

Russia's Adaptation Game

Deciphering the Kremlin's "Humanitarian Policy"

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THE ISSUE

Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine has prompted an unprecedented wave of Western sanctions, leaving Moscow increasingly isolated from various regional and international platforms. This, in turn, has impacted the Kremlin's foreign policy thinking and diplomatic toolbox, exemplified by its "humanitarian policy," a new decree based on the concept of the "Russian World" that President Putin signed into law in September 2022. The document provides Moscow with a newly codified justification to intervene in the domestic affairs of other states, specifically those of the former Soviet Union, should it decide that the rights of local Russian-speaking groups are violated in any significant way. This brief analyzes the Kremlin's new decree, considering the complex geopolitical context contributing to the release of the document, as well as Russia's ability to defend the idea of the "Russian World" in the post-Soviet bloc.

INTRODUCTION

On September 5, 2022, Russian president Vladimir Putin signed a **decree** on the "Concept of Humanitarian Policy of the Russian Federation Abroad." The document, which runs over 30 pages, is presented by the Kremlin as an "**indispensable**" part of Russia's national security strategy and foreign policy toolbox.¹

At first glance, the new policy, coming six months after Moscow's brutal and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, seems detached from reality. It describes the Russian Federation as a **multinational and multireligious** country that aspires to maintain **peace and stability** in the world. "This has absolutely nothing to do with the reality—the catastrophe into which Russia is plunging itself," **notes** Elena Sorokina, a journalist with the Russian-language branch of Radio Liberty.

Yet the Kremlin's decision to roll out this new policy is directly tied to the war, as it seeks to send a threatening signal to Russia's neighbors. The decree articulates what Moscow considers one of the driving forces behind its foreign policy decisions: the concept of the "**Russian World**" (Russkiy Mir). The document **states** that as the current "world order" attempts to politicize culture—and thus pressure "specific governments and individuals"—one of the core goals of Russia's "humanitarian policy" should be to preserve and promote the values intrinsic to Russkiy Mir. Crucially, this concept is the latest justification for Russian intervention in neighboring countries. The decree provides an additional **pretext** for interfering in sovereign territories of the former Soviet Union, notably in Georgia, Moldova, and the Baltics, to protect the rights of local Russian-speaking groups.

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¹ Russian documents quoted in this report were translated into English by the authors.

defined set of cultural criteria, Moscow's newly minted humanitarian policy provides an evergreen *casus belli* that Russia can invoke against its neighbors. Yet though it attempts to demonstrate Russia's strength to former Soviet states, the decree is borne out of weakness.

The “special military operation” in Ukraine is putting great strain on Russia's economy, limiting the country's capacity to engage with, and thus exert influence on, its post-Soviet neighbors. In this context, the humanitarian policy should be seen as an effort by the Kremlin to put countries within its sphere of influence on notice. Despite its troubles in Ukraine, including **military losses**, Moscow is signaling that it has not lost sight of its post-Soviet neighbors and reserves the right to intervene should they seek to exploit Russia's current weakness. Having failed at its efforts to trigger regime change in Kyiv or gain any traction in claiming Russia was engaged in the “**de-Nazification**” of Ukraine, the Kremlin is using the publication of its humanitarian policy as a new addition to its means of legitimizing the war—one that is narrower in its implications for Ukraine but potentially broader in its impact on the post-Soviet space.

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The following sections of the brief evaluate this policy document in greater detail, analyzing the troubling geopolitical context within which it was produced, as well as the reinvigorated concept of the Russian World and its possible effects on the post-Soviet bloc.

THE GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT BEHIND RUSSIA'S HUMANITARIAN POLICY

The release of the humanitarian policy follows a series of earlier diplomatic victories and recent battlefield setbacks for Russia in 2022. This context is critical to understanding Moscow's rationale in issuing the document.

The Kremlin entered 2022 in a position of relative geopolitical strength. Across Russia's post-Soviet periphery,

it appeared to be the preeminent regional actor. In Belarus, Russian president Vladimir Putin's long-held desire to further **integrate the Lukashenko regime** into the Russian-led Union State was continuing apace. In the Baltic states, local governments continued to express concern about the **influence** of Russian media and business interests over domestic Russian-speaking populations. In Georgia, the ruling Georgian Dream party continued to take a **conciliatory approach** in its dealings with Moscow. Elsewhere in the Caucasus, Russia had successfully brokered a **ceasefire agreement** between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2020, further entrenching Russia's diplomatic and military presence within the region. Most importantly, the Kremlin's proxies in eastern Ukraine continued their **frozen conflict** with Kyiv, trapping Ukraine in an ongoing border dispute that had de facto disqualified the country indefinitely from membership in either the European Union or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Russia's position as a formidable regional power was further solidified in Central Asia in January 2022. **Popular uprisings** against the Kazakh government forced President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev to reach out to his Russian counterpart for assistance. Tokayev's plea and concern about another liberal “color revolution” prompted Putin to intervene militarily. Moscow swiftly deployed 2,000 soldiers, mostly Russian, to Kazakhstan, claiming that the troops represented the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)—a Eurasian intergovernmental military alliance led by Russia. The intervention succeeded in **quelling the street protests**, including the civil unrest in Kazakhstan's largest city, Almaty, ultimately helping the Tokayev government reestablish control over the country. As Bayram Balci, a researcher at Sciences Po, later **argued**, the Kazakh crisis was so easily quelled by Moscow that it reinforced the Kremlin's belief that former Soviet states, especially in Eurasia, were dependent on Russian power and could therefore never pursue an independent foreign policy. By **assisting** the Tokayev government, “Russia has demonstrated to the Kazakh elites and all other partners of Kazakhstan that without Russia the country could have sunk into the abyss.”

Similar Russian assertions of regional hegemony were expressed by Putin in his infamous **speech** on February 24, 2022, declaring the start of the “special military operation” in Ukraine. Addressing the nation and the world, the Russian president **claimed** that Moscow had long ago accepted “the new geopolitical reality after the dissolution of the USSR” and always treated the former



Photo: Alexey Nikolsky/SPUTNIK/AFP/Getty Images

Soviet republics with respect and consideration. This was most recently “proven by the assistance we provided to Kazakhstan when it faced tragic events and a challenge in terms of its *statehood and integrity*” [emphasis added]. However, according to Putin, what Moscow would never be able to accept and tolerate was NATO’s continuous eastward expansion into Russia’s “historical lands”—especially in Ukraine, where a threatening “anti-Russia” was taking shape. Crucially, Putin **contended**, Moscow had to intervene in Ukraine to save millions of people with strong cultural affinity to Russia from an alleged genocide spearheaded by the central government in Kyiv but “fully controlled from the outside” (i.e., the West).

The events that unfolded in January and February showcase two controversial, yet strongly intertwined, concepts underpinning the Kremlin’s foreign policy. On the one hand, Russia is represented as a guarantor of peace, integrity, and stability in its near abroad, as proven by its prompt resolution of the Kazakh crisis, support for the Lukashenko regime in Belarus, and deft mediation between Armenia and Azerbaijan. On the other hand, Moscow tolerates the “statehood and integrity” of the post-Soviet states only as long as they do not seek greater political autonomy from the Kremlin. And when certain territorial entities seek a separate path that is closer to Moscow, the Kremlin has no qualms undermining the sovereignty of its neighbors, as demonstrated by its ongoing support for separatist factions in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, as well as its ongoing pressure on the Baltic states.

But if Moscow felt itself in a position of strength before the launch of its February invasion, its continuing **military setbacks**, the implementation of aggressive **Western sanctions**, and the increasing **consolidation** of the

Ukrainian state and national identity have forced realists within the Kremlin to reassess the country’s international position and articulate new justifications for its actions. This is the context needed to understand the release of Russia’s humanitarian policy. Published six months into Moscow’s war of aggression against Kyiv, the document articulates how the Kremlin has adjusted its foreign policy thinking to match the shifting geopolitical landscape in Russia’s near abroad.

Putin first **highlighted** the importance of creating such a document in mid-April, when he met with the permanent members of the Security Council of the Russian Federation. The meeting followed two major military setbacks in Ukraine: a forced retreat from the Kyiv-adjacent town of **Bucha** on April 1, which unveiled **brutal killings** of civilians by Russian forces, and the **sinking** of Russia’s Black Sea missile cruiser Moskva after a successful Ukrainian offensive on April 13. While it is difficult to infer whether these events had any direct impact on Putin’s decision to have the humanitarian policy drafted, it is certain that these incidents significantly affected the Kremlin’s regional and international standing, showcasing Russia as a brutal, yet declining, global power. It was within this heightened and troublesome geopolitical context that Putin convened his Security Council and argued for the creation of Russia’s humanitarian policy, which would be **consistent with** the country’s “national interests in the near, medium, and more distant future.”

RUSSKIY MIR: “A COMMUNITY THAT GOES FAR BEYOND RUSSIA”

Evidently, one of Moscow’s chief national interests that the humanitarian policy seeks to revive is the concept

of *Russkiy Mir*. While “Russian World” is not explicitly defined in the document, the term itself is far from new. It was initially **coined** in Russian political circles in the late 1990s, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the country’s subsequent quest for a national identity, and revolved around the **idea** that Moscow had a sacred duty to defend the culture, language, and rights of all Russian speakers across the world, particularly in the former Soviet Union. According to **Heather Ashby**, the senior program officer for the Center for Russia and Europe at the U.S. Institute of Peace, such a “broader conceptualization of ‘Russianness,’” expanding into other sovereign territories, was a natural outcome of the Soviet collapse, which **left** some 25 million ethnic Russians outside of Russia’s territorial borders: “Living in a country that had long been a multinational empire, it was difficult for many Russians to accept that many of their ethnic brethren now lived in foreign countries.”

Indeed, the concept of the Russian World fit into a broader trend of Russian thinkers and policymakers grappling with the future role of the new Russian Federation. Researchers and writers such as **Charles Clover** have documented the ideological development of the post-Soviet Russian right, exploring the myriad ways this movement has embedded itself within, influenced, and been instrumentally co-opted by the Putin regime. More specifically, this doctrine of Russia’s moral, linguistic, and cultural supremacy in the post-Soviet bloc has been **viewed** by the Putin administration as “a guiding notion,” **complementing and strengthening** “the Kremlin’s belief that it possesses—and should continue to maintain through cultural, economic, political, and military ties—legitimate spheres of influence across the former Soviet Union.”

Putin has expressed similar sentiments numerous times in the past, most notably in April 2007, when he said during an **address** to the Federal Assembly, “The Russian language not only preserves an entire layer of truly global achievements but is also the living space for the many millions of people in the Russian-speaking world, a community that goes far beyond Russia itself.” In June 2007, Putin signed a decree creating the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation to promote Russian language and culture regionally and internationally. Today, the foundation **claims** that Russian World includes not only members of the Russian diaspora, but also anyone who speaks Russian and has developed “an appreciation for Russia and its rich cultural heritage.”

Yet the revival and further elevation of the concept of *Russkiy Mir* in the humanitarian policy can be seen as an

effort by the Kremlin to establish a cultural separation with the West by emphasizing Russian civilization’s distinctiveness. The policy comes against the backdrop of Moscow’s rising economic and diplomatic isolation, which in turn further elevates the status of the Russian World, as the decree provides a legal platform to the Kremlin to declare Russia culturally and politically superior to its near abroad. This language of defensive cultural posturing can be interpreted as part of Moscow’s reaction to the war and need to justify its invasion of Ukraine. In addition, it is also a response to the perceived threat of Western-backed “**color revolutions**” in the post-Soviet space; these supposedly foreign interventions by Western powers are believed to be executed by local actors pushing an anti-Russian message that is just as much about culture as it is about political institutions. The rhetorical construction of a linguistically and socially homogenous *Russkiy Mir* gives the Kremlin an ideological justification to intervene in Russia’s near abroad, one that can be invoked in the face of international criticism. It also sends a warning to the West: since the Kremlin wrongly perceives “color revolutions” as something done by the West to undermine Russia, Moscow is similarly signaling it can respond in kind.

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This is why, amid Russia’s continued invasion of Ukraine and the perceived efforts of certain Western actors to “**cancel**” the celebration of Russian culture internationally, analysts should continue to expect Russian leaders and state-backed news outlets to lean into the **language of cultural grievance**.

THE DOCTRINE OF INTERFERENCE

The document claims that one of the core principles of the Russian World, in addition to advancing Russian culture and language through “**soft power**,” is “**noninterference** in internal affairs of other states.”

Moscow has repeatedly used the now-infamous doctrine of noninterference to appeal to authoritarian governments



Photo: Contributor/Getty Images

across East Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America. The decree **stresses** the importance of deepening traditional, cultural ties with countries in these regions, singling out China and India in particular. Russia's isolation from Europe since the war in Ukraine has accelerated the Kremlin's own geopolitical reorientation. Putin has frequently echoed these sentiments in his speeches, signaling his intention to "pivot to the East" not only with Russian gas and oil, but also culturally and politically. Two days after signing the humanitarian policy, the president reaffirmed his intentions during a speech at the **Eastern Economic Forum**, held in the city of Vladivostok with the aim of driving foreign investment in Russia's easternmost region. He **referred** to the countries of the Asia-Pacific region as the new cultural, economic, and technological hegemony, contributing to the shift "toward a multipolar world" and thus challenging an "obsolete" Western-led rules-based order.

However, even if Moscow has upheld the principle of noninterference in its relations with Beijing and New Delhi, the opposite is true about the Kremlin's intentions toward countries perceived as part of the Russian World. As mentioned above, the Putin administration respects the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the post-Soviet nations as long as they do not question and dispute Russia's leading cultural, political, and economic posture in the region. This contradiction in Moscow's thinking is embedded in the humanitarian policy. The document **prioritizes** the advancement of bilateral and multilateral cooperation between the Kremlin and the members of the Commonwealth of Independent States

(CIS), a regional intergovernmental organization bringing Russia together with eight neighboring countries from Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the South Caucasus. The decree **maintains** that one of the central goals of Russia's humanitarian policy will be to create "a unified cultural, educational, and informational environment" and strengthen the "historically entrenched" position of the Russian language in the CIS. Although the CIS countries cumulatively have nine different official languages, the decree only acknowledges and promotes the culture and language of Russia.

Furthermore, while there is no mention of Ukraine in the humanitarian policy, **clause 94** of the document stresses that the Kremlin will maintain close diplomatic ties with the so-called Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic—statelet names that Putin **excluded** from the decree on October 17, following sham referendums held in late September that led to the **proclamation** of these territories as official parts of the Russian Federation. The updated version of clause 94 now only mentions two breakaway and internationally unrecognized territories: Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which Moscow acknowledged as "independent states" after the **2008 Russo-Georgian War**. The decree emphasizes the strengthening of diplomatic ties between the Russian Federation and these South Caucasian "republics."

Importantly, **clause 62** of the decree pledges to protect the rights and interests of Russian compatriots living abroad and to assist them in "the preservation of the all-Russian cultural identity." At the same time, **clause 95** warns that the Kremlin will carefully observe the "protection of the rights

of Russian-speakers” in the post-Soviet states of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, and Georgia, which will impact Russia’s foreign policy decisions vis-à-vis these nations.

SHOULD THE SINGLED-OUT BE CONCERNED?

While clauses 62 and 95 do not seem menacing at first glance, their subtext surely is. Singling out the post-Soviet states that are either in NATO and the European Union, in the case of the Baltic countries, or have pro-Western aspirations, in the case of Moldova and Georgia, is by no means an accident. Instead, it is a clear reaction to the drastically changing security environment in Russia’s “historical lands,” which the Kremlin believes have become hostile parts of *Russkiy Mir*.

Moscow had been **basing** its right to protect Russian speakers from continued oppression and discrimination in foreign countries, including Ukraine, on the United Nations’ principle of “responsibility to protect.” From now on, however, it can use the language of the humanitarian policy, specifically clause 62, to justify Russia’s interference in the domestic affairs of other post-Soviet states—presenting it as a sign of the Kremlin’s unwavering commitment to the safety and security of all Russian-speaking communities residing abroad.

Since the start of the invasion, thousands of Russians opposing Putin’s war have fled the Russian Federation, attempting to find safe havens in the neighboring countries of post-Soviet Eurasia and even the European Union. According to **Kirill Krivosheev**, a journalist with Russia’s *Kommersant* newspaper, the immediate problems created by Russian expatriates in these countries are “somewhat more mundane,” including a shortage of places and increased rent and consumer prices. Most Russians fleeing the regime do not seek to create or contribute to heightened political tensions between the Kremlin and the governments of the former Soviet countries. However, Krivosheev also **notes** that “given Putin’s penchant for launching wars with the purported aim of protecting ethnic Russians . . . the idea that tomorrow he may decide to ‘protect’ those Russians who have escaped his grip no longer seems entirely outlandish.” In this context, the humanitarian policy can also be viewed as a means for Moscow to justify aggressive intelligence operations in its near abroad because the Russian émigrés, even if they oppose the regime and the war, are still part of the Kremlin’s *Russkiy Mir*.

Baltic States: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, three Baltic nations with a combined population of approximately

6 million people, have sizeable Russian-speaking communities. About 25 percent of Estonia’s population of **1.3 million** and Latvia’s population of **1.9 million** self-identify as ethnic Russians. This number is smaller, yet still significant, in Lithuania, where **15 percent** of the 2.8 million citizens belong to the local Russian-speaking minority.

Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the Baltic states have been unanimous in their efforts to curtail Moscow’s influence over ethnic Russians in their respective countries, from **banning** Russian and Belarusian television channels and online media outlets to **demolishing** Communist-era monuments. The three nations have also not been cowed by the release of the humanitarian policy. On September 7, the heads of the governments came to a joint decision to **restrict entry** indefinitely from Russia and Belarus for virtually all Russian citizens with EU visas. “What we have seen in the last couple of weeks and months, is that the number of border crossings by Russian citizens holding Schengen visas have dramatically increased. This is becoming a public security issue, this is also an issue of a moral and political nature,” **declared** Latvian minister for foreign affairs Edgars Rinkēvičs.

The Baltic states have remained similarly adamant in their decision to keep borders closed even for those Russian citizens who are running away from the **partial military mobilization** announced by Putin on September 21. Top diplomats have **asserted** that “being drafted into the army is not enough” to grant asylum to the fleeing Russians, claiming that they would still pose a significant threat to the national security of their respective nations, as well as to Euro-Atlantic stability more broadly. However, as Western European nations such as **Germany and France** continue to push back on efforts to block the entry into the European Union of Russians fleeing mobilization, it remains unclear to what extent the decisions of the Baltic states will affect the ability of these émigrés to seek shelter in Europe. In fact, despite facing opposition from the Baltic nations, the European Union **received** more than 100,000 Russian citizens in the weeks immediately following the announcement of partial mobilization.

Andrei Kolesnikov, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, **argues** that the travel ban on Russian citizens imposed by EU and NATO members Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania plays into President Putin’s **narrative** that the West uses Moscow’s “historical territories and people close to us living there” to cultivate hatred against Russia and Russians. Independent media outlets are already **reporting** that a rising number

of Russians in these countries “are left feeling they may be losing their place in the society.” To prevent such ethnic tensions from escalating even further, Estonian president Alar Karis has called for mutual respect and sensitivity, **acknowledging** that “some residents of our country do have a different historical understanding,” as they “have not been taught an ideologically unbiased history of Estonia, Europe and the world.” However, considering the Kremlin’s history of malign influence operations in the Baltic states, these countries will have to ensure that their strong opposition to the Kremlin does not simultaneously alienate their own Russian-speaking minorities and thus create a vulnerability that Moscow could exploit.

Moldova: Moldova is actively distancing itself from Russia. Yet the country is in a difficult political and security situation, as it still has up to 1,500 Russian troops present in the Moscow-backed breakaway region of Transnistria. Additionally, while **ethnic Russians** account for 6 percent of the country’s overall population, their share in Transnistria reaches 30 percent.

In early March 2022, Moldova **applied** for EU membership, seeking to cement its Westward turn. However, this was soon followed by a series of “**terrorist incidents**” in Transnistria, which the local de facto authorities promptly attributed to Kyiv. The central government introduced a state of emergency in the country but also stressed the importance of a diplomatic resolution of the conflict with Transnistria—which, through Moldova, maintains much stronger **trade relations** with the European Union than with Russia. More specifically, as a result of the **2014 Association Agreement** between the European Union and Moldova, Transnistria now **trades** with 20 EU member states; 70 percent of its exports, including textile materials and steel products, end up in the European market. By contrast, exports to Russia experienced a steady decline, with a sharp **fall** from “\$909 million between 2007 and 2010 to \$232 million between 2015 and 2018.” Therefore, despite Transnistria’s **intention** to gain independence from Moldova, the local authorities seem to understand that the region’s “economic lifeline,” especially against the backdrop of a politically and economically isolated Russia, lies in its links to Brussels and Chisinau rather than to Moscow.

The central authorities in Moldova also understand the changing geopolitical context and its effects on domestic policymaking. On August 27, Moldovan Independence Day, President Maia Sandu **told** citizens celebrating at the Great National Assembly Square in Chisinau that “Russia’s unjust war against Ukraine clearly shows us the price

of freedom. . . . The war will end, and we will be able to get out of these crises stronger, more resilient.” Similar sentiments were **shared** by the Moldovan minister of foreign affairs and European integration in late September, strongly condemning the Kremlin’s move to hold sham referendums in Ukraine’s Donbas region.

However, while Moldova’s pro-Western aspirations are on the rise, so is the Kremlin’s fear of losing yet another member of its Russian World. Putin **believes** that Russia is currently fighting not against Ukraine but “actually the entire military machine of the collective West,” which has been “nurturing the hatred of Russia for decades” across the former Soviet Union. Reflecting the president’s attitude, the humanitarian policy attempts to warn newly minted EU candidate Moldova of Moscow’s self-granted ability to protect Russian speakers in Transnistria and beyond.

Georgia: It would be extremely difficult for Moscow to openly intervene in the domestic affairs of the Baltic NATO member states or even Moldova, sandwiched between Ukraine and NATO member Romania. Georgia, however, is a much easier target. According to the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI), a local nongovernmental organization, up to **50,000** citizens of Russia were staying in Georgia between March and June 2022. This figure has grown significantly since September 21, as more than **53,000** Russians crossed the Russo-Georgian border following Putin’s order on **partial military mobilization**.

Besides escaping the army and the war, Russian citizens travel to Georgia to circumvent the ongoing Western economic sanctions on technology and consumer goods and Russian businesses. Based on **data** from Transparency International, Russian émigrés have registered about 6,400 companies in Georgia since the start of the war in Ukraine. Most of the Russians settling in Georgia are encouraged by the existing visa regime, which **enables** them to stay in the country visa-free for up to a year. Even though several opposition parties have argued in favor of introducing visas for Russian citizens fleeing to Georgia, the ruling Georgian Dream party has disregarded the opposition’s plea as a “**xenophobic**” campaign aimed at dragging Tbilisi into an armed conflict with Moscow.

Yet **public opinion polls** show that up to 60 percent of Georgians are concerned about the advancement of a pro-Kremlin agenda in their country and expect Russian military aggression in the near future. Despite—or perhaps because of—this, the majority of Georgians remain highly supportive of Georgia’s EU (82 percent) and NATO (71 percent) aspirations, as well as of the Ukrainians fighting against Russian aggression (98 percent).



Photo: Daro Sulakauri/Stringer/Getty Images

In a 2016 commentary, Igor Zevelev, then a visiting fellow with the CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program, **claimed** that the Russian diaspora in the South Caucasus “is relatively small, aging, and continues to shrink. It is not mobilized and thus cannot become an instrument of Russian foreign policy.” Today, however, Georgia faces a drastically different demographic picture, as the country of 3.7 million keeps accepting thousands of Russian expatriates daily. As time goes on, analysts will need to track the increased economic influence Russian workers and investors will have on the Georgian economy and what percentage of the Russian émigrés will seek long-term residency in their new home. As the Russian presence in Georgia becomes both more pronounced and influential, clause 95 in Moscow’s new humanitarian policy will continue to make the Georgian public wary. In the past several weeks, the exact text from the decree has been continuously circulated throughout Georgian media.

Despite significant public concern, the government has not yet commented on Moscow’s self-proclaimed right to intervene should it one day decide Russian speakers are oppressed in any way in Georgia. Conveniently, and unsurprisingly, such a “humanitarian” act could coincide with a spike in the Kremlin’s fears that Tbilisi has become too comfortable with its Euro-Atlantic partners. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has already raised its concerns regarding the joint Tbilisi-NATO military exercises that took place in Georgia in September 2022, **stating** that the West’s continuous efforts to “draw” Tbilisi into NATO present a national security threat to Russia and jeopardize peace and stability in the South Caucasus at large.

Kazakhstan: Even though the humanitarian policy does not list Kazakhstan as one of the five former Soviet states where Moscow pledges to observe the rights of local Russian-speaking groups, the Kremlin might revisit its approach as Russia’s influence in Central Asia starts to weaken. In stark contrast to January 2022, when it seemed that the Kremlin’s grip on the Tokayev government was as tight as ever, Putin’s Kazakh counterpart has become less transparent about where his political loyalties might lie.

Tokayev was one of the first leaders within the CSTO to refuse to send troops to assist the Kremlin’s “special military operation” in Ukraine. More importantly, in a July **phone call** with European Council president Charles Michel, the Kazakh president expressed the country’s readiness to cooperate with the European Union on developing alternative delivery routes for oil and natural gas, including the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route—a direct affront to Moscow’s efforts to choke off European energy supplies and break the political will for the current sanctions regime. However, following Tokayev’s call with Michel, a Russian court temporarily **closed** down the Russo-Kazakh Caspian Pipeline Consortium’s oil terminal in Russia. This move served as a warning for the Tokayev administration not to intervene in Moscow’s energy war with the West and a reminder that the Kremlin can still influence Kazakhstan’s foreign policy decisions.

Importantly, in its dealings with Russia, Kazakhstan has to factor in the thousands of Russian émigrés currently present in the country. Already, **around 70,000** of them have received Kazakh ID numbers to open bank accounts and look for jobs, indicating that many Russians might

be seeking a longer-term residence in this Central Asian republic. In the meantime, according to *The Economist*, the Kremlin “is already irked by the lack of cheerleading for its war from its supposed allies in the region,” including Kazakhstan. Therefore, as in Georgia, Moscow might use the humanitarian policy and presence of Russian speakers in Kazakhstan to check the country’s pro-Europe plans.

CONCLUSION

The Kremlin’s new policy document outlines a pretext for future aggression against the post-Soviet states seeking greater political autonomy and a more liberal future. However, Russia currently finds itself in a severely weakened geopolitical position. As the Russian military is **challenged** in Ukraine and the economic and diplomatic effects of international sanctions become more pronounced, questions regarding Moscow’s actual capacity to uphold promises made in the humanitarian policy will become unavoidable.

Already, experts claim that the long-held perception of the Kremlin’s authority as a mediator of conflicts and a guarantor of peace and security in the broader region is cracking. According to **Jeffrey Mankoff**, a senior associate with CSIS, “As Moscow bleeds in Ukraine, it is losing the ability to manipulate the other post-imperial conflicts that litter its borderlands.” Proving this point are renewed border clashes between **Armenia and Azerbaijan** in the South Caucasus and **Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan** in Central Asia. These tensions have signaled Russia’s inability to effectively involve itself in several simultaneous conflicts in the region and have thus impacted Moscow’s standing in a larger post-Soviet Eurasia.

Considering these changing geopolitical dynamics within the Kremlin’s supposed sphere of influence, it might seem easy to dismiss the threatening language of the humanitarian policy. However, such an increasingly prominent idea of Russian weakness in the Russian World could make the Putin regime even more desperate to exert its influence and therefore willing to take even greater risks in its efforts to claim post-Soviet hegemony. As Zaur Shiriyev, an analyst at Crisis Group, **states**, “There are no illusions in the region about Russia’s power. . . . No one wants to antagonize Russia.”

Indeed, besides Ukraine, Russian troops and military equipment are currently present in different contested territories across the former Soviet Union, including **Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Transnistria, and Nagorno-Karabakh**. Moscow continues to exert significant

economic and political influence over **Belarus**, providing multimillion-dollar loans to the Lukashenko regime and using the country as a staging area for the Russian military. Furthermore, the Putin administration still enjoys sufficient economic and political influence across the countries of Central Asia, which **continue to rely on** Russia’s security assistance, remittance inflows, and export routes. Finally, in the case of the Baltic states, despite the efforts of local authorities to battle Moscow’s propaganda at home, news has emerged about a large-scale **Russian disinformation campaign** aimed at mimicking reputable European media outlets to disseminate pro-Kremlin interpretations of the Ukraine war across the European Union. Considering Moscow’s entrenched position among Russian minority groups in the Baltic states, such disinformation campaigns could further intensify tensions between the local governments and Russian-speaking communities.

It is true that current Western sanctions continue to erode Moscow’s economic and geopolitical lifelines, limiting its ability to exert power in the broader region. Still, a politically and economically weakened Russia has managed to ignite and manipulate various ethnic tensions and conflicts in the post-Soviet era. Today, the Putin regime wants the world to know that despite sanctions, Russia’s capacity to control its sphere of influence should not be underestimated.

The release of the humanitarian policy serves exactly this purpose. By signing the decree into law, the Kremlin has made it crystal clear that it is buttressing the concept of *Russkiy Mir*—its nationalist narrative about Russia’s cultural, linguistic, and moral supremacy in the former Soviet Union. Already, the Security Council of the Russian Federation is discussing drafting a **new language policy** commensurate with the stated goals of the humanitarian policy, namely preservation and promotion of the Russian language against the backdrop of the ongoing “Westernization” of the world. According to **Oleg Khramov**, deputy secretary of the Security Council, creation of such a decree is necessary to “prevent further Latinization of the Russian society and preserve *civilizational sovereignty*” [emphasis added].

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Thus, the humanitarian policy is part of a continuing effort by the Kremlin to claim that Russia is culturally distinct

and separate from the West, furthering its view that the two are inevitable adversaries. Adding a cultural dimension to this conflict is also intended to help mobilize the Russian public and stoke nationalism against the West in support of a costly and possibly ruinous war in Ukraine.

Today, Putin's Russia still has enough stamina to fight for its near abroad. The Kremlin is not yet backing off—indeed, it is doubling down. Accordingly, the West should be wary of Moscow's revanchist tendencies in the post-Soviet bloc and remain on the alert for more trouble ahead. ■

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