

# Does State Violence Translate into a More Bellicose Foreign Behavior? Domestic Predictors of International Conflict-Propensity in Post-Soviet Eurasia

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***Abstract:** With the questioning of the democratic peace axiom according to which democracies do not go to war with one another, scholars in comparative politics started investigating whether authoritarian regimes are more prone to launch or escalate an international conflict. Empirical studies have shown that state violence is often reflected in more aggressive foreign policy behavior. “Rogueness,” measured by the intensity of state violence (political repression, systematic torture), is usually correlated with a greater propensity to use force first in interstate disputes. Whereas Russia illustrates this “warmonger rogue” behavior, in other post-Soviet Eurasian countries the correlation is not fully verified, however. Building on empirical data on interstate conflict-onset, this paper demonstrates that violence-intensity at home does not necessarily translate into more bellicosity abroad. Belarus, Turkmenistan, and to some extent Kazakhstan are at the same time rogue countries—in the original sense of the term—and peaceful players (“peaceniks”) in IR. Refining existing authoritarian regime typologies, the paper singles out which regime and leadership features are conducive to international conflict-propensity, or war avoidance, in the region. Findings are not fully conclusive, but they contribute to highlighting*

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\* This research was undertaken as part of an EU-financed MSCA-IF-2014 research project (Horizon 2020) on “DICTAPLOMACY. The International Dimensions of Authoritarian Regime Survival: Comparing ‘Dictaplomatic’ Strategies in Post-Soviet Eurasia.”

*the impact of underexplored domestic variables to explain variations in the conflict-propensity of transiting regimes.*

**Keywords:** rogues, authoritarian regime-types, violence, conflict-propensity, foreign policy behavior, post-Soviet Eurasia.

## **Introduction**

Intuitively, one would assume that dictators have a more hawkish foreign policy than democratic rulers. The 20<sup>th</sup> century bore many bloodthirsty autocrats who behaved like renegades in international affairs. While perpetrating mass killings at home, Adolf Hitler, Pol Pot, Idi Amin Dada, Muammar Gaddafi, and Saddam Hussein, to mention but the most (in)famous ones, pursued a bellicose policy towards their neighbors. Closer to us chronologically, Vladimir Putin's regime, while backsliding into authoritarianism over the past decade, got Russia involved in two interstate armed conflicts: in 2008, when it launched a Blitzkrieg against Georgia to prevent its South Caucasian neighbor from forcefully regaining control of breakaway Abkhazia and South Ossetia; and since early 2014 in providing military support to separatists in Eastern Ukraine against the Western-backed government that emerged from the Euromaidan protests in Kiev. Whereas a number of domestic variables can explain the bellicosity of warmongers such as Putin's Russia, the same variables fail to explain why other states, such as Belarus, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan, are paragons of "peaceful dictatorships." Throughout post-Soviet Eurasia, levels of *intrastate* violence, whether due to terrorism, ethnic conflicts, or political repressions, are particularly high. This does not systematically translate into a more conflict-prone or violent behavior in *interstate* relations however. Understanding why is the main ambition of this paper.

The study covers the period from 1992 to 2014 and includes the 12 countries of the ex-USSR commonly referred to as "post-