees in the case studies to be researched.

Methodology:

1. First, my research project will involve identifying relevant case studies and analysing the existing secondary literature. News coverage of the interference, both international coverage and internal Russian media coverage which is expected to present a biased view, will also be analysed. From these sources, a clear picture of each case will form.
2. The second stage of research will involve interviewing experts on Russian foreign policy, using my supervisor's network of contacts. These interviews will take place over Zoom or Skype, as these platforms allow communication regardless of physical distance. It will also consist of comparing the events leading up to each case of Russian interference, with the intent of identifying common factors and incentives. The de-escalation of these interferences, if de-escalation was possible, will also be analysed, in an attempt to identify the most effective methods of conflict resolution in these situations.
3. Finally, my research project will extrapolate these common factors and identify methods of predicting events of Russian interference before they happen. It is expected that the rhetoric of Russian government officials, the movement of military forces, and information from whistle-blowers will be helpful warning signs. This analysis of potential signals will make it easier to predict Russian action and prepare cyber and military forces pre-emptively, rather than reactively.



Impacts & Relevance:

The current crisis on the border of Ukraine is an example of a state blatantly threatening its neighbour with military force if that neighbour, NATO, or the West does not agree to a list of demands. For over two months, the threat of invasion has been imminent and diplomatic negotiations with President Putin have proven almost completely ineffective. Western states failed to pre-empt the massing of troops on the Ukrainian border and must now negotiate from a position of weakness. For citizens on the ground of Ukraine and other post-Soviet neighbours of Russia, an invasion could take place at any moment and lead to loss of life, a lack of food and water in the country due to broken supply chains, and the instability of indefinite war.

It is evident that new methods of negotiating with Russia must be identified, and must be based on a greater understanding of the Russian government’s decision calculus. This research project will seek to expand our understanding of why such events take place, how they can be prevented, and how existing military threats can be de-escalated. It is critical for this research to take place and these outcomes to be reached, so that post-Soviet states can democratise and potentially join Western alliances without having their sovereignty threatened.

Leadership-in-Action experience proposal (500 words max.)

LiA Category	Category C: In-field application of research
<i>Delete as appropriate</i>	

Leadership in Action (497 words)

After the first summer, I will have extensively analysed the common features of occasions where Russia has interfered in the political affairs of post-Soviet states. This aspect of my project will improve both my research skills and my time management skills, as I intend to complete an ambitious research project in just one summer. I will have interviewed multiple expert scholars in this area, drawing on my research supervisor’s network, as well as reaching out to academics from other Irish institutions such as University College Dublin (UCD) and the National University of Ireland Galway (NUIG). This will provide me with a wide array of perspectives on Russia’s decision calculus in foreign policy. As I intend to pursue a postgraduate degree in political science, the contacts made in this part of the project will be invaluable for my future career.

In the second summer, I hope to apply my findings to current cases of Russian interference. I will work with the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), an international think-tank that specialises in European foreign policy. Throughout the current Ukraine crisis, ECFR has published nuanced, cutting-edge articles on how different foreign leaders have engaged with Russia. In collaboration with ECFR, I intend to publish a report on Russian interference in post-Soviet states, combining my research from Summer 1 with ECFR’s years of experience reporting on Russia. In addition, I will collaborate on more articles and publications on European foreign policy, drawing on the expertise of ECFR and developing my ability to work within a team.

ECFR has offices in seven European cities, one of which is in Warsaw. Due to Poland’s shared border with Russia, I believe that the Warsaw office would be an excellent location from which to also continue my research from Summer 1. The situation on the ground in Ukraine is uncertain at present, and if it continues to be of relevance in 2023 then Warsaw’s



proximity to Ukraine will provide the perfect opportunity to apply my research to this crisis. If not, the proximity to Russia will allow me to accurately report on any new Russian foreign policy initiatives that involve political or military interference. I will travel to Moscow during this time to gather perspectives from Russian academics, thus ensuring that my research does not disproportionately showcase Western perspectives. If COVID-19 travel restrictions prevent me from travelling to Moscow, I will instead arrange online interviews over Zoom.

Collaborating with ECFR will allow my research findings to reach a wider audience. This means that the methods of predicting events of Russian interference that my research seeks to develop will be used by more policy professionals across Europe, thus ensuring that these events can be prevented in future. Furthermore, the experience of working with experienced professionals in the publication of this report will allow me to expand my teamwork skills, my project management skills, and my understanding of the working environment within an international think tank. This will provide an excellent opportunity for personal growth.