Title Page

Officially-approved title of the thesis:

Using Relations with China for Authoritarian Persistence: Omnibalancing and Policy Emulation Between China and Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine

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Declaration page

I, Peter James Braga, confirm that the work presented in my thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Signature: [Removed]

Abstract

This dissertation examines how three post-Soviet regimes—Belarus, Russia and Ukraine—used their relations with the People's Republic of China between 2006 and 2016 for the purposes of authoritarian persistence. It develops a regime-type-neutral reformulation of Steven David's 'omnibalancing' framework, specifying seven enabling conditions that together render regime leaders more likely to seek external alignment in order to manage existential internal threats. To operationalise the framework the study pairs longitudinal sentiment analysis of 71,000 Russian-language presidential, ministerial, and prime-ministerial utterances (from speeches, press releases, and interviews) with explaining-outcome process tracing. Sentiment analysis maps when elites in Minsk, Moscow and Kyiv expressed markedly positive or negative attitudes towards China; process tracing then reconstructs the causal chains linking those inflection points to domestic crisis, engagement with China, and omnibalancing success or failure.

The findings diverge sharply across the three cases. Belarus and Ukraine faced acute challenges. In Minsk, there were shrinking Russian rents and mounting protest. In Kyiv, there was elite fragmentation and the Euromaidan uprising. More than half of the enabling conditions were present in the two cases. Both governments sought large, low-conditionality Chinese credit lines and framed them domestically as guarantees of modernisation. Yet implementation lagged behind political need: the Belarusian strategy stalled in a loan-conditionality loop and the Ukrainian effort collapsed before funds were released. Russia, by contrast, satisfied only two enabling conditions; the Bolotnaya protests never became an existential threat to the regime, and Sino-Russian co-operation therefore served long-term strategic purposes in the form of authoritarian learning of internet policies, rather than regime-saving purposes.

The dissertation thus qualifies broad claims that Chinese engagement can work towards authoritarian persistence. External alignment can furnish material, ideational, and symbolic resources for regime survival. However, the effectiveness of Chinese support for the autocratic state depends on state capacity, elite cohesion, and timing. Methodologically, the project demonstrates the value of combining big-data text mining with fine-grained process tracing, providing a replicable protocol for future research on the international dimension of authoritarian rule.

Impact Statement

This dissertation makes a contribution to the understanding of how autocratic regimes in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus have sought to enhance authoritarian persistence through their bilateral relationships with China from 2006 to 2016. It offers an analysis of these regimes' strategies by examining three core approaches alongside China: omnibalancing (aligning with external powers to suppress internal threats to regime stability) and policy emulation (adopting successful policies from China's model).

Impact Within Academia

The research methodologically expands upon omnibalancing theory by introducing more precise, revised enabling conditions tailored to contemporary nondemocratic regimes. Explaining-outcome process tracing, used here to investigate cases of omnibalancing, provides a novel and rigorous approach to analyse authoritarian regimes' foreign policy decisions against internal crises. This chapter's theoretical revisions of omnibalancing theory and its better defined enabling conditions offer a more objective and tailored framework for researchers studying regime survival in nondemocratic states.

The dissertation also breaks ground by using sentiment analysis to track authoritarian learning through coding policymakers' discourse on China. This computational approach enhances the toolkit for scholars studying policy diffusion and authoritarian learning by linking periods of increased positivity in discourse with potential periods of regime learning. The visualisation of sentiment patterns offers a data-driven approach to observe shifts in bilateral relations over time. These methodological innovations are relevant not only to political science but to computational social sciences, allowing for new interdisciplinary research into authoritarian regimes, international relations, and policy transfer.

Impact Outside Academia

The dissertation's findings on how autocratic regimes strategically navigate external relations and internal pressures provide practical insights for policymakers, think tanks, and international organisations concerned with democracy promotion, global governance, and foreign aid distribution.

The dissertation's detailed examination of the specific Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian use of Chinese partnership in the development of internet surveillance and control offers insights into the global spread of digital authoritarianism.

Governments and advocacy groups interested in freedom of speech, internet governance, and human rights can use these findings to shape counter-strategies in light of expanding authoritarian cooperation in the digital sphere.

Moreover, the research highlights emerging patterns of multilateral cooperation among authoritarian regimes, which makes it relevant in the context of international policymaking, particularly given China's gaining global influence. Policy analysts and international development practitioners concerned with autocratic resilience, economic diplomacy, and China's influence in Eurasia and beyond could use these insights to forecast future geopolitical trends and prepare targeted engagement strategies.

The dissertation's impact, therefore, spans across academic disciplines and into the policy realm, enriching the debate on how authoritarian regimes engage with rising powers like China to strengthen their own internal survival mechanisms and counter external pressures for reform or democratisation. As international competition between democratic and autocratic governance models intensifies, these findings provide crucial empirical insights into the evolving nature of global governance and authoritarian resilience.

Table of Contents

Declaration page ..... **i**

Abstract ..... **ii**

Impact Statement ..... **iii**

List of Figures ..... **x**

List of Tables ..... **xi**

Chapter 1. Introduction **1**

1.1 Introduction and Framing 1

1.2 The Puzzle: Why Study this Question? 1

1.3 The Approach: How the Dissertation Addresses the Puzzle 9

1.4 Main Arguments and Findings 12

1.5 Value and Contribution to Social Science Scholarship 14

1.6 Structure of the Dissertation 15

Chapter 2. Literature Review, Core Theory, and Methodology and Methods **17**

2.1 Introduction to Comparative Framework 17

2.2 Literature Review 18

2.2.1 Authoritarian Persistence and International Dimensions 19

2.2.2 Omnibalancing Theory and Literature 24

2.2.3 China, Policy Emulation, and Authoritarian Learning 28

2.2.4 Quantitative Tools in the Study of Authoritarianism and Sentiment Analysis 32

2.3 Theory: Revising Omnibalancing 36

2.3.1 Core Elements of Classic Omnibalancing 38

2.3.2 Omnibalancing & Regime Type 40

2.3.3 Limits of Classic Theory and Rationale for Revision 49

2.3.4 Revised Omnibalancing: Enabling Conditions and Process Tracing 52

2.3.4.1 Presence of Internal Threats 52
2.3.4.1.1 Omni-Present Threats & Quotidian Omnibalancing: Addressing Omnibalancing's Sword of Damocles Problem 53
2.3.4.2 High Stakes for Leaders 60
2.3.4.3 Institutional Checks Degraded or Absent 62
2.3.4.4 Low State Capacity (administrative vs coercive) 65
2.3.4.5 Low Legitimacy 70
2.3.4.6 Fragmented Elite: 71
2.3.4.7 Vulnerable Geopolitical Position 76
2.4 Theory: Authoritarian Learning and Positive Policy Emulation 78
2.5 Research Design, Methodology, and Methods 83
2.5.1 Multi-Method Logic 84
2.5.2 Methodology 88
2.5.3 Process Tracing within the Omnibalancing Framework 89
2.5.4 Sentiment Analysis as a Tool for Mapping and Guiding Enquiry 98
2.5.4.1 Step 1. Data Acquisition 100
2.5.4.2 Step 2. Data Preprocessing 101
2.5.4.3 Step 3. Categorisation 102
2.5.4.4 Step 4. Exploratory Data Analysis 107
2.5.4.5 Step 5. Examination of Results 119
2.5.4.6 Step 6. Comparison of Results with Policy Adaptation/Implementaiton 120
2.5.5 Case Selection and Timeframe 121
2.6 Conclusion: Synthesis for Case Studies 123

Chapter 3. Belarus 125
3.1 Case Study Introduction 125
3.2 Context 126
3.2.1 Overview of Policy Generation and Policy Trends in Lukashenka's Belarus 127
3.2.1.1 Domestic Policy Trends: 129
3.2.1.2 Regional Policy Trends: 130
3.2.1.3 International Policy Trends: 132
3.3 Sentiment Analysis Results 133
3.3.1 Corpus 134
3.3.2 Graphical presentation of quarterly scores 134
3.3.3 Interpretation: Belarus: Authoritarian Branding, Not Copying 141

3.4 Process-Tracing Omnibalancing 148
3.4.1 Trigger Event 149
3.4.2 Internal-Threat Profile: Belarus's Omnibalancing Enabling Conditions 152
3.4.2.1 Presence of Internal Threats: Present 153
3.4.2.2 High Stakes for Leaders: Present 153
3.4.2.3 Institutional Checks Degraded or Absent: Present 154
3.4.2.4 Low State Capacity (Administrative vs Coercive): Absent 154
3.4.2.5 Questionable Legitimacy: Ambiguous 155
3.4.2.6 Fragmented Elite: Absent 156
3.4.2.7 Vulnerable Geopolitical Position: Present 156
3.4.3 Truth Table 158
3.4.4 Wire-framing of Causal Mechanism 161
3.4.5 Causal Narrative 163
3.4.6 Outcome Assessment 175
3.5 Case Conclusion 180

Chapter 4. Russia 182
4.1 Case Study Introduction 182
4.2 Context 183
4.2.1 Overview of Policy Generation and Policy Trends in Putin's Russia 184
4.2.1.1 Domestic Policy Trends 187
4.2.1.2 Regional Policy Trends 190
4.2.1.3 International Policy Trends 192
4.3 Sentiment Analysis Results 195
4.3.1 Corpus 196
4.3.2 Graphical presentation of quarterly scores 196
4.3.3 Interpretation 202
4.4 Process-tracing the Omnibalancing 211
4.4.1 Trigger Event 212
4.4.2 Internal-Threat Profile: Russia's Enabling Conditions 218
4.4.2.1 Presence of Internal Threats: Absent 218
4.4.2.2 High Stakes for Leaders: Ambiguous 219
4.4.2.3 Institutional Checks Degraded or Absent: Present 220
4.4.2.4 Low State Capacity (Administrative vs Coercive): Absent 220
4.4.2.5 Questionable Legitimacy: Ambiguous 221
4.4.2.6 Fragmented Elite: Absent 221

4.4.2.7 Vulnerable Geopolitical Position: Absent 222
4.4.3 Truth Table 223
4.4.4 Outcome Assessment 225
4.5 Conclusion 230

Chapter 5. Ukraine 233
5.1 Case Study Introduction 233
5.2 Context 234
5.2.1 Overview of Policy Generation and Policy Trends in Ukraine 235
5.2.1.1 Domestic Policy Trends: 238
5.2.1.2 Regional Policy Trends: 240
5.2.1.3 International Policy Trends: 242
5.3 Sentiment Analysis Results 243
5.3.1 Corpus 244
5.3.2 Graphical presentation of quarterly scores 244
5.3.3 Interpretation: Ukraine: Exception that Proves the Rule 250
5.4 Process-tracing of Omnibalancing 254
5.4.1 Trigger Event 255
5.4.2 Internal-Threat Profile: Ukraine's Omnibalancing Enabling Conditions 256
5.4.2.1 Presence of Internal Threats: Present 256
5.4.2.2 High Stakes for Leaders: Present 257
5.4.2.3 Institutional Checks Degraded or Absent: Ambiguous 257
5.4.2.4 Low State Capacity (Administrative vs Coercive): Present 258
5.4.2.5 Questionable Legitimacy: Present 259
5.4.2.6 Fragmented Elite: Present 260
5.4.2.7 Vulnerable Geopolitical Position: Present 260
5.4.3 Truth Table 261
5.4.4 Wire-framing of Causal Mechanism 264
5.4.5 Causal Narrative 266
5.4.6 Outcome Assessment 273
5.5 Case Conclusion 274

Chapter 6. Comparative Evaluation 276
6.1 Introduction 276
6.2 Omnibalancing Comparisons 277
6.3 Cross-Case Comparisons 282

6.3.1 Belarus: Long-term Omnibalancing with China, Ultimately Unsuccessful 282
6.3.2 Russia: A Negative Example of Omnibalancing 283
6.3.3 Ukraine: Reactive Crisis-Based Omnibalancing 285
6.3.4 Discussion of Findings: The Boundaries and Strengths of Omnibalancing Theory 286
6.4 Implications for the Revised Omnibalancing Theory 288
6.4.1 Reflections on Omnibalancing Success and Failure 293
6.5 SA Results and Visualising Relations 295
6.6 Conclusion 300

Chapter 7. Conclusion 303
7.1 Introduction 303
7.2 Synthesis of Main Arguments 303
7.2.1 Theoretical Contributions 304
7.2.2 Empirical Findings 306
7.2.3 Methodological Reflections 307
7.3 Support for Main Arguments 309
7.3.1 How the Evidence Supports the Central Claims 309
7.3.2 Theoretical and Policy Implications 311
7.4 Limitations and Avenues for Future Research 312
7.5 Final Synthesis 313

Bibliography 316

Appendix 1 404

List of Figures

Figure 2.1 A Theoretical Understanding of External Relations and the State in Democratic Political Regimes. 44

Figure 2.2 A Theoretical Understanding of External Relations and the State in Autocratic Political Regimes. 46

Figure 2.3 A Diagram of the Omnibalancing of Threats to Regime Survival 47

Figure 2.4 Omnibalancing as Process Tracing Causal Mechanism Framework 97

Figure 2.5 Steps for Using Sentiment Analysis to Trace Authoritarian Learning 100

Figure 2.6 Sentiment Towards Russia: An Example of Turbulent and Worsening Relations. Language Used by Top Ukrainian Policymakers, 2006–2016. 110

Figure 2.7 Sentiment Towards Kazakhstan: An Example of Cordial, Static Relations. Language Used by Top Ukrainian Policymakers, 2006–2016. 112

Figure 2.8 Sentiment Towards Turkey: An Example of Steadily Improving Relations. Language Used by Top Ukrainian Policymakers, 2006–2016. 115

Figure 3.1 Belarusian President Lukashenka's Sentiment Towards China and Sentiment-Influencing Events, 2006–2016 137

Figure 3.2 Omnibalancing Process-Tracing Wireframe for Belarus 162

Figure 4.1 Russian Top Policymakers' Sentiment Towards China and Sentiment-Influencing Events, 2006–2016 199

Figure 5.1 Ukrainian Top Policymakers' Sentiment Towards China and Sentiment-Influencing Events, 2006–2016 247

Figure 5.2 Omnibalancing Process-Tracing Wireframe for Ukraine 265

Figure 6.1 Sentiment Towards Russia: An Example of Turbulent and Worsening Relations. Language Used by Top Ukrainian Policymakers, 2006–2016 297

Figure 6.2 Sentiment of Russian Policymakers When Mentioning Democracy, 2006 to 2016 299

List of Tables

Table 2.1 Revised Omnibalancing Enabling Conditions 96
Table 2.2 Categorisation Examples 103
Table 2.3 Accuracy Test Results 104
Table 3.1 Omnibalancing Enabling Conditions Truth Table: Belarus 159
Table 4.1 Parallel Developments in Digital Authoritarianism, 2006–2016 207
Table 4.2 Omnibalancing Enabling Conditions Truth Table: Russia 224
Table 5.1 Omnibalancing Enabling Conditions Truth Table: Ukraine 262
Table 6.1 Comparison of Omnibalancing Enabling Conditions in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine 280

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction and Framing

This dissertation investigates whether or not regimes in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus have used their bilateral relations with China to enhance authoritarian persistence from 2006 to 2016. Authoritarian persistence refers to the strategies autocratic regimes use to prolong survival and remain in power (Aleprete, 2013a, p. 5).

Before getting started, three pieces of jargon must be explained. First, authoritarian regimes (also referred to as autocratic regimes) are systems of political rule with two core features: (1) restricted political opposition and limited opposing ideas; and (2) a leader or sometimes a small group exercises a great amount of power, because checks and balances are ill-defined or subverted (J. J. Linz, 2000, pp. 159–169). Second, this dissertation uses “persistence” and “survival” interchangeably. The two terms can be understood as “maintaining power over an extended period” (M. Gallagher & Hanson, 2013, p. 187). Third, regime (rather than government or administration) is the preferred term to describe autocratic or democratically backsliding systems of political rule. The word highlights the personal preferences of individual leaders or small ruling groups and the way these interact with formal institutions (Sakwa, 2011a, p. 29). In short, “regime” emphasizes a system of rule uncommon among democracies. Russia, Ukraine and Belarus can be classified as hybrid, electoral authoritarian regimes, which contain both democratic and autocratic elements.

1.2 The Puzzle: Why Study this Question?

This dissertation is a reaction to two related debates within social science. These two debates seek to understand the impact of China’s growing global

influence. These debates underpin the main objectives of the dissertation and create a puzzle for this dissertation to solve.

The first debate is within the academic fields of democracy and autocracy promotion. These fields study how states use foreign policy instruments to promote the spread of democratic or authoritarian political systems. The first debate seeks to explain why authoritarian regimes are making a come back—or, at least, why they are continuing to persist (Bloom, 2016, pp. 1–6; Dimitrov, 2013; Gat, 2007, pp. 64–67; S. Hall, 2023a; Tansey, 2016a, pp. 5–9).

After Soviet collapse, there was optimism fledgling regimes would eventually transition to democracies (Plattner, 1991; Rustow, 1990). For the most part, this has not been the case. In Central Asia, for example, every former Soviet republic is ruled by some form of autocratic subtype (Diamond, 2002, pp. 29–32; Way, 2015, p. 696). Authoritarian regimes persist in post-Soviet East Europe as well. Russia and Belarus can be classified as hybrid, electoral authoritarian regimes, which contain both democratic and autocratic elements.

In this debate, China (a one party bureaucratic authoritarian regime) is discussed as an object of authoritarian survival, resilience and gaining power. As explained above, survival is the maintenance of power over an extended period. Resilience, on the other hand, is not only survival but when a regime's economy and military are also able to thrive and adapt to new circumstances (M. Gallagher & Hanson, 2013, p. 187). China has all the signs of authoritarian resilience. The size of China's middle class has overtaken the US and is the world's largest (SCMP, 2024). It is the world's greatest trading nation, the second largest oil consumer, and it has become a non-negligible source of aid and foreign investment (Brautigam & Tang, 2011; Copper, 2016; X. Li et al., 2014).

The study of China's impact upon the persistence of other autocratic regimes is nascent. Julia Bader (2015b, p. 656) is correct in saying our "understanding of

China's interactions with other non-democracies and its role in authoritarian persistence is still rather thin." For example, Melnykovska et al. (2012) have argued that deeper economic cooperation with China has worked to encourage the development of more democratic institutions. Others, such as Nathan (2015), Halper (2012) and Kurlantzick and Link (2009) argue the opposite. They warn deeper relations with China encourage non-adherence to Western standards of good governance (such as protecting human rights) and justify non-democratic forms of rule. Recently, Stephen Hall (2023a, pp. 106–119) argues that China serves as source of authoritarian learning for other nondemocratic regimes. China becomes either a passive or active transmitter of autocratic best practices for other nondemocratic regimes to learn from and, thereby, persist.

However, research on regimes strategically using links to the international system for survival tends not to focus on China. That is, if the discussion moves to how autocratic regimes seek to use external (international) ties to enhance authoritarian persistence, China being a potential source of external support is mentioned but not studied (Libman & Obydenkova, 2016; Vanderhill, 2013; Vanderhill & Aleprete, 2013). In her introduction to China's Foreign Relations and the Survival of Autocracies, Julia Bader (2016) argues researchers on the subject "often do not cover China." Indeed, the literature appears to be preoccupied with Western concerns, such as Russia, Iran and Venezuela. She suggests this is because there is uncertainty among scholars about how to classify China's foreign engagement (Bader, 2016, pp. 34–37).

To summarise, this first debate has yet to establish how regimes use ties with China for authoritarian persistence. The role China plays remains unclear. For example, since 2006, Russia, Ukraine and Belarus (all to varying degrees) have sought to deepen ties with China. Whether or not this amounts to seeking patronage—external diplomatic, economic or military support, which can be used by

an incumbent regime to improve or maintain stability—in order to enhance authoritarian persistence is unclear.

The second debate underpinning this dissertation extends to the broader fields of international relations (IR) and international political economy. The debate focuses on China as an emerging power. Although there is no consensus on the term, here emerging power refers to the "increasing degree of might of a country in politics and international economy" (Fonseca et al., 2016, p. 51). The second debate centres around what kind of impact a rising China will have upon international politics and economics.

The debate features a plurality of views. Some argue China's rise will mean American decline (Zakaria, 2009), or that China's rise will bring the demise of the liberal order's open and rule-based system of relations dominated by the US (M. Li, 2005, 2008; Root, 2013) . Critics argue to the contrary that China will have no effect. This is either because the health of China's economy depends upon the world order's continued existence (Hung, 2016; Ikenberry, 2011), or because the US military, US technology, and Western resistance will create barriers to China's rise (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2016). Others say this makes a China-versus-the-West clash likely (Stuenkel, 2015). Or the opposite—that it heralds a global political, economic and cultural convergence (Mahbubani, 2013). Another position is that China is developing a partnership order (Braga & Hall, 2019; X. Wu, 2018), which resembles the US hegemonic liberal order in terms of openness, but adherence to rules will be less hegemonic and more based on bilateral relationships.

Overall, there is unease over what sort of impact China's growing global presence will have on democracies and autocratic regimes alike. In particular, there is disagreement over whether China can be labelled an autocracy promoter (Yakouchyk, 2016), a patron of autocratic regimes (Bader, 2015b, 2015a, 2016), or neither (Tansey, 2016b). China's support for Russia's banking system as it wages a

bloody war against Ukraine might make China a military patron (Leng & Walker, 2023). There is no shortage of critics that accuse China of being a supporter of autocratic regimes (Cooley, 2012; Halper, 2012; Kurlantzick & Link, 2009; Nathan, 2015; Pillsbury, 2015).

But China does not display a preference for working with only authoritarian states. Its non-interference policy automatically gears it to engage with incumbent regimes—regardless of regime type (Bader, 2016). Despite deepening ties with Russia, for example, China was one of the first to recognise the new, nominally pro-democratic Poroshenko regime in Kyiv. China has committed to continue “strategic partnership” level relations with Ukraine even after the autocratic Yanukovych regime collapsed (Baggiani, 2015).

But China is hesitant to pursue autocracy promotion abroad. China’s Communist Party has not endorsed any ideological frameworks. The concepts of “Neo-Confucianism,” the “Beijing Consensus,” “Neo-authoritarianism” or the “China Model,” which tout the advantages of state guided economics and authoritarian political rule but with “Chinese characteristics,” are all academic creations and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) does not acknowledge any of them (Bell, 2015; Ramo, 2005). There has been no global proliferation of autocratic regimes beholden to China—unless Russia can be counted as China’s “new vassal” (Gabuev, 2022). Ratings indicate a global decline in average democratic performance scores (Papada et al., 2023). It would be hard to argue, however, these scores point to any form of Chinese autocracy promotion and not instead a more complex combination of factors.

Without a strong ideological commitment to spreading a particular nondemocratic regime type—in contrast to Maoist China in the 1950s and the Soviet Union throughout the Cold War—it is difficult to accuse China of being an active autocracy promoter. For example, what might appear to be autocracy promotion

may, in fact, be efforts to prevent the spread of democracy. That is, Chinese external actions may be motivated by self-interested concerns for maintaining existing policies with close allies, like support for Syria and Pakistan for example, rather than a drive to spread authoritarianism (Bader, 2016; Small, 2020; Tansey, 2016a, pp. 149–150).

The debate over China's support for Russia, Ukraine and Belarus is equally unclear. There is practically no academic discussion of whether Chinese engagement helps to perpetuate undemocratic rule in Ukraine (Oleinikova, 2016). In its relations with Belarus, China is generally viewed as a source of financial support, which is free from Western demands for economic or political reform (Libman & Obydenkova, 2016, pp. 24–25; A. Wilson, 2011, p. 223; Yakouchyk, 2016, p. 219). The discussion over Chinese engagement with Russia—which dwarfs Ukraine and Belarus in size and importance—is changing since Russia's expanded 2022 war against Ukraine. Before the expanded invasion, some argued there was a 'Russia–China Axis' that encourages "anti-democratic alliances" (Schoen & Kaylan, 2014) working to reverse democratisation the world around (Kagan, 2006; Silitski, 2010). Others downplayed the closeness of the China–Russia partnership. They argued it more closely resembled China's engagement with Belarus—economic cooperation free of conditions (Gabuev, 2015). After Russia's 2022 invasion, China is viewed as a partner and supporter of Russia, which has been isolated by the West. China is not overtly supporting Russia's military efforts but has maintained normal trade relations, escalating economic cooperation, and supporting Moscow diplomatically by avoiding direct condemnation of its actions while amplifying Russian narratives in global forums (Kim, 2023).

Recent scholarship has highlighted the role of "sharp power"—the use of information manipulation, elite capture, and cultural programming—as a means by which China projects governance norms and influences political environments abroad (Walker 2018, 2022; Nye 2018; Wu 2019) (Nye, 2018; Walker, 2018, 2022; Y.

Wu, 2019). In the context of the Belt and Road Initiative, such techniques are embedded in economic and cultural projects, raising questions about the diffusion of authoritarian models and the erosion of liberal-democratic standards. For post-Soviet regimes, the availability of Chinese sharp power resources may offer new avenues for regime legitimation, information control, and policy emulation. However, the extent to which these regimes actively leverage, adapt, or resist such tools remains empirically uncertain. Sharp power may constitute a potential mechanism of authoritarian learning and external alignment, to be assessed alongside more conventional forms of economic and diplomatic support.

To summarise, the first debate is disagreement about China's role in global authoritarian persistence. The second debate is concerned over the degree China's direct support for autocracy. There is a corollary from this second debate, which feeds back into the first. Deepening links with China in post-Soviet East Europe will have an impact upon the entire region—not just for the individual regimes (Daly, 2015; Pavlovets, 2016; Yakouchyk, 2016). Post-Soviet East Europe refers to the group of countries which border or are located not far from the EU, but are not members of the EU, were once part of the USSR, and are commonly identified as being part of Eastern Europe.

Deepening ties with China may create a bulwark against democratisation. Democratisation is the process of transformation from a non-democratic to democratic regime. It also involves liberalization or only partial democratisation in regimes that do not become fully democratic (Huntington, 1993, pp. 6–15). democratisation presents a threat to authoritarian regimes, because democracies require regular regime change by definition. The EU is an active democracy promoter. It does so via its Eastern Partnership foreign policy (E. A. Korosteleva, 2012, p. 36). The EU may have to contend with a Chinese presence firmly established on the edge of Europe's Eastern neighbourhood (Yakouchyk, 2016). This presence may work both to prevent the spread of democracy and to enhance

authoritarian persistence in the region. If so, this will weaken one of the EU's foreign policy tools in the region: pressuring neighbours to take steps towards democratisation in return for access to the single market, financing or aid. Moreover, it may even come to be perceived as a threat to EU internal security. Certainly, in times of high-intensity warfare, democratisation is on hold—Ukraine, for example, cannot constitutionally hold elections during war-time (Romandash, 2024). However, when the war ends, perhaps China's increased presence in this region will be a hinderance to the development, spread, and endurance of democracy.

Reflecting on these two debates, this dissertation has three objectives. First, to expand the debate on authoritarian persistence to include China, with a particular focus on relations with Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. Second, to contribute to understanding how regimes use ties with China. Arguably, it is not how we classify China as an autocracy promoter or an autocratic patron, but rather how authoritarian regimes try to benefit from ties with China. Third, this study will contribute to better understanding of the impact of a rising China. Specifically, can it be used for authoritarian persistence and what sort ramifications will this have.

This dissertation suggests a practical solution to these debates. It is not how to label China, but rather how regimes are using China. China may have no intention to promote or to support any form of autocracy. But regimes may emulate aspects of China's authoritarian political economy, such as state-led export focused development or internet surveillance, and use financial assistance and loans from China to prolong the survival of their regimes. Therefore, this dissertation shifts the focus from the authoritarian great power and focuses on the support-seeking, autocratic client state.

These two debates thus present a puzzle to solve in the form of two questions that are combined to make the main research question (Gerring, 2012, p. 107). The first question is descriptive. That is, it seeks an empirical argument to answer a what

or in what manner question. (1) What is the nature and impact of Russia's, Ukraine's and Belarus' bilateral relations with China? The second question lays the groundwork of a causal argument; it demands a cause be identified for a specific outcome. (2) Do these relations enhance or weaken authoritarian persistence? This dissertation has combined these two questions to make the main investigative research question: do regimes in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus have used their bilateral relations with China to enhance authoritarian persistence? The following section will show how this dissertation went about answering these two questions and achieving its aims.

1.3 The Approach: How the Dissertation Addresses the Puzzle

The dissertation tackles the puzzle through a sequenced, mixed-method research design anchored in a revised, regime-type-neutral formulation of omnibalancing. Omnibalancing is where a regime uses external relations with another state to counter internal threats to regime survival (David, 1991). At the theoretical level it reconceptualises David's (1991) omnibalancing theory (devised for Cold War "Third World" settings) as a portable framework that links domestic theats to external alignment irrespective of regime type. The reformulation specifies seven enabling conditions (acute internal threat, high personal stakes, degraded institutional checks, low administrative capacity, low coercive capacity, elite fragmentation and geopolitical vulnerability) and integrates them with insights from the literatures on authoritarian learning and policy diffusion. These revisions and collection of theories and methods allows the study to distinguish routine bilateral relations with China from autocratic client states seeking use external ties with China for authoritarian persistence.

To operationalise the framework the study deploys a two-stage empirical strategy. First, computer-assisted sentiment analysis (the analysis of a text to determine its disposition, such as positive, negative, or neutral, towards something)

is applied to more than 71,000 Russian-language speeches, press releases and interviews by presidents, prime ministers and foreign ministers in Minsk, Moscow and Kyiv (2006–2016) (see Chapter 2) (B. Liu, 2015). The technique maps quarterly fluctuations sentiment within elite discourse and identifies statistically significant surges in favourable or unfavourable references towards China. These surges in sentiment delineate the temporal windows in which alignment, learning, or emulation can be qualitatively investigated. Second, explaining-outcome process tracing reconstructs the causal chains that link the decision to turn to Beijing and the eventual regime outcome (Beach, 2021; Beach & Pedersen, 2019).

The research design is a three-case, most-similar (but power-differentiated) case deign (Meur & Gottcheiner, 2009, pp. 209–213 and 218). Belarus, Russia and Ukraine are all post-Soviet electoral or hegemonic authoritarian systems, but they vary markedly in material capability and geopolitical importance. The 2006–2016 timeframe for the dissertation captures (1) China's outward "going-global" acceleration, (2) the onset of the Belt and Road Initiative, and (3) major crises and shocks that impacted the post-Soviet, East European region, including the 2009 capital flight from Russia and Russia's 2014 war in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea. Across the three cases the dissertation tests two empirical approaches to external support: (a) omnibalancing, such as aligning with China to counter internal threats; and (b) policy emulation, adopting or invoking Chinese governance practices. This research design is used to investigate how regimes use ties to the international system as strategies for authoritarian persistence—to enhance regime survival.

In practice, the international dimensions of authoritarian persistence entail the use of different strategies to enhance regime survival. As Aleprete (2013a, p. 5) states, regimes in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus "seem to have all developed effective strategies designed specifically to use their ties to the global community... to bolster their domestic regimes in ways that actually blunt or undermine efforts at

democratisation." Sometimes, it is not clear what is a strategy and what is a tactic. The difference between tactics and strategy is scope (Freedman, 2013, pp. 72–73) . Tactics are short term and are situational. Strategy is focused on broader objectives and the overall direction of efforts. While tactics involve the specific actions and manoeuvres required to achieve immediate goals, strategy involves planning and coordinating resources to maximize success in achieving overarching, long-term aims. This dissertation will investigate the strategies and tactics nondemocratic regimes use at the international level to enhance regime survival.

But what does it mean "to enhance regime survival." The concept of authoritarian persistence/survival may be straight forward, but what is meant by "enhance" is unclear. So far, this dissertation has used the word interchangeably with "prolong [regime] survival" and "promote internal stability." At the lexical level, enhance means to increase or to improve the quality of. In this dissertation, enhance refers to anything that aids or improves stability. Stability in contemporary authoritarian regimes arises from a combination of three factors: legitimation (in terms of economic performance and leadership competency); strategic repression (measures to prevent social unrest and revolution, such as surveillance and violence, if costs to the elite of concessions are greater); and Co-optation (linking strategically important actors to the regime elite) (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2009, p. 29; Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003; Bueno de Mesquita & Smith, 2012; Gerschewski, 2013a, pp. 16, 19–20, and 22–23, 2023; Treisman, 2011, p. 590). Thus, "enhance regime survival" refers to those factors that improve domestic legitimation, complement strategic repression, or facilitate co-optation.

Thus, this dissertation combines a revised theoretical framework (omnibalancing) with computer-assisted text mining and fine-grained process tracing, to evaluate how these autocratic client regimes seek to use China for authoritarian persistence. The approach aligns the analysis of domestic threat perception with

observable foreign-policy behaviour and, in so doing, addresses the empirical and theoretical uncertainty that motivates the study.

1.4 Main Arguments and Findings

The dissertation argues that post-Soviet rulers have indeed attempted to mobilise their relations with the China for authoritarian persistence. However, their such efforts proved contingent and, in the period examined, rarely decisive. Minsk and Kyiv each faced convergent internal and external pressures that made alignment with China (via omnibalancing) more acceptable for the regime leadership. In Belarus, the contraction of Russian energy rents, recurrent social unrest and a vulnerable geopolitical position prompted President Lukashenka to court Beijing as a prospective “third wing” of foreign policy (see Chapter 3). His flagship initiative—the Belarus–China Great Stone Industrial Park—was intended to substitute Chinese finance and symbolism for eroding Russian support. Not only this, this strategy aimed to re-package the Belarusian regime as a modernising guardian of social stability (see “authoritarian branding” in Chapter 6). While sizable credit lines were negotiated and positive elite discourse towards China rose steadily, repeated failures to meet loan conditionality and renewed pressure from Moscow created a development–conditionality loop that left the regime structurally dependent on the Kremlin. Belarus therefore exemplifies a conversion failure: an omnibalancing strategy was launched but the resources obtained were too slow and too narrowly disbursed to rescue a deteriorating social contract.

Ukraine offers a more acute crisis-driven variant (see Chapter 4). By late-2013, the Yanukovych administration confronted mass protest, elite fragmentation, and Russian economic coercion. This made omnibalancing with Beijing more likely. Sentiment analysis registers a surge in pro-Chinese rhetoric among policymakers at precisely the moment the demonstrations peaked (a long-planned trip to Beijing was not cancelled despite the protests). During his 3–6 December 2013 state visit to

Beijing, Yanukovych secured large credit pledges and mooted future participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (Izmirli, 2014)—an explicit attempt to placate oligarchs and to signal a non-Russian external sponsor. Yet the regime collapsed before any tranche was released. Chinese assistance could not be accessed rapidly enough to stem defections or to rebuild legitimacy. Ukraine thus represents an access failure: omnibalancing was pursued under acute threat, but the temporal gap between promise and disbursement rendered the strategy futile.

Russia stands as the negative case (see Chapter 5). The 2011–2012 Bolotnaya Square protests raised protest activity but did not threaten the regime. This meant Russia had less of an imperative to omnibalance internal threats with China. Cooperation with China therefore advanced for long-term strategic reasons, chiefly in Chinese inspired internet regulation policies. This is in an example of authoritarian learning (when nondemocratic regimes learn best practices from one another). Moscow's behaviour locates the empirical boundary of omnibalancing: in the absence of existential domestic threats even an autocracy facing Western sanctions can deepen ties with Beijing without treating them as regime insurance.

Across the three cases computer-assisted sentiment analysis performs a dual function. First, it maps when senior elites directed sustained attention towards China, thereby identifying the temporal windows within which alignment or authoritarian learning was most plausible. Second, its absence during Russia's protests and its pronounced presence during Belarusian and Ukrainian crises independently corroborate the omnibalancing process-tracing narratives. Taken together, the findings qualify general claims that Chinese engagement guarantees authoritarian durability. Alignment can supply credit, infrastructural investment and reputational capital, yet its usefulness depends on the simultaneity of omnibalancing pressures, the speed of disbursement, and the regime's administrative and elite cohesion. If a

regime faces too many pressures, Chinese support remains a potential rather than an assured prop for authoritarian persistence.

1.5 Value and Contribution to Social Science Scholarship

This dissertation contributes to two debates that cut across comparative politics and International Relations. First, it refines the study of the international dimension of authoritarian pesistence. By recasting Steven David's Cold-War-era omnibalancing argument as a regime-type-neutral framework anchored in seven observable enabling conditions, the analysis moves beyond vague references to "weak and illegitimate" leaders and "Third-World" states (David, 1991, p. 236). In so doing, it offers scholars of autocracy a portable template for linking domestic threat perception to external alignment, irrespective of geographic setting or regime subtype. This means the research method can be applied to backsliding democracies, such as the United States, as well. The Belarusian, Russian and Ukrainian cases show that the framework discriminates between alignment pursued for routine strategic advantage and alignment activated when rulers face existential threats. The study thus bridges research on patron–client ties, authoritarian learning, and regime survival. It suggests these logics are complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

Secondly, the inquiry advances methodological discussion on how to trace cross-border support for nondemocratic regimes. The pairing of longitudinal sentiment analysis with explaining-outcome process tracing provides a replicable way to locate temporal windows in which external engagement is likely to matter. Process tracing can then be used to unpack the causal sequence that follows. Sentiment scores act as a transparent gatekeeper: they identify surges in elite attention towards an external actor without presuming a particular motivation. Process tracing then tests whether those surges translate into material, ideational (in the form of policies or best practices), or symbolic support. It can be redeployed in

other languages, regions or regime types, and thereby widens the empirical reach of comparative authoritarian scholarship.

Taken together, these contributions reinforce the importance of integrating domestic politics with foreign-policy analysis. This dissertation's methods and analysis demonstrate the analytical leverage gained from combining computational and qualitative tools. Finally, it provides a comparative baseline against which future research on authoritarian persistence—whether in Central Asia, the Middle East or hybrid democracies—can be calibrated.

1.6 Structure of the Dissertation

The following is a summary of the dissertation's organisation and structure. The dissertation has seven chapters. Chapter 1 begins with the statement of the research puzzle and resolves with empirically supporting analytical findings and wider implications.

Chapter 2 situates the study within four strands of scholarship: the international dimensions of authoritarian persistence, omnibalancing theory, authoritarian learning, and China's engagement with the post-Soviet space. Next, the chapter argues for a revised, regime-type-neutral omnibalancing framework. It specifies that omnibalancing theory must include seven enabling conditions that make omnibalancing more likely. After, Chapter 2 details the mixed-methods design that pairs longitudinal sentiment analysis with explaining-outcome process tracing.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 supply the empirical case studies. Chapter 3 analyses Belarus. It traces how the Lukashenka regime sought to mobilise Chinese credit and the Belarus–China Great Stone Industrial Park to offset shrinking Russian rents and growing pressure. It uses these mixed methods to demonstrate why this ambitious, long-term omnibalancing effort stalled.

Chapter 4 turns to Russia. It argues that, despite deepening co-operation with Beijing, the Kremlin faced no existential domestic crisis in 2006-2016. Its alignment with China, therefore, served strategic rather than regime-saving purposes.

Chapter 5 examines Ukraine. It reconstucts how President Yanukovych attempted—too late—to secure Chinese finance and diplomatic cover during the Euromaidan protests. This omnibalancing attempt also failed before Chinese funds could be drawn.

Chapter 6 conducts a comparative evaluation. It contrasts the sentiment analysis results and the omnibalancing process-tracing analyses to reinforce the findings of the case study chapters 3 to 5. The chapter also assesses the contribution of sentiment analysis as an empirical mapping tool for bilateral relations.

Chapter 7 concludes the dissertation’s research and analysis. It synthesises the theoretical, empirical, and methodological findings. It clarifies the contingent nature of Chinese support for embattled, client, autocratic, post-Soviet regimes. Chapter 7 also reflects on the limits of the dissertation. Finally, it outlines avenues for further research.

Together, the chapters show that engagement with China can supply material, ideational, and symbolic resources, yet their ability to secure authoritarian persistence also hinges on domestic structures and timing.

Chapter 2. Literature Review, Core Theory, and Methodology and Methods

This chapter situates this dissertation within existing scholarship, it advances the conceptual logic that supports the empirical analysis in the case study chapters and sets out the dissertation's research design. The chapter argues that a revised, regime-type-neutral formulation of omnibalancing, combined with a peer-to-peer authoritarian learning perspective and a sequenced mixed-method research design, provides the most appropriate framework for explaining how Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine have attempted to use their ties with China for regime survival.

2.1 Introduction to Comparative Framework

The dissertation situates its enquiry at the intersection of four bodies of scholarship that rarely speak altogether: the international dimensions of authoritarian persistence, omnibalancing theory, research on authoritarian learning and policy diffusion, and the fast-expanding literature on China's engagement with the post-Soviet space. Their integration is necessary for this study. China's rise as an alternative centre of power has introduced new resources (financial, technological and ideational) that authoritarian rulers in Eurasia are likely to use to buttress their rule.

The chapter therefore advances a comparative framework that links internal regime vulnerability to two external mechanisms: foreign policy alignment (analysed through a revised formulation of omnibalancing) and emulation of policy and governance practices (conceptualised as positive, peer-to-peer authoritarian learning) with China. The framework treats these mechanisms as complementary rather than mutually exclusive and specifies the conditions under which each is likely to be activated.

The chapter proceeds as follows. Section 2.2 surveys the four literatures and identifies this study's place within them. Section 2.3 reconstructs and updates omnibalancing, introducing a set of enabling conditions that travel beyond the Cold-War Third World context. Section 2.4 explains the theory of how and why regimes emulate (or claim to emulate) Chinese practices. Section 2.5 details the mixed-method research design: sentiment analysis and explaining-outcome process tracing. Taken together, these sections lay the conceptual, methodological, and method-based foundations for the case studies that follow.

2.2 Literature Review

The literature review surveys four strands of scholarship that together frame the dissertation's core enquiry into post-Soviet autocracies and their survival strategies involving China. Section 2.2.1 argues that recent scholarship on autocracies and regime survival is moving beyond domestic explanations of regime durability to consider the international dimension of authoritarian persistence. Autocrats draw on external sponsors, regional organisations and transnational learning to reinforce rule.

Section 2.2.2 revisits omnibalancing. Originally devised for Cold War, Third World states, the theory argues that rulers align with foreign powers to manage internal threats. Scholarship has adapted it to contemporary, resource-rich autocracies, relaxed its enabling conditions, and formed into minimalist, state-formation and revisionist theoretical camps. This discussion prepares the ground for the dissertation's own refinement of the model.

Section 2.2.3 turns to authoritarian diffusion and learning. Scholars trace how regimes emulate policies and learn from each other via structural linkages, regime type similarity (isomorphism), and information networks. The section also evaluates claims that China now offers a developmental and governance template for other autocracies—a claim central to the dissertation's case studies.

Lastly, section 2.2.4 is a critical review of methods used to study authoritarian diffusion and learning. Qualitative work on policy transfer is criticised for anecdotalism. The review argues a combination of archival sources with computational tools, such as sentiment analysis, can be used to improve research. The dissertation adopts this mixed approach.

Together, these four literatures build an argument (expanded on in sections 2.3 to 2.5) for this dissertation's analytical approach: to integrate international alignment, regime-type incentives, policy emulation, and novel data strategies to analyse whether Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine have used China for regime survival.

2.2.1 Authoritarian Persistence and International Dimensions

The international dimensions of authoritarian persistence—how autocratic regimes use foreign policy and external linkages to prolong survival— constitute an expanding field of research (Kneuer, 2017; Soest, 2015; Tansey et al., 2017; Yom & Al-Momani, 2008). This literature explores how international structures and agents reinforce or undermine authoritarian regimes (Brownlee, 2002; R. Hinnebusch, 2006). Earlier works in the subfields of area studies and comparative analyses attributed authoritarian persistence primarily to internal factors, such as state capacity, elite cohesion, and rent-distribution (Hinnebusch, 2006, pp. 379–382; Nisnevich & Ryabov, 2020). But the last two decades have seen a resurgence in scholarship emphasising the pivotal role of international linkages, diffusion, regionalism, and external support (Ambrosio, 2010; Brusis, 2024; Levitsky & Way, 2010).

International authoritarian persistence is a subfield within the broader field studying the foreign policy of authoritarian regimes. A comprehensive review is provided by Kneuer's (2017) study. It is argued that different political systems pursue fundamentally different foreign policies (Hagan, 2010). But until recently, the foreign policy of nondemocracies lacked both systematic study and communication between

its related subdisciplines (Kneuer, 2017). Foundational works on authoritarian regimes, such as those by Arendt (1951) and Brzezinski and Friedrich (1965), were often limited to case studies and lacked theoretical coherence. The articulate analyses of regime types in the 1970s were intended for comparative politics and largely neglected foreign policy (Gerschewski, 2023, pp. 8, 16–17; Linz, 1975). Likewise, until the 1990s, the dominant, realist schools studying international relations were loath to open the black box of the state. Realists feared it would negate the parsimony of their models (Kneuer, 2017, p. 1; Mearsheimer, 2014, pp. 10–11). And finally, foreign policy analysis (where IR seeks to describe, foreign policy analysis scrutinises the conduct of inter-state relations and provides normative assessments) literature neglected the study of nondemocracies outside of Communist Russia and China (Alden & Aran, 2017, p. 3; M. G. Hermann, 2001, p. 49). The result is an academic literature that is well-developed in some areas (such as regime type categorisation) but less developed in others (whether different regime types behave differently from one another) (Kneuer, 2017, pp. 17–18; Kou & Kao, 2011, p. 5).

The international dimension is gaining prominence as a key determinant of authoritarian persistence. Early democratisation theory, rooted in modernisation and structuralist paradigms, often treated the international environment as exogenous or as a source of democratising pressure (Hinnebusch, 2006). However, research through the 2000s and 2010 has demonstrated that international factors can also reinforce authoritarian rule. Levitsky and Way's (2010, pp. 38–45, 2006, pp. 382–388) influential framework distinguishes between "leverage" (the vulnerability of a regime to external pressure) and "linkage" (the density of cross-border ties with democratic states), showing that high linkage to the West increases the costs of repression and strengthens domestic democratic actors. Yet, as later studies have shown, linkage is not unidirectional: dense ties to other autocracies—what Tansey et

al. (2017, pp. 1222 and 1225–1227) term “autocratic linkage”—can provide alternative sources of support, resources, and legitimation.

Empirical research has suggested that autocratic regimes with high levels of international linkage to other autocracies are more likely to survive, as these ties create both external and domestic constituencies with a stake in regime continuity (Debre, 2022; Schmotz & Tansey, 2018; Tansey et al., 2017). Regional clusters of autocracies (in the post-Soviet space, the Middle East, and East Asia) have developed dense networks of trade, migration, diplomatic exchange, and institutional cooperation (Schmotz & Tansey, 2018; Silitski, 2010; Soest, 2015). These facilitate the diffusion of authoritarian practices, mutual learning, and coordinated responses to democratic threats. These regional linkages are not merely a function of geographic proximity or regime similarity, but are actively constructed through foreign policy (Debre, 2022; Libman & Obydenkova, 2018; Obydenkova & Libman, 2019).

This literature has also responded to changing international circumstances. The international environment has become increasingly permissive for autocratic survival. The rise of authoritarian powers such as China and Russia, the proliferation of “clubs of autocrats” (Debre, 2022, p. 505), and the weakening of Western democracy promotion have all contributed to a global context in which autocratisation is less likely to be penalised and more likely to be emulated (Ambrosio & Tolstrup, 2019; Soest, 2024, p. 257). Regional organisations dominated by autocracies, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), have institutionalised norms of sovereignty and non-interference, provided material and ideational resources for regime survival, and shielded members from external democratic pressures (Debre, 2022; Libman & and Vinokurov, 2018; Tallberg & Vikberg, 2025).

The foreign policy of autocratic regimes is now recognised as both a tool for regime survival and a domain in which regime type matters (Borzyskowski & Kartal,

2022; Hyde & Saunders, 2020; Kneuer, 2017; Mattes & Rodríguez, 2014). Some recent literature (Düben, 2023) argues omnibalancing (where alignment is used to balance both foreign and domestic threats to regime survival) is best suited for the study of nondemocratic regimes. The nuances of this regime type vs foreign policy argument in relation to omnibalancing will be taken up later in this dissertation.

What is the significance of the post-Soviet space in regards to this literature and this dissertation? The post-Soviet region provides case studies of the international dimensions of authoritarian persistence. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, most successor states experienced only brief or abortive episodes of democratisation before consolidating various forms of autocratic rule (Brusis, 2024; Nisnevich & Ryabov, 2020). The durability of these regimes has been attributed not only to domestic factors—such as the legacies of the nomenklatura, the institution of power-property, and the weakness of civil society—but also to the regional and international environment (Brusis, 2024; Fisun, 2019; Hale, 2015).

Russia, in particular, has played a central role as a “black knight” supporting authoritarian regimes in its near abroad (Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 185; Libman & Obydenkova, 2018; Silitski, 2010; Tolstrup, 2009). Through a combination of bilateral patronage, economic integration projects (such as the EAEU), and regional organisations (CIS, CSTO, SCO), Russia has provided material resources, security guarantees, and diplomatic cover to embattled autocrats, while also seeking to limit the influence of Western democracy promotion (Debre, 2022; Libman & Obydenkova, 2018; Soest, 2015).

At the same time, post-Soviet autocracies have developed sophisticated foreign policy strategies to maximise their autonomy and regime security. For example, Kazakhstan’s multivectorism (a pragmatic foreign policy that seeks to establish and develop mutually beneficial cooperation with all countries) exemplifies how secondary powers can use omni-enmeshment and complex balancing to avoid

dependence on any single great power, extracting resources and security guarantees from both Russia and China, while maintaining positive relations with the West (Vanderhill et al., 2020, pp. 978–980). Other regimes, such as Belarus and Azerbaijan, have leveraged their geopolitical position to secure rents and support from multiple external patrons, while resisting external pressures for democratisation (Braga & Sangar, 2020; Brusis, 2024; Rudyj, 2021).

The post-Soviet region has also been a site of intense authoritarian learning and diffusion. The Colour Revolutions of the 2000s prompted a wave of pre-emptive authoritarian consolidation, as regimes adopted new tools of repression, co-optation, and legitimation, often drawing on the experiences of their neighbours and on support from Russia and China (Silitski, 2010; Soest, 2015; Tsourapas, 2021). Regional organisations such as the SCO have facilitated the diffusion of authoritarian norms and practices, including transnational repression, information control, and the suppression of civil society (Debre, 2022; Tsourapas, 2021).

Where does this dissertation locate itself within the literature discussed here? This dissertation intersects the above discussed literature in three ways. First, this dissertation focuses on the international dimensions of authoritarian persistence in the post-Soviet space. But instead of taking the perspective of China as an autocratic patron (Bader, 2015a, 2016), it takes the standpoint of the autocratic client. Second, by examining the role of China as both a model for post-Soviet autocracies, the current dissertation engages with the emerging literature on authoritarian diffusion, learning, and the rise of non-Western “gravity centres” (Hall, 2023; Hall & Ambrosio, 2017; Lang, 2018; Sordi & Libman, 2020). Third, this dissertation’s work on omnibalancing advances understanding of how regime type shapes international behaviour and how smaller states navigate (and take advantage) of a competitive and increasingly multipolar international environment (much like multivectorism) (Libman & and Vinokurov, 2018; Vanderhill et al., 2020).

This dissertation also contributes methods-based innovations to the study of nondemocratic regimes. The dissertation combines qualitative case studies with quantitative tools such as sentiment analysis. This contributes to mapping of regime attitudes and behaviours (Hale & Lenton, 2024) and authoritarian learning (Hall, 2023; Hall & Ambrosio, 2017). The dissertation also attempts to focus the application of omnibalancing by arguing for a novel analytical framework. This directly contributes to the nondemocracy foreign policy literature by providing a more precise way to explain the alignment choices of foreign policy regimes. This framework unites domestic and international factors in authoritarian persistence.

This dissertation contributes to the growing body of literature that recognises the international embeddedness of authoritarian regimes. By focusing on the post-Soviet space and the role of China, it offers new insights into the mechanisms of authoritarian survival and the evolving architecture of global authoritarianism.

2.2.2 Omnibalancing Theory and Literature

This section introduces Steven David's (1991) original theory of omnibalancing and then reviews the contemporary academic omnibalancing literature. The review describes three groups of contemporary omnibalancing theorists and argues, due to issues with omnibalancing theory, that the literature is neglected and region specific. A brief outline of the original formulation is required to contextualise subsequent revisions, including those proposed later in this dissertation.

Omnibalancing is a foreign-policy strategy in which rulers align externally to neutralise the domestic threat(s) to their survival, even if that alignment contradicts national interest (David, 1991, pp. 235–242). It builds on and diverges from traditional realist theories by highlighting the role of domestic insecurity, especially in postcolonial or so-called Third World states (David, 1991, p. 244). David (1991, pp. 238–245) generalises that these states often face internal divisions, authoritarian rule, and foreign interference. The theory assumes three enabling conditions: acute

internal threat, leadership weakness/illegitimacy, and high personal stakes (A fuller discussion of these mechanisms follows in 2.3.1.) (David, 1991, pp. 235–243).

This dissertation's modifications of omnibalancing require some understanding of the existing theoretical literature. Indeed, David's scattered description of the theory and its Cold War-outlook have led users of omnibalancing to emphasise certain features (while excluding others) or to make modifications. In general, omnibalancing has been neglected, producing a region-specific literature. But there is renewed interest surrounding nondemocratic regimes. The contemporary theoretical literature can be divided into three groups: (1) the State Formation theorists (R. A. Hinnebusch, 2003; R. A. Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, 2014; Welz, 2022); (2) the minimalists (Düben, 2023; E. A. Miller, 2006c; E. A. Miller & Toritsyn, 2005) and; (3) the revisionists (Beswick, 2011; Braga, 2021a). The following is a short discussion of each group, which will provide context for the criticisms and revisions argued in section 2.3 (below).

State formation theorists—of which Hinnebusch (2003) is the most influential—are important to omnibalancing theory because they employ the theory in creative but selective ways. Hinnebusch (2003, pp. 7–9, 73–89) combines omnibalancing theory, state formation theory, and the concept of foreign policy roles to create a sophisticated approach for analysing the determinants of Middle Eastern states' foreign policies, based on the origins of postcolonial states. These theorists emphasise the features of omnibalancing that fit postcolonial contexts, such as the Middle East and Africa. They emphasise foreign policies are often driven by internal threats and states seek to balance between opportunities and threats at both the internal and external levels (Nonneman, 2005b, p. 13; Watkins, 2020, pp. 658–660). It is this multi-level feature of omnibalancing that these theorists emphasise most. More recently, Welz (2022, pp. 384–385) has developed a similar approach to Hinnebusch, but focusing on Africa. This research is part of a renewed interest in omnibalancing that emphasises complementarity with nondemocratic regime types

(Welz, 2022, pp. 385–386). Welz adds neopatrimonialism (a political system where informal norms and personal rule take precedence over formal institutions, blending traditional and legal-rational authority) to the conditions that make omnibalancing more likely among African states (Bratton & Walle, 1997, pp. 61–63; Guliyev, 2011, pp. 578–579; Weber, 2019/1922, pp. 344–354, 361 and 367). A criticism of state formation theorists' use of omnibalancing is their "pick-and-choose" approach, focusing only on multi-level threat management while overlooking David's (1991, p. 236) intent for it to complement realist IR theory.

The minimalist group of theorists emphasise core features of David's omnibalancing theory—such as leadership weakness and illegitimacy, and the explanation of behaviour anomalous to IR realist theory—while largely ignoring its original Third World application. The importance of the minimalists is they demonstrate the core of David's theory is still applicable while also making small adjustments. Miller (2006) and Miller and Toritsyn (2005) are the exemplars of this group of theorists. Unlike the state formation theorists, they begin from the same a balance-of-threat, realist position that David begins from (E. A. Miller, 2006a, paras 5–9, 2006b, para. 23). Omnibalancing is used to explain behaviour that realist theory otherwise cannot account for, such as post-Soviet states aligning with a predatory Russia instead of balancing against it. These theorists adjust omnibalancing theory in response to the rise of the post-Soviet space (E. A. Miller & Toritsyn, 2005), updating it to include performance legitimacy (e.g., a well- or poorly-run economy) and a broader range of threats (e.g., defining a "crisis" as a more acute threat). Düben (2023) also uses a minimalist form of omnibalancing to explain the deepening alignment between Russia and China, which realist theory struggles to explain. Like Welz (2022), Düben is part of the renewed interest in omnibalancing, emphasising its suitability for the study of authoritarian regimes. Düben (2023, p. 467) astutely notes, "the variety of different studies in the academic literature that have employed Omnibalancing theory[…] have almost exclusively applied it to states with

authoritarian (or semi-authoritarian) political systems." However, as will be shown below, the minimalists' continued reliance on David's (1991, p. 236) parsimonious but problematic "weak and illegitimate" enabling conditions shackles omnibalancing theory to vague and value-laden categories of "Third World".

The revisionist group of theorists views parts of David's original theory as problematic, including the "Third World" state classifier, how to identify the most significant threats to leaders, and the assumption of weak, illegitimate leaders (Beswick, 2011, pp. 4–5; Braga, 2021a). The importance of this group is their critical examination of omnibalancing theory (more on this in section 2.3.1 below). The revisionists argue international and political landscapes have significantly changed, and omnibalancing needs to be reframed to fit a contemporary context.

General neglect of omnibalancing has led to a patchy and region-specific academic literature. Omnibalancing is most prevalent in analyses of Middle East foreign policy. Drawing direct comparison to Third World states, some defence analysts have used omnibalancing to explain the foreign policies of Syrian and Saudi regimes (Bergen, 2000; Reinhold, 2001). Hinnebusch's sophisticated framework has (directly or indirectly) led to omnibalancing being featured in studies on Middle East foreign policy (Kristiansen, 2006; Nonneman, 2005a; O'Reilly, 1999; Selján, 2020; Sim & Fulton, 2021; Strakes, 2011; Ulrichsen, 2014; Watkins, 2020). David originally used case studies from Africa to demonstrate omnibalancing. Unsurprisingly, other scholars have applied omnibalancing to regions in Africa (Beswick, 2011; Welz, 2022). Following Miller & Toritsyn's (2005) and Miller's (2006) use of omnibalancing, it has featured in analyses of the post-Soviet space (Düben, 2023; Hansen, 2013; Kubicek, 2009; Mowchan, 2018; Nourzhanov, 2012; K. Oskanian, 2016; Pikalov, 2014). Above all, omnibalancing is consistently used to connect domestic threats to regime survival to explain external alignment decisions.

Omnibalancing theory has undergone various modifications to remain relevant in contemporary IR. This review identifies three groups of theorists: state formation theorists, minimalists, and revisionists. State formation theorists, such as Hinnebusch and Welz, adapt omnibalancing to analyse postcolonial states, focusing on internal and external threats. Minimalists retain core aspects of the original theory, demonstrating its applicability to authoritarian settings. The revisionists critique and seek to update the theory, addressing its outdated Cold War context and problematic assumptions. The theory continues to be relevant in explaining the foreign policies of nondemocratic regimes, particularly in the Middle East, Africa, and post-Soviet states. However, as will be argued below, this useful theory still requires major adjustments.

2.2.3 China, Policy Emulation, and Authoritarian Learning

Having shown how omnibalancing explains external alignment choices, the chapter now turns to a second pathway: policy emulation. When nondemocratic regimes emulate or copy policies from other regimes, this falls under the two linked bodies of academic literature: diffusion and authoritarian learning. Diffusion is the process whereby government policy decisions in a given country are conditioned by prior policy choices made elsewhere (Elkins & Simmons, 2005, p. 7). Ambrosio (2010, pp. 381–383) distinguishes diffusion driven by perceptions of "appropriateness" from that propelled by assessments of "effectiveness", stressing that neither intentional promotion nor coercion is required. Authoritarian diffusion is the transnational spread of autocratic norms, institutions, and practices as rulers emulate or are otherwise influenced by successful or prestigious authoritarian counterparts (Ambrosio, 2010). Authoritarian learning is a process in which authoritarian regimes adopt survival strategies based upon the prior experience of other governments (Hall & Ambrosio, 2017, p. 143). This study defines learning as "a change in beliefs about causal relationships in the light of experience" (Golosov, 2017, p. 184). But learning from experience becomes "authoritarian," because of the

nature of the regime doing the learning and the purpose of learning to prevent regime change. Peer-to-peer authoritarian learning is where one autocratic regime learns or adapts from another autocratic regime. Any learning between regimes focused on this study (China, Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus) is peer-to-peer; all are authoritarian types and subtypes (Diamond, 2002, p. 25; Koesel et al., 2020; Levitsky & Way, 2010, pp. 5 and 12; Pavlovsky, 2016, pp. 10–11; Trantidis, 2008; A. Wilson, 2015a, pp. 311–321 and 330–347). This section reviews the academic literature on how nondemocratic regimes may derive survival gains from emulating and learning from China.

Scholars studying autocracy promotion and China as an emerging power have recently been debating China's sharp power. Since the mid-2010s a growing body of scholarship has recast Beijing's external information and influence activities as an integral component of a broader project to advance authoritarian governance norms overseas. Walker (2018) conceptualises these efforts as "sharp power": techniques that do not attract by persuasion (soft power) but rather penetrate and skew information environments through censorship, co-optation and disinformation. Extending this insight, Walker (2022) documents how Chinese party-state organs exploit the permeability of universities, media and civil-society arenas in democratic states to suppress unfavourable narratives and normalise CCP political values, a strategy that relies on opacity and elite capture rather than on the voluntary appeal assumed in conventional soft-power accounts. Nye (2018) concurs that such practices constitute a form of coercive hard power masquerading as soft power, warning that they erode the very openness on which democracies' own soft-power advantages depend. Wu (2019) traces the domestic roots of these outward-facing tactics to the CCP's long-standing "thought-remoulding" campaigns and shows how they have been intensified by digital instrumentation, enabling Beijing to manipulate overseas Chinese communities and foreign publics alike.

Debates around the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) illustrate how this sharp-power toolkit can be embedded in ostensibly economic projects to promote authoritarian models of governance. Proponents inside China frame the BRI as a benign public good; however, Shao (2019) and other critics argue that infrastructure lending and cultural programming linked to the BRI operate in tandem with narrative engineering to diffuse norms of state-led development, limited pluralism and conditional sovereignty. From this perspective, Confucius Institutes, subsidised media content and preferential finance are not separate tracks but mutually reinforcing instruments designed to dilute liberal-democratic standards and legitimate one-party rule. A key divide in the literature therefore concerns whether the BRI's normative policy effects are accidental externalities of commercial expansion or, as sharp-power theorists maintain, a deliberate strategy to reshape the international order in ways favourable to authoritarian survival.

Indeed, policymakers in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus have shown enthusiasm for China's approach to domestic political economy (McKinsey & Company, 2011; Xinhua News Agency, 2015). China can be described as a market authoritarian, one party state. The reform path implemented by Deng Xiaoping and continued after his death is often referred to as the China Model or Beijing Consensus. Joshua Cooper Ramo (2005) coined the phrase "Beijing Consensus" to frame China's economic development model as an alternative—especially for developing countries—to the Washington Consensus of market-friendly policies put forward by the IMF, World Bank, and U.S. Treasury (Turin, 2010). This alternative recommends a pragmatic approach to policy using experimentation and innovation to achieve "equitable, peaceful high-quality growth", and "defense of national borders and interests" (Ramo, 2005, p. 4). Others have described it as a collection of policies aimed to promote "stable, if repressive, politics and high-speed economic growth" (Kurlantzick, 2014). Academics disagree whether the China Model is transferrable outside China or coherent enough to represent a model (Fourie, 2015, pp. 291–292).

Regardless, advocates argue China's state-led reform and development experience offers lessons which can learned by other countries (He, 2018). China's impressive economic growth and relative stability have made it somewhat of a poster child for authoritarian regimes. Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian policymakers' interest in Chinese policies suggests the possibility of learning from or adapting parts of China's development experience.

The scholarship on nondemocratic regimes copying other nondemocracies—authoritarian diffusion—has traced how autocratic norms, institutions and policy tools spread across borders, typically emphasising geography, cultural affinity or economic interdependence as key transmission channels. Early contributions framed diffusion mainly as an inadvertent, horizontal process in which the prior adoption of a practice elsewhere altered elites' cost–benefit calculus at home (Ambrosio, 2010; Brinks & Coppedge, 2006; Gel'man & and Lankina, 2008). Subsequent work refined the menu of mechanisms, distinguishing learning, emulation, competition and coercion (Weyland, 2017, pp. 1241–1242). Two insights structure the current consensus. First, diffusion rarely operates through outright coercion (Weyland, 2017, p. 1237); instead, it hinges on information and signalling effects (appropriateness and effectiveness) that render emulation both feasible and legitimate (Ambrosio 2010, pp. 381–84). Second, authoritarian diffusion can be impacted by regime similarity or geographic proximity, which may reinforce the effect of regime similarity (Goldring & Greitens, 2020, p. 321). Authoritarian diffusion, thus, operates along structural linkages, which may be territorial, though regime similarity is stronger. Autocrats are most likely to borrow from peers that share core organisational features, because similar regimes face comparable vulnerabilities and can credibly signal workable solutions (Bunce & Wolchik, 2006, p. 228; Goldring & Greitens, 2020, p. 330; Kneuer & and Demmelhuber, 2016, p. 781). Recent studies therefore redirect attention from geographic neighbourhoods to "authoritarian linkage", a dense web of economic, technocratic and informational ties among nondemocratic regimes, which facilitates

the transfer of NGO laws or protest-proofing tactics (Koesel & Bunce, 2013, p. 761; Sojková, 2023, pp. 48–53; Tansey et al., 2017). Where such linkages are thick, diffusion helps rulers recalibrate repression, close civic space and thus prolong survival; where they are thin, autocratic emulation appears sporadic.

Whereas diffusion centres on how practices travel, authoritarian learning examines how rulers internalise external examples to enhance survival. Recent research on authoritarian learning proposes cross-border dialogue networks enable the drawing lessons from other regimes' successes or failures (S. Hall, 2023a, pp. 10–12). Early transitology already hinted at "political learning" during crises (Bermeo, 1992, p. 274), but systematic treatment emerged only recently (S. Hall, 2023a, pp. 10–15; S. Hall & Ambrosio, 2017). In Lang's (2018) study of authoritarian learning, he distinguishes positive learning—emulating effective instruments—from negative learning—avoiding paths that led peers to collapse. Davis (2020, pp. 45–53) finds that learning is typically triggered by crises that make the status quo untenable and force elites to choose between repression and concession; external examples supply heuristics that guide that choice. Lang (2018, pp. 149–158) adds a multilevel perspective: regimes simultaneously absorb lessons from domestic pilot projects, authoritarian peers and democratic states, with gate-keeping elites deciding which lessons to internalise. Because lessons circulate through networks of similar regimes (Kneuer & and Demmelhuber, 2016, pp. 777–786), authoritarian learning complements diffusion: it translates observed experience into tailored institutional or policy change—tightening NGO laws, refining media censorship, or professionalising coercive organs (Dupuy et al., 2021; Gerschewski, 2013b, 2023)—that enhances regimes' adaptive capacity and helps explain their surprising resilience.

2.2.4 Quantitative Tools in the Study of Authoritarianism and Sentiment Analysis

A review of authoritarian learning research finds dissatisfaction with current research methods. For reasons discussed below, authoritarian learning requires

mixed methods. The results of these methods suggest causal links rather than demonstrate them in a straightforward or mechanical fashion. This sort of ambiguity has been repeatedly criticised by researchers.

As the following review shows, authoritarian learning studies tend to employ pragmatic, comparative, close readings of policy documents, policy debates, and official state media. Great attention is paid to important political events, too, such as elections, protests, and revolutions. After examination of these data, questions are drawn from the authoritarian learning framework as to the qualities of the data: (a) Is there an apparent source of learning (peer-to-peer, nonpeer-to-nonpeer, or internal adaptation)? (b) Do any policies examined appear to be examples of positive or negative learning? A review of influential research on authoritarian learning confirms this methodological summary.

Six leading studies apply these methods to trace authoritarian learning. Results are suggestive, rather than straightforward. Ambrosio (2010, pp. 382–383) quotes government officials, cites theories and conclusions from other analysts, and close reads policy to argue for the existence of authoritarian learning. Heydemann and Leenders (2011, pp. 651–652) compare regime reactions to protests and argue similar behaviour among autocrats within the same region is proof of policy transfer. Koesel and Bunce (2013, pp. 759–760) reference newspaper reports of technology sharing and policymakers' discussions in Russia of adopting Chinese style internet controls. Golosov (2017, p. 194) finds repeat changes in electoral legislation, and quotes policymaker discussions for proof of nonpeer-to-nonpeer authoritarian learning. Ambrosio (2017, pp. 191–192) draws inferences about regime learning by "clearly identifying possible policy options, illustrating why they may be applicable in a particular case, and then undertaking 'to observe and evaluate' the policies undertaken by political actors." And finally, in Lang's (2018, p. 152) article, that features the helpful typological framework of positive and negative authoritarian learning, the author uses official and unofficial policy debates surrounding the

legislative process and policy implementation, policy documents, as well as official media reports. The goal of these methods is to find similarity between policies or convincing statements made by policymakers, and thereby suggest a causal link of policy transfer from one regime to another. Together these studies rely on inference rather than direct evidence, a point acknowledged by Hall and Ambrosio (2017, p. 144).

The need for a mixed range of methods and reliance on inference is due to the nature of authoritarian learning. Hall and Ambrosio (2017, pp. 149–150) provide a concise summary of the limitations researchers face. To begin with, learning is often an internal process. Authoritarian regimes are seldom transparent. Important decisions are often made in private. Second, policies may arise from non-learning sources. For example, new policy may be driven by structural adjustment or political change. Third, learning may come from multiple sources. New lessons could be drawn from combination of authoritarian peers, nonpeers, and internal trial and error. Or learning could be a process of best-practices exchange from official (the United Nations, the World Bank, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, etc…) or unofficial (groups of domestic, functional experts) forums (Rose, 2005, pp. 58–59). The result is tracing and measuring authoritarian learning is not easy. Researchers must use a diverse set of tools to produce their evidence.

The existing research approach has been persistently criticised. “[M]any of the authors’ best practice examples [of authoritarian learning] amount more to anecdotal evidence of direct exchanges between leaders than to a systematic research programme” (Lang, 2018, p. 151). The policy transfer process remains a “black box,” whereby researchers predominantly focus on policy convergence between regimes over time (Erdmann et al., 2013, p. 19). These circumstances suggest the subfield of authoritarian learning is open to new research approaches.

The present dissertation proposes a novel use of a computational method, sentiment analysis (SA), also known as opinion mining, as a new approach for studying authoritarian learning. SA, a computational technique for extracting positive or negative valence from natural-language texts (B. Liu, 2015), offers one quantitative means of addressing these evidentiary gaps. A natural language text can be a written document expressing someone's opinion (sentiment and opinion will be defined in section 2.5.4 below). The following is a brief literature review of the use of SA to study politics. It argues SA is now part the expanding toolkit of "big data" social science research tools. While SA of Russian language texts is common, open source tools are scarce. The use of SA to study Russian language, political texts is, unsurprisingly, a small but growing literature.

SA in political science is undergoing a period of development and expanding application. SA began to catch on as a political science research tool after the launch of Twitter in 2006. Political analysts and data scientists teamed up to study users' posts (Tumasjan et al., 2010, pp. 178–180). Of course, work studying online message boards had also been done (Koop & Jansen, 2009; Schneider, 1996), but it appears the advent of Twitter turbo-charged political science SA research. SA has been well funded by the private sector, because businesses care about how their customers feel (Wilkerson & Casas, 2017, pp. 533–534). The private sector called for empirics and practical solutions. Business and data science, rather than the more traditional field of linguistics, has driven recent SA research (B. Liu, 2015). Perhaps this helps explain why no unified, accepted approach to conduct SA has yet been agreed on (B. Liu, 2015); academic rigour and theory has not kept pace with ingenious practical solutions. Current political science applications are expanding, from mapping changing opinions on Brexit (Chandio & Sah, 2020) to voter sentiment in Egypt (Elghazaly et al., 2016).

SA studies of policymakers' speeches—the type of text targeted in this dissertation—are becoming more common. Early SA research targeting political

speeches by Bansal et al. (2008) and Thomas et al. (2006) tried to discern if a given speaker was for or against an issue under debate. Somewhat comparable to the present study, Diermeier et al. (2012) and Iyyer et al. (2014) used sentence-level SA to analyse debates in the US Senate and Congress to determine the speakers' ideological biases. More recent studies have focused on presidential debates. For example, Liu and Lei (2018) and Savoy (2018) analyse Donald Trump's and Hillary Clinton's 2016 campaign speeches. Study of policymakers' speeches is gradually establishing itself within the SA methodological toolkit.

Academic studies using SA to inspect Russian language, political texts are still limited. Rogers et al. (2018) examines the discussion of politics in social media. Loukachevitch and Rusnachenko (2018) have created a machine learning training dataset for extracting authors' sentiment in international relations articles. Bobichev et al. (2017) develop a program for gauging the sentiment of Russian and Ukrainian news reports. Russian language politics can also feature in multilingual studies (SA tends to be monolingual). A recent study by Proksch et al. (2019) uses online google translation software to analyse debates in multiple languages to determine European Parliament MPs' views towards specific policies. The field is young and method approaches vary. With the creation of Large Language Model AI assistants (like OpenAI's ChatGPT) SA in various languages is likely to become much easier (Belal et al., 2023; Vaswani et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2024). Thus, this dissertation makes a modest contribution to the nascent SA literature on Russian language politics. A methods section below (2.5.4) specifies how SA is operationalised in this study and how its results integrate with qualitative tracing.

2.3 Theory: Revising Omnibalancing

This section develops the theoretical spine of this dissertation. It proceeds in five steps and has two objectives. First, it reconstructs Steven David's original omnibalancing claim; secondly, it offers a regime-type-neutral revision that can travel

beyond late-Cold-War, Third World settings into contemporary cases. This lays the groundwork for the mixed-method research design introduced later in the dissertation.

2.3.1 restates the classic omnibalancing argument. It recalls how David explains surprising alignments by Third World regimes. Three enabling conditions (acute internal threat, weak and illegitimate leadership, and high personal stakes) make a regime's choice to omnibalance more likely. Leaders sometimes sacrifice external autonomy to counter domestic peril.

2.3.2 then links omnibalancing logic to regime type using selectorate thoery. It demonstrates why foreign policy in autocracies is routinely performed for regime, rather than state, security. This structural asymmetry makes omnibalancing more plausible in nondemocratic contexts. Three structural figures contrast democratic and autocratic state architecture and introduce conceptual understanding used throughout the dissertation.

2.3.3 catalogues the limits of the classic omnibalancing model. It reviews criticisms by Beswick, Miller, Düben and others, highlighting four weaknesses: reliance on the dated Third World category, an over-generalised picture of weak leaders, a rigid internal/external divide, and an exaggerated predictive claim. The section concludes that the theory remains useful, but only as an explanatory.

2.3.4 offers a revised version of omnibalancing. It sets out seven enabling conditions: internal threat, high stakes, degraded checks, low administrative/coercive capacity, low legitimacy, elite fragmentation, and vulnerable geopolitical position. The discussion tackles two methodological issues: (a) the 'Sword of Damocles' risk of seeing omnibalancing everywhere, and (b) the role of crisis versus background conditions.

Taken together, sections 2.3.1–2.3.4 prepare theory to support the later analytical investigation: leaders in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine employ external alignment with China to arrest domestic threats. This is more likely to occur when more of the seven enabling conditions are present. The remainder of the chapter shows how these enabling conditions are operationalised and combined with other methods.

2.3.1 Core Elements of Classic Omnibalancing

Section 2.2.2 (above) sketched omnibalancing's basic claim and enabling conditions; here we unpack the causal logic and identify points that require revision. The leadership (or regime) is central to omnibalancing. The perceived need to counteract perceived domestic threats to regime security, interests, and survival dictate its international alignments with other states. Technically, omnibalancing is a strategy open to any regime type, though it is particularly relevant under specific conditions. The following section will demonstrate these core elements of traditional omnibalancing by describing David's original theory.

Omnibalancing can be understood through the presence of three conditions where a state becomes more likely to use the strategy—enabling conditions. First, the regime faces significant internal threats, such as coups, assassination attempts, and mass uprisings (David, 1991, pp. 237–238). These internal threats often stem from a disunited state, for example, from rival, subnational groups with allegiances to ethnic, religious, or regional identities rather than to the state (David, 1991, p. 239). Second, the leader(s) are weak and illegitimate. David presents these two enabling conditions (weakness and illegitimacy) as one, but the choice is deliberate. The leader(s) or regime are weak because they lack the power to resolve threats to their regime within state borders effectively (David, 1991, pp. 236, 252–253). They also lack legitimacy, often coming to power through force or using repression to maintain their position. Weakness and illegitimacy can exacerbate each other (hence being

grouped together). This creates a natural disunity within the state: a divide between the (weak and illegitimate) rulers and the ruled (David, 1991, pp. 236, 242, 251–252). The third condition is the stakes for the leadership are high; losing power could lead to imprisonment, exile, or death (David, 1991, pp. 236 and 250). Under these conditions, the survival imperative drives the leadership to place its own interests above those of the state (David, 1991, p. 243). This can produce counter-intuitive alignments (e.g., allying with a hostile great-power patron). For example, the regime may align with international supporters of domestic threats or align with secondary threats to counter more immediate ones (David, 1991, pp. 235–236). If faced with a choice between potential collapse and harming state interests for their survival, the leadership will choose the latter (David, 1991, p. 243). Thus, international relations alignments are explained by the leader(s) or regime balancing threats at both domestic and international levels—hence omni-balancing. “Omni” refers to the internal and external levels of a state where threats to survival are being “balanced”.

But what does balancing refer to? In general, David (1991, pp. 235–236) argues, most alignment behaviour can be accounted for by traditional realist balance-of-power and balance-of-threat theories. A balance-of-power is created (or maintained) when states align together to check the countervailing power of one state or a group of states (Waltz, 1979, pp. 123–128). Like balance-of-power, balance-of-threat theory accepts states confronted by more powerful or threatening states can either balance against or bandwagon with them (Walt, 1985, p. 4). Here, balancing refers to alignments used to check rival states or groups of states. Bandwagoning is where states align with a power (such as a rising China) to address their security interests. The two traditional realist theories differ over aligning to gain or maintain power. Balance-of-threat (to which omnibalancing is closer to) believes states align in order to counter threats. Threats include another state’s aggregate power, geographic proximity, ability to engage in offensive military operations, and cultural or ideological motivations to act (Walt, 1985, pp. 9–26). Omnibalancing

agrees with these theories where leaders align with other states to resist external threats to survival.

As discussed in section 2.2.2, scholarship since 1991 has shown that (i) legitimating resources other than coercion (e.g., performance, ideology) can offset "weakness" (ii) domestic threat perception is not binary but graded, and (iii) the framework was written for Cold-War "Third World" states and thus needs concepts portable to today's post-Soviet or neopatrimonial settings. Sections 2.3.2–2.3.4 respond to each of these limits.

2.3.2 Omnibalancing & Regime Type

This section argues that selectorate theory clarifies the mechanisms behind both autocratic foreign policy behaviour and omnibalancing's central imperative: foreign policy is undertaken primarily to secure the regime, not the state. In autocratic regimes, foreign policy is undertaken primarily to secure the regime, not the state. Autocratic leaders employ diplomacy, alignment, and economic engagement to reinforce their legitimacy, reward loyal elites and neutralise domestic threats (Gerschewski, 2013a, 2023). The interests of the wider state and population are addressed only insofar as they contribute to those primary goals. By contrasting this logic with democracies, the section explains why foreign policy in autocracies consistently reflects a regime-before-state imperative.

The theoretical operation of autocratic regimes pairs well with omnibalancing. In an autocracy, the "set of people who control enough other instruments of power to keep the leader in office"—known as the "winning coalition" in selectorate theory—feature in these support pillars and enable them to function, such as members of the security services, members of the military and business elite, and bureaucrats (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003, p. 8; Gerschewski, 2013a, p. 22). When a regime engages in external relations, foreign policy is conducted with this set of key people and the regime/leadership in mind—not the interests of the state. State security is

core to state survival and regime legitimacy. But fundamentally, state security is secondary to security of the regime. Therefore, foreign policy is a feature of the state, but in autocratic states this feature is separated from it. A regime-before-state survival logic drives foreign policy in nondemocratic regimes.

There are justified criticisms of selectorate theory (M. E. Gallagher & Hanson, 2015). The first is the vagueness of the qualities of the selectorate and winning coalition. For example, is a military general the same as a cardinal (a high-ranking church official) count equally for regime survival or societal influence if they are part of the winning coalition? Should they be counted the same way? It would likely be context dependent. There are also major problems with the measurement of the selectorate and winning coalitions. Selectorate theory uses S (size of the selectorate) and W (size of the winning coalition) to categorise and explain the behaviour of all regimes. While this allows for comparison and parsimony, it does not differentiate between types of regimes (ibid.). China and the USA, for example, have the same size of selectorate (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003). But qualitatively, these two groups cannot be compared. When omnibalancing is demonstrated with selectorate theory, on the other hand, structural differences foreign policy conduct can be conceptualised depending on regime type. Depending on regime type, power is regulated differently—both formally and informally (see section 2.3.4 below for more on this). Figures 2.1 and 2.2 use selectorate theory to build a structural model of a unified, democratic state and a nondemocratic state. The point of these models is to demonstrate disconnected structure of the leadership from the state in nondemocratic regimes.

Figure 2.1, titled “A Theoretical Understanding of External Relations and the State in Democratic Political Regimes”, visually represents the relationship between the leadership, winning coalition, selectorate, inhabitants, and the state within the context of external relations. It is designed to illustrate how democratic regimes

manage external relations through a structure of political and societal layers that is unified within the state.

At the core of the diagram is the “Leadership”, depicted in the innermost (purple) circle, which highlights the central role of the ruling individuals or group in directing the state’s actions and decisions.[1] Surrounding the leadership is the “Winning Coalition” (a red-coloured box), which is composed of key supporters and elites whose backing is necessary for the leadership’s survival in power. The winning coalition in democratic regimes is theoretically quite large (meaning potentially millions of people) in democratic regimes (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003, pp. 41–55, 473). The leadership must take its wishes and concerns into consideration conducting external relations, because it is crucial for maintaining the leadership’s authority.

The “Selectorate” encloses the winning coalition (depicted as an orange square), representing a broader group of actors with a say in leadership selection. In democratic regimes, the selectorate (for example, eligible voters) is larger and more inclusive compared to nondemocratic systems, where it might be limited to a narrow elite. The selectorate’s support is also essential for sustaining the leadership, as it provides a pool from which the winning coalition is drawn.

Next is the layer of “Inhabitants” (a yellow-coloured square), representing the general populace. In democratic regimes, the interests and welfare of the inhabitants are theoretically given more consideration, due to their connections to the broader selectorate.

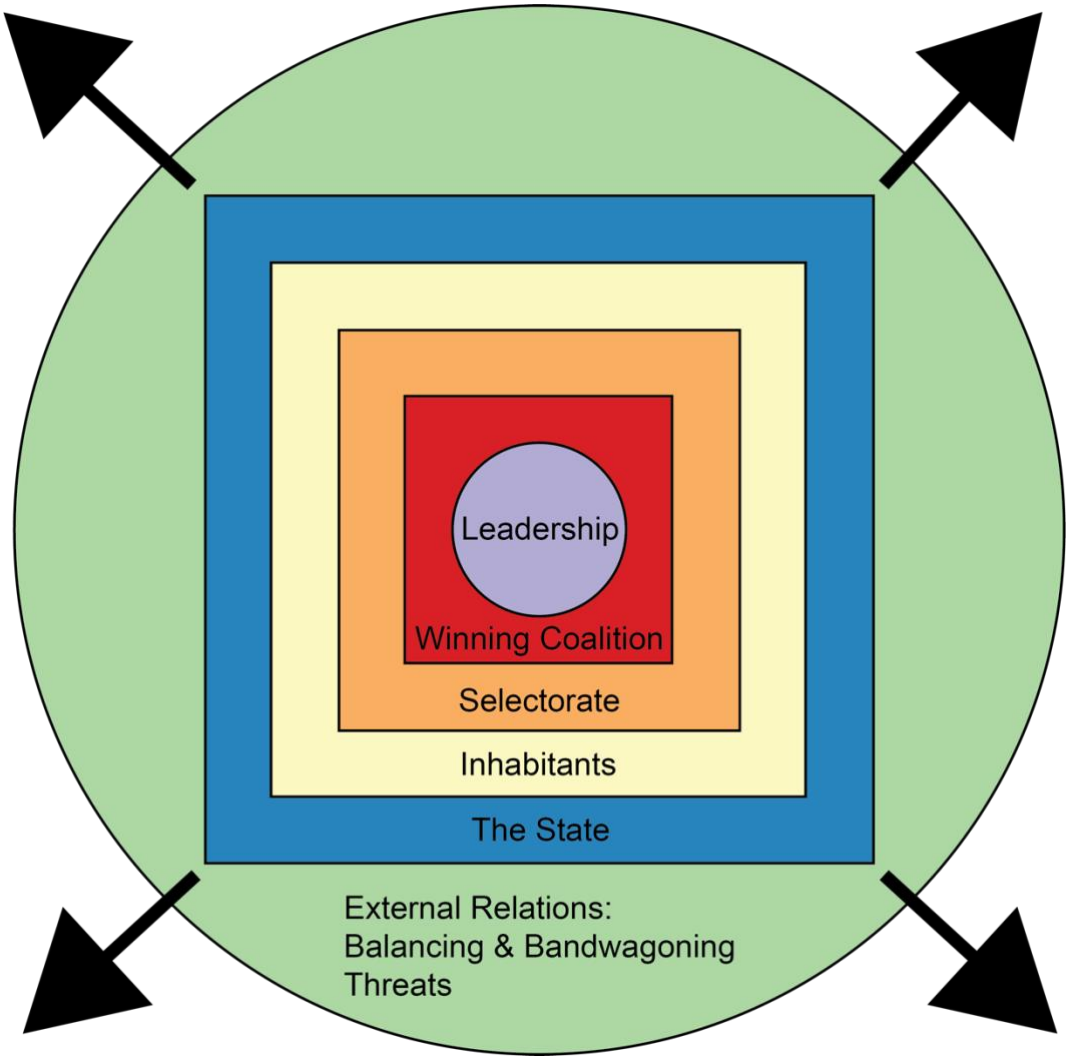
Finally, “The State” (a dark-blue-coloured square) encompasses all these layers, signifying the unified framework within which the interactions of the leadership, winning coalition, selectorate, and inhabitants occur. These interactions

1. NB. The colours used here are photo-copier safe, meaning they are selected to be easy to differentiate between if photocopied in black-and-white. The colour has no specific significance.

and the institutional rule that regulate these interactions are inter-linked and housed within a unified state. Projecting from the state are External Relations with other external actors (such as states and international groups or organisations), which is represented as a circle (coloured light-green) with four, 45º angled arrows protruding from it. The multiple arrows indicate external relations with multiple actors (China, the USA, the EU, the UN and so on) and at regional or global levels. The external engagement balances or bandwagons threats to ensure the safety and interests of the state and those within it. This outer layer reflects the state's strategies to navigate international challenges, maintaining its sovereignty and stability by engaging in alignments and cooperative interaction with other states.

In this diagram, the structure conveys how democratic regimes are organised to manage both internal power dynamics and foreign policy. The model highlights the multi-layered approach of democratic regimes, where the leadership relies on a broad coalition and the support of the selectorate and inhabitants to sustain power. External relations are depicted as a strategic component, where the state actively engages with the international system to protect its interests and maintain stability, balancing internal demands with external pressures.

Figure 2.1 A Theoretical Understanding of External Relations and the State in Democratic Political Regimes.



Source: Created by the author. Based on theory from Bader et al. (2010), Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2003), David (1991), and Gerschewski (2023).

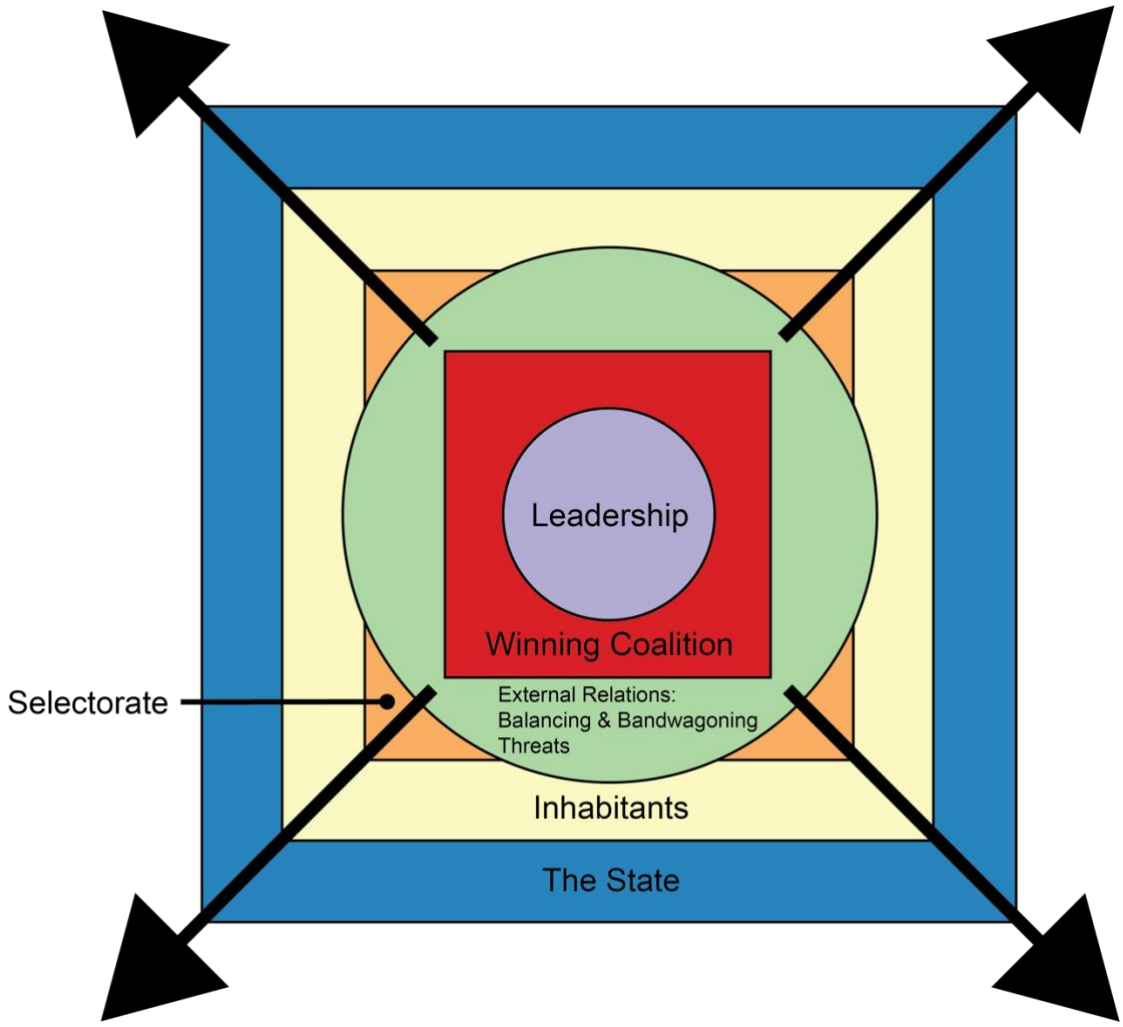
Figure 2.2 (below), titled “A Theoretical Understanding of External Relations and the State in Autocratic Political Regimes”, represents the theoretical understanding of how nondemocratic regimes approach external relations and foreign policy. The figure for autocratic political regimes places the “External Relations” circle (coloured light-green) directly around the “Winning Coalition” (a red-

coloured square) and the “Leadership” (a purple-coloured circle). It should also be noted how the placement of the External Relations circle overlaps with the other layers of the state, including the “Selectorate” (a orange-coloured square, poking out from under the External Relations circle), the Inhabitants (a yellow-coloured square), and the state (a dark-blue-coloured square). This positioning reflects a critical difference with democratic foreign relations: in autocracies, external relations are conducted for and by the regime’s core leadership and its immediate supporters. Notice that the arrows of external engagement originate from the Winning Coalition, indicating that foreign policy is primarily crafted to serve the interests of this narrow elite group, which is crucial for the autocrat’s survival (Bader et al., 2010).

In this autocratic model, the Leadership and Winning Coalition are at the core, signifying that their interests take precedence over those of the broader state and its inhabitants. The Selectorate in this context is smaller and more controlled (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003, pp. 41–55). The Inhabitants have minimal influence over state decisions. The State itself is positioned as encompassing but essentially detached from the source external relations. The four arrows that indicate external engagement beyond the state extend from the state. But these arrows originate from the winning coalition. While the state’s external relations and the balancing of external threats can be a public good for all Inhabitants, state institutions ultimately serve the regime’s survival.

This figure visualises the power dynamics and external relations in autocratic regimes, where the central concern of the leadership and its winning coalition is to ensure their own survival. External relations serve as yet another tool to address the needs of the regime, rather than to benefit the state as a whole. In principle, the state is separate and disunited between the regime/leadership and its Winning Coalition versus the Selectorate and the inhabitants. There is overlap between all these structures. But external relations serve regime survival, not state survival.

Figure 2.2 A Theoretical Understanding of External Relations and the State in Autocratic Political Regimes.

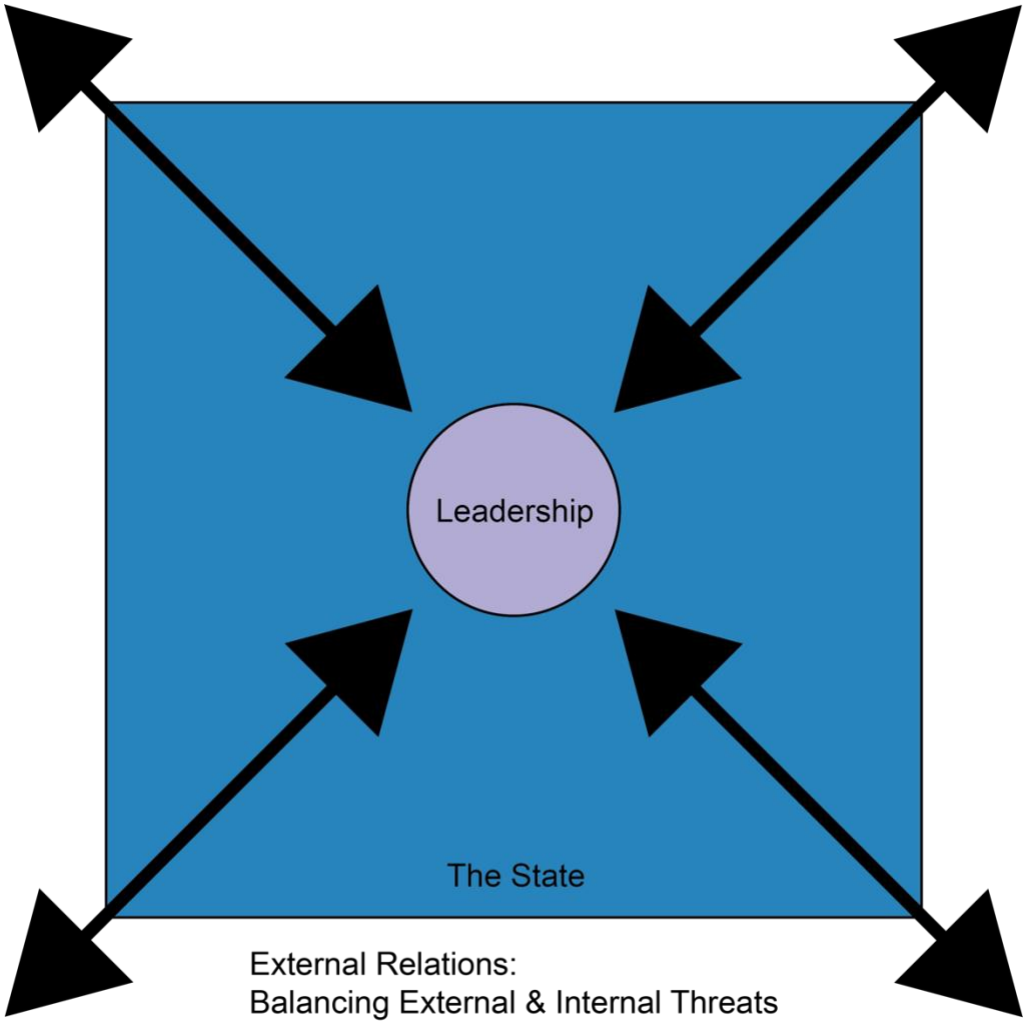


Source: Created by the author. Based on theory from Bader et al. (2010), Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2003), David (1991), and Gerschewski (2023).

The final figure in this section, Figure 2.3 (below), titled “A Diagram of the Omnibalancing of Threats to Regime Survival”, illustrates the omnibalancing of external and internal threats to ensure regime survival. To recall, any regime type can omnibalance. To reflect this, the power structure boxes from the previous figures 2.1 and 2.2 have been removed. Instead, there are only three core features: the regime (a purple-coloured circle labelled “Leadership”), the state (a blue-coloured box titled “The State”) and double-headed arrows (coloured black) with the caption

“External Relations: Balancing External and Internal Threats.” This diagram shows that when a Leadership chooses to omnibalance, its external alignment enters the state to counter internal threats—not just external threats—to sustain the leadership.

Figure 2.3 A Diagram of the Omnibalancing of Threats to Regime Survival



Source: Created by the author.

Figure 2.3 can also be compared to figures 2.1 and 2.2 to illustrate features of omnibalancing. Comparison shows why it is, in general, easier to omnibalance in nondemocratic regimes. As suggested in figure 2.2, foreign policy (the light green colour) extends from the autocratic Leadership and the Winning Coalition. Foreign policy is extends from within the state. This structural arrangement makes it easier

for omnibalancing to take place, because there are fewer institutions and societal structures for foreign policy decisions to take account of. External relations extend to the Leadership and the elites central to its survival. Therefore, using external relations to also address internal threats has a structural logic for nondemocratic regimes. By contrast, in a democratic state (figure 2.1) omnibalancing is less likely due to structural arrangements of power and institutions that serve the state. There are caveats. Nondemocratic regimes can have institutional constraints (as with the Chinese Communist Party) and democratic regimes can attempt to use or misuse institutions (such as President Trump using Ukraine's legal system to find compromising information on Hunter Biden) to omnibalance.

To summarise, this section shows the critical structural differences in how democratic and autocratic regimes engage in external relations. It is possible to visualise this conceptually using omnibalancing and selectorate theories. Democratic regimes (Figure 2.1) have a unified state. External relations are conducted with the interests of the broader population and state security in mind. In autocratic regimes (Figure 2.2), state structure is disunited. Foreign policy is principally directed by and for the leadership and its narrow winning coalition, prioritising regime survival over state interests. Finally, figure 2.3 illustrates why omnibalancing is theoretically easier for autocratic regimes. The structural power configuration of autocracies means the regime's survival logic pervades other state functions. Foreign policy is a tool of regime preservation, distinctly separate from the broader state and its inhabitants. But these are just expressions of likelihood: omnibalancing is not always possible (due to institutional constraints), let alone it is desired by the regime.

Nonetheless, relying on the classic omnibalancing framework is increasingly problematic. Its Cold-War focus, its presumption of uniformly weak and illegitimate leaders, and its sharp separation of internal from external threats all sit uneasily with contemporary, empirical realities. The next section, therefore, scrutinises these

theoretical limitations and lays the groundwork for a revised, regime-neutral version of omnibalancing that can travel across diverse political systems.

2.3.3 Limits of Classic Theory and Rationale for Revision

This section argues that the canonical formulation of omnibalancing, while innovative in the late Cold War context, is now theoretically and empirically deficient. It demonstrates that the framework's reliance on the dated Third World category, its portrayal of leaders as uniformly weak and illegitimate, its rigid separation of internal from external threats, and its claim to predict rather than merely explain alignment choices no longer withstand contemporary scrutiny. The discussion synthesises the critiques advanced by Beswick and others to show how these limitations constrain the theory's applicability across diverse regime types and blur the domestic–international boundary it presumes to be clear.

Classic omnibalancing was devised during the late Cold War to explain alignment choices of post-colonial states that eluded (neo)realist theories.[2] Theorists were critical of the realist assumptions of a coherent, unified state and the neorealist over-reliance on power to explain international politics (Lamb & Robertson-Snape, 2017, pp. 213–214, 277–278). Especially after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the Soviet Union, greater attention was paid to internal, domestic factors to influence external, international politics (ibid.). Omnibalancing diverges from realist theories in two ways: (1) how the state is conceptualised and (2) the extent to which the concerns of the ruling elite affect alignment decisions.

David (1991, pp. 235–236, 238) designed omnibalancing to explain and predict the alignment decisions of Third World states, which realist theory was poor at doing. When the term Third World does appear it is often used as a stereotype for less or under-developed states in comparison to countries with large, developed economies

2. Omnibalancing can be regarded as part of the wave of liberal and constructivist innovations that came to characterise post-Cold War IR scholarship (Kneuer, 2017, pp. 8–10).

(Natella, 2011, pp. 7–10). David characterised Third World states as dangerous, unstable, and disunified (David, 1991, pp. 239–241). By contrast, realist theories treat states as unitary actors. It is the external structure of the international system, which all states encounter, that fundamentally shape foreign policies, much less states' internal characteristics (Waltz, 2018/1959, pp. 177–179 and 181–182). Extending this unitary state abstraction to its logical end, neorealism reduces states to being "like billiard balls that vary only in size" according to their power (Mearsheimer, 2014, pp. 17–18). But the chaotic internal politics of many Third World states made these sorts of theoretical assumptions highly questionable. Hence, David developed omnibalancing to better explain the international behaviour of these states, recognising their unique internal and external pressures.

Beswick has four main critiques that argue omnibalancing is rooted in a Cold War context, which is outdated. First, she takes issue with Third World as an analytical category. As Third World has faded from use, contemporary scholars have used post-colonial and developing countries as an analogous category to Third World. This overgeneralises the internal similarities between these states, which in reality are quite diverse (Beswick, 2011, p. 4). Furthermore, it obscures a fundamental aspect of omnibalancing that, theoretically, it can be applied to all regime types—not just nondemocratic regimes that are often associated with post-colonial or developing countries. Second, David's (1991, p. 238) claim of omnibalancing's ability to predict how leaders will behave is clearly overstated and rooted in Cold War thinking. Instead, omnibalancing is a theory with explanatory power (Beswick, 2011, p. 3). The third criticism is omnibalancing's assumption that Third World leaders are inherently weak and illegitimate (Beswick, 2011, pp. 6–7). This is not universally applicable; some leaders have considerable domestic power and control (for example, Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe or Kim Jong Un in Korea). Indeed, weakness can be a grey zone for regime survival. A client state's vulnerability can be a resource to attract support from an invested patron state. The

fourth criticism is the limited understanding of internal and external threats. The impact of evolving political systems, like the real or nominal introduction of multiparty democracies, alter the landscape of internal threats and opportunities for leaders (Beswick, 2011, pp. 5–6). Fair elections, for example, may pose a threat to the regime but may be a condition of external support. The distinction between internal and external threats can thus be blurred, which David's theory does not account for. Braga (2021a, p. 17) attempts to build on Beswick's critiques with the aim of expanding the applicability of omnibalancing. His conference paper argues that omnibalancing should be refocused on regime type. The aim is to make the theory more objective, dropping the value-laden, vague categories tied to development (Braga, 2021a, pp. 12–20). Indeed, it is not just weak nondemocracies that are attempting to omnibalance—arguably the leader of the United States has attempted to omnibalance (Drezner, 2018, 2021, 2023; more on this below).

In short, the classic formulation of omnibalancing is anchored in a Cold-War intellectual milieu that presupposes a monolithic Third World, uniformly fragile leaders, neat internal–external threat boundaries, and even a predictive capacity. These premises have become empirically untenable and conceptually restrictive. Contemporary regimes—democratic or autocratic, consolidated or hybrid—display a far wider spectrum of legitimacy, capacity, and elite cohesion than David allowed for. The theory's core insight that leaders sometimes sacrifice external autonomy to neutralise domestic peril is useful and should be retained. Otherwise, the theory demands a revised framework that abandons obsolete categories, treats the argument as explanatory rather than predictive, and specifies the conditions under which internal and external threats interact. The following section operationalises this agenda through a set of updated enabling conditions and a process-tracing template designed to restore omnibalancing's analytical reach without sacrificing precision.

2.3.4 Revised Omnibalancing: Enabling Conditions and Process Tracing

A revised set of seven enabling conditions are needed to make omnibalancing more objective, precise, and applicable. These revised enabling conditions are:

1) Presence of Internal Threats
2) High Stakes for Leaders
3) Institutional Checks Degraded or Absent
4) Low State Capacity (administrative vs coercive)
5) Low Legitimacy
6) Fragmented Elite
7) Vulnerable Geopolitical Position

The revised framework of omnibalancing will encompass expanded conceptual understandings of internal threats, leadership legitimacy, and state capacity. By broadening these dimensions, the revisions will offer greater explanatory power, making omnibalancing suitable for application across any regime type—whether it is democratic or autocratic.

2.3.4.1 Presence of Internal Threats

The presence of internal threats is an essential enabling condition for David's original theory and for this revised version, too. The key feature that needs modification is the understanding of what threats are. This enabling condition is revised based on Beswick's (2011, pp. 5–6) criticisms of the interrelatedness of internal and external threats and (E. A. Miller, 2006b, paras 20 and 57) expanded understanding of threats, which include crises—a more acute form of threat.

Threats to regime survival are multifaceted. Omnibalancing requires significant internal threats to a leadership or regime. However, the landscape of threats are more complex than David theorised. This complexity needs to be acknowledged. In practice, this would be a willingness to expand the type and engage with the internal/external boundaries of threats. For example, internal threats can originate

both internally and externally. Sometimes, the line between internal and external threat can be blurred (Beswick, 2011, p. 5). The proliferation of electoral authoritarian regimes, for instance, has shifted the nature of internal threats, with threats increasingly surrounding electoral processes—not just civil wars, assassination attempts, and coups (David, 1991, pp. 238–239). A demonstration of the internal and external interrelation of threats to a regime are Ukrainian politics in the 2010s. In the 2010 Ukrainian Presidential elections, the domestic threat to the incumbent Yushchenko regime, Viktor Yanukovych, was clearly supported externally by Russia (Vanderhill, 2013, p. 146). To help Yanukovych win, Russia provided gas debt forgiveness of approximately $1 billion USD (ibid.). When the Yanukovych regime was toppled in 2014, domestic mass-movement against his regime concerned foreign policy decisions—closer alignment with the EU or with the Russian-led EAEU—each with their own opportunities and threats for the regime (A. Wilson, 2022, pp. 347–349). In both Ukrainian examples, the internal threats to the different incumbent regimes internal and external dynamics.

2.3.4.1.1 Omni-Present Threats & Quotidian Omnibalancing: Addressing Omnibalancing's Sword of Damocles Problem

An issue with threats must be addressed before continuing. A problem with omnibalancing is threats can seem omni-present. Due to the range of threats to regime survival, it can hard to distinguish when an alignment decision isn't omnibalancing. This can be demonstrated by showing the links between foreign policy and the maintenance of a winning coalition. Among actors that enable a leader's or regime's survival (referred to as the "selectorate"), the "winning coalition" are those actors that are essential for retaining power (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003, pp. 41–55; Gerschewski, 2013a, p. 22). In nondemocratic regimes, winning coalitions tend to be small. In Belarus, for example, the Lukashenka regime's winning coalition are the siloviki (members of the security services and meaning "men of force"), members of the state bureaucracy, and members of the business elite (A. Wilson, 2021, pp. 190 and 223). In the United States, by contrast, the

winning coalition is technically “a little more than half the [voters] in half the states” to secure enough electoral-college votes (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003, p. 473). Winning coalitions associated with authoritarian regimes tend to have external interests, because elites commonly control large-scale domestic assets, which are linked to the global economy (Bader et al., 2010). In a democracy like the United States, foreign policy can also be linked to the winning coalition via the economy, for example, through the need to maintain high employment. If a political regime fails to maintain its winning coalition, the leadership can lose its support. In nondemocratic Ukraine, for example, when the Yanukovych regime’s winning coalition of oligarchs removed their support, Yanukovych fled and his regime effectively collapsed (A. Wilson, 2015c, pp. 102–107). In the United States, Jimmy Carter’s loss in the 1980 presidential elections was partly due to the 1979 oil crisis, which contributed to economic stagnation. Jimmy Carter lost the winning coalition and failed in his re-election campaign (Hakes, 2021, chapter 25 para. 40). Foreign policy, therefore, can be a core interest to the winning coalition and an essential tool for the leadership to maintain domestic support. A failure to maintain a winning coalition can thus threaten political survival. So, when a regime conducts foreign policy, it can be hard to distinguish when the leadership is and is not omnibalancing the internal threat of losing the winning coalition. This presents a Sword of Damocles problem—an allusion to the ever-present peril faced by those in positions of power (‘Damocles’, 2011). For example, is deepening economic ties with another state simply a procedural formality? Is it to address the needs of the winning coalition? Could it be both these things? And if so, could the leadership be attempting to omnibalance the threat of losing the winning coalition via foreign policy alignments? For democratic regimes, institutional checks upon and low stakes of office removal for the leadership often preclude omnibalancing. But this can present confusion for analysing nondemocratic regimes. The variety of ever-present threats mean it can be tempting to over-apply omnibalancing to explain almost any type of alignment decision.

For nondemocratic regimes, the Sword of Damocles problem can lead to quotidian omnibalancing—applying omnibalancing to everyday, business-as-usual external interactions. In theory, authoritarian regimes are always omnibalancing. Every single alignment can be argued to balance some form of high stakes internal threat, because there is always a need to reinforce the pillars of regime survival—legitimation, repression, and elite co-optation (Gerschewski, 2013a, 2023). It could be argued that an alignment is to maintain regime legitimacy (R. A. Hinnebusch, 2003, p. 152), or to develop better tools of repression (Düben, 2023, p. 480), or to maintain a strong economy with the intention of co-opting elites (Welz, 2022, pp. 390–391), and so on. In some regions, like the post-Soviet space, omnibalancing can seem over-determined. Since the mid 2000s, for example, Russia has sought to reassert its dominance in the region (Götz, 2017a, 2022, p. 1533). Based on balance-of-threat theory, post-Soviet regimes aligning with Russia is (arguably) illogical (E. A. Miller, 2006a, paras 5–9, 2006b, para. 23). Certain scholars have long argued that post-Soviet Central Asian states should group together to balance rather than align with Russia (Cornell & Starr, 2018). Yet, Central Asian states continue to align closely with Russia (Costa Buranelli, 2021). Is every decision to align with Russia in the post-Soviet space, then, a form of omnibalancing? Aligning with a stronger, predatory Russia to maintain regime elites? This recalls Popper's friends seeing verification of Marxism "everywhere" (Popper, 1962, p. 35). This is peril of quotidian omnibalancing: the potential to see omnibalancing everywhere.

The use of restrictions can address the Sword of Damocles problem and limit quotidian omnibalancing. The researcher has two tools: (a) limiting omnibalancing to its original purpose to explain anomalous alignment behaviour and (b) limiting omnibalancing case selection to crises. The first tool is required, while the second is optional. The first tool is based on alignment decisions that do not make sense in terms of realist balancing behaviour. In this instance, omnibalancing can only be proven when alignment behaviour can be shown to be (1) detrimental to the state's

interests (defined in the next sentence), or (2) alignment with a secondary threat to address a more pressing threat, or (3) illogical in terms of balance-of-power or balance-of-threat theory. Going against the state's interests is understood as alignment decisions that compromise state sovereignty (control over a state's territory or people) or other key elements of state power, such as the economy or military.

The second tool to reduce the chance of over-applying omnibalancing is to select crises for omnibalancing test cases. This draws on Miller's (2006b) and Miller and Toritsyn's (2005) work. The solution is to select convincing cases to demonstrate the theory. Miller introduces the concept of a crisis—a type of acute threat—as an enabling condition that enhances the likelihood of omnibalancing. A threat is defined as a crisis when "a country faces economic collapse in part due to a leader's inability or unwillingness to enact and implement reform, address the country's basic economic needs, or perhaps because of outright corruption and graft," which calls the legitimacy of the leader(s) into question (E. A. Miller, 2006c, para. 57; E. A. Miller & Toritsyn, 2005, p. 335). In this dissertation's revision of omnibalancing, the precise definition of a crisis is context dependent and up to the individual researcher. The first utility of crises is they are not everyday occurrences. This distances the researcher from applying omnibalancing to mundane circumstances. In addition, when a crisis involves a state's leadership, it is often accompanied by a "centralization of power", simultaneously deepening the disunity of the state (between the ruler and the ruled) and potentially reducing institutional checks on the leadership (Houghton, 2020, para. 18). These are both conducive to omnibalancing. A crisis also 'engenders a sense that "something must be done"' (ibid. para 4). Indeed, the term "crisis" stems from a Greek word that denotes a transitional or pivotal moment (Freedman, 2014, p. 7). In this case, the decision for the leadership is whether to omnibalance. Crisis conditions, therefore, create better testing grounds for omnibalancing.

Is the level of crisis the real driver of omnibalancing behaviour, and are the other enabling conditions are secondary? A crisis is neither a stand-alone cause nor a hierarchically superior condition that mechanically propels rulers towards omnibalancing. Crisis is analytically subsumed under the first enabling condition—the presence of significant internal threats—and its impact is always mediated by contextual factors and the other six enabling conditions. A crisis is best understood as a proximate catalyst, not as the primary cause of omnibalancing. Leaders decide to seek external alignment when several background conditions (acute domestic threat, high personal stakes, degraded checks, limited capacity, low legitimacy, elite fracture and geopolitical vulnerability) combine to make internal management appear unfeasible. A crisis compresses the time available for response, thereby raising the probability for decisive or painful decisions. Its intensity is therefore consequential only in so far as it magnifies underlying vulnerabilities. For example, severe shock may be ridden out by a regime with cohesive elites and ample coercive state capacity. But a modest threat may precipitate alignment if capacity is weak, legitimacy thin, and external cover readily available. A crisis is mediated by multiple factors that include omnibalancing enabling conditions, external support, and features of the crisis itself. This is why the explaining-outcome process-tracing research method is so important to be paired with this revised omnibalancing framework. It is needed to untangle the interlinking factors connected to omnibalancing and crisis conditions. For research design, the presence of an overt crisis is useful because it bounds the enquiry and reduces the risk of seeing quotidian foreign-policy business as omnibalancing; analytically, however, crisis severity is an intervening factor, mediated by the enabling conditions rather than displacing them.

In the crisis literature a broad, cross-disciplinary convergence has emerged around a three-part conception first articulated by Hermann (1972, p. 13) and refined by Rosenthal et al. (1989, p. 10) (Boin et al., 2016, pp. 5–7; Rosenthal & Kouzmin,

1997, pp. 279–280). Elaborating on Rosenthal et al.'s (1989, p. 10) definition of crisis within political contexts, a situation qualifies as a crisis when: (1) decision-makers perceive an acute threat to core values and fundamental structures (such as their own political survival); (2) the perceived time available for response is severely compressed; and (3) there is pronounced uncertainty in circumstances, such as uncertainty over the likely consequences of alternative courses of action. This triad—threat, urgency, and uncertainty—distinguishes crises from chronic policy problems and from routine external shocks (Rosenthal & Kouzmin, 1997, pp. 279–280). This definition is objective. The magnitude of the threat can be specified after-the-fact in terms of lives, assets, or institutional integrity at risk. But it can also be subjective. A crisis can be securitised and framed subjectively as a crisis and thereby elevate it on the governmental agenda (Birkland, 2006, pp. 2–3; Buzan et al., 1998, p. 24).

For the purposes of analysing omnibalancing using explaining-outcome process-tracing, a pragmatic and comparable definition is required. The following is informed by Rosenthal and Kouzmin (1997) and Birkland (2006). The dissertation therefore treats a crisis as an episode—bounded in time—during which the regime leadership publicly or privately acknowledge that (a) regime survival or undisputed authority is at risk; (b) they cannot rely on existing routines; and (c) they must decide on, or implement, exceptional measures within days or weeks. Empirically, the presence of crisis is established when at least two of the following indicators are observed: (1) formal declaration of an emergency, activation of special legal provisions, or deployment of coercive forces beyond normal jurisdiction; (2) sustained elite rhetoric that a critical juncture or state of emergency exists; (3) significant loss of life, output or territorial control; (4) mobilisation of mass protest, insurgent violence or elite defections signalling imminent regime collapse. These indicators permit cross-case comparison and help to avoid the "omni-present threat" problem noted earlier: quotidian budgetary squeezes or routine cabinet reshuffles do not meet the threshold.

Within omnibalancing theory, crises are analytically important because they intensify the leadership's insecurity and thus raise the attractiveness of seeking external alignment—even at the expense of sovereignty—to neutralise internal threats. Using crises to study political regimes beneficial in terms of precision. A crisis window provides the temporal focus for process-tracing: it marks the point at which the causal mechanism (which features in alignment with a foreign patron in order to counter the domestic threat(s)) becomes observable through policy deliberations, diplomatic démarches, financial flows, or military co-operation.

A note on existential versus constructed crises. Constructed crises are common in the post-Soviet space as form of *dramatugia*, "political theatre" (A. Wilson, 2023). When the threat is exogenous and overwhelming, such as imminent military defeat, collapse of state revenue, or uncontrollable mass uprising, this means the leadership's options are genuinely narrowed; external realignment is plausibly a survival response. Manufactured crises, by contrast, are elite strategies intended to consolidate power, manipulate public opinion or extract concessions from external actors (Kreuder-Sonnen, 2018). Theoretically, in such cases of manufactured crisis omnibalancing might actually occur, but the high costs that potentially come with omnibalancing make this a highly illogical or rare course of action.

In terms of methods, adopting a crisis threshold serves two further functions. First, it disciplines case selection: only episodes meeting the criteria enter the small-n comparison, avoiding the temptation to see omnibalancing in every policy adjustment. Second, it sharpens causal inference. Beach (2021) notes that process-tracing gains leverage when mechanisms are examined within bounded temporal spaces; crises provide precisely such windows by compressing decision sequences and by generating unusually rich traces (emergency decrees, summitry, financial transfers). Accordingly, the dissertation treats crisis not as an explanatory variable in its own right but as a contextual catalyst that renders the omnibalancing mechanism observable.

This study defines crisis as an acutely threatening, time-compressed and uncertainty-laden episode publicly acknowledged by incumbents; recognises both material and constructed variants; and operationalises the concept through clear thresholds suitable for process-tracing. This conceptual stance preserves fidelity to the comparative crisis literature while providing the analytical clarity required to test omnibalancing in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine.

2.3.4.2 High Stakes for Leaders

The personal safety and political survival of leaders are central to the theory. This is the same as David's conceptualisation. Leadership in such regimes fear that losing power could lead to severe personal consequences, such as imprisonment, exile, torture, or death. Implicit in this condition, too, is high stakes can refer to positive consequences, such as continued or increased power, prestige, wealth, and so on. This condition, therefore, can have a profound impact on leaders in their willingness to make hard decisions or to take risks.

Its importance can be demonstrated with the example of US president Donald Trump's dealings with Ukraine. After Donald Trump became president, the stakes for leadership removal in the USA have been raised. Trump is well-known among his former advisors and associates for fearing prison (Scaramucci & Kay, 2024, Section 19:34). In April 2019, accusations of Trump's obstruction of justice against the Mueller Russia investigation had swirled in the news (Gerstein & Samuelsohn, 2019). In June 2019, for example, then-US Senator Kamala Harris claimed when Trump left office, the US Justice Department "would have no choice" but to pursue criminal charges against Trump (Detrow & Masters, 2019). The US Republican Party was already an "anti-system" party, but "authoritarian" Trump has made US politics more autocratic, such as 'talking about using the Department of Justice to arrest his enemies, not because they are guilty of something, but because[…] he wants

“retribution”’ (Applebaum, 2024; Hacker & Pierson, 2019; Pengelly, 2023; Wolf, 2019).

Trump’s authoritarian mindset, a desire to remain in power, and a growing fear of his removal from office may be why Trump attempted to omnibalance his domestic presidential rival, Joe Biden, by external alignment with Ukraine in 2019. On 25 July 2019, lieutenant colonel Alexander Vindman listened in on a Trump phone call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy (The New York Times, 2019). Days before his July 25 call with Zelenskiy, Trump directed acting chief of staff Mick Mulvaney to withhold $400 million USD in military aid to Ukraine (Demirjian et al., 2019). Zelenskiy thanked Trump for the US’s “great support in the area of defence,” an apparent reference to the military aid (White House, 2019, p. 2). Trump replied, “I would like you to do us a favor though” (ibid., p. 3). Trump wanted intelligence on CrowdStrike, an American cybersecurity firm, which Trump believed could grant access to sensitive data on the Democratic National Committee’s internet server (Bertrand, 2019, para. 8; White House, 2019, p. 3). Trump also asked Zelenskiy to work with US Attorney General William Barr to investigate Joe Biden and his son’s dealings with Ukrainian natural gas company Burisma (Bertrand, 2019, paras 9 and 13; White House, 2019, pp. 3–4). Trump is threatening to withhold US aid to Ukraine unless Zelenskiy investigates his political opponents, including his presidential opponent, (at the time) former vice-president Joe Biden. This is textbook omnibalancing. Trump is using alignment with Ukraine (military aid) to counter his domestic threats to his leadership (using compromising materials gained from an external power) in the US.

Although Trump’s attempt at omnibalancing failed, it was attempted. Indeed, if it wasn’t for the tenacity of colonel Vindman (Vindman, 2021, para. 97), Trump may have gotten the Ukrainians to, at least, play along. Zelenskiy tells Trump, “we will take care of that and will work on the investigation of the case” (White House, 2019, p. 4). In fact, this is what Trump’s personal attorney, Rudy Giuliani, had explicitly said

needed to happen days earlier to Ukrainian presidential chief of staff Andriy Yermak (CNN, 2021; Shuster, 2024, chapter 10 para. 28). Without Vindman, omnibalancing may have taken place. It can only be guessed at if it would have been successful. This dissertation does not have the space or scope to further explore this example.[3] What this example demonstrates is the importance of high stakes for the leadership as an enabling condition for omnibalancing.

2.3.4.3 Institutional Checks Degraded or Absent

This enabling condition assumes omnibalancing is more likely when institutional checks on leadership or regime power are degraded, subverted, or absent. The discussion on this revised enabling condition explores how the presence or absence of these institutional constraints influences the likelihood of omnibalancing, arguing that while regime type is an important factor, it should not be seen as a definitive determinant.

Omnibalancing is more likely to occur in contexts where institutional checks on leadership are weakened or non-existent. Liberal democratic institutions are supposed to be characterised by transparency, constraints, and accountability (Peceny & Butler, 2004, p. 568). These systems insert “multiple veto players in the policy process. The more veto players there are, the more difficult it is to initiate any risky and costly foreign policy, unless there is a consensus among all the relevant domestic actors” (Peceny & Butler, 2004, p. 569; Tsebelis, 2001). These checks and balances can act as a barrier to omnibalancing, especially when an external alignment benefits the leadership at the expense of state interests. However, if these checks are compromised or missing, the leader or regime seeking to omnibalance will face fewer obstacles.

[3]. Although, the author would love to write an academic article on this.

It may seem more convenient to use nondemocratic regimes as an enabling condition. This is logical at first glance. Nondemocratic regimes are particularly susceptible to omnibalancing due to the frequent absence or subversion of institutional checks. In these regimes, leaders prioritise maintaining power and avoiding "the uncertainties of regime change" (Schedler, 2013, p. 1). Typically, legislatures are relatively weak and broader outcomes are rarely in doubt (S. Williamson & Magaloni, 2020, p. 1525), the judiciary is subordinate to the regime (Ginsburg & Moustafa, 2008, pp. 4–10), and civil society organisations are prohibited or constrained (Dupuy et al., 2021, p. 6). Regime type, then, seems to be a good candidate for an omnibalancing enabling condition: nondemocratic regimes can omnibalance with greater ease because institutional checks are missing; democratic regimes will struggle to omnibalance due to institutional checks.

While regime type is suggestive, it is not a definitive enabling condition for omnibalancing. This can be demonstrated with Düben's (2023, pp. 467–468) recent article on omnibalancing (italics replicated from the original):

> the key premises of omnibalancing could in principle be applied to any state: in any state context, political leaders will have an interest in preserving their power and balancing against domestic as well as foreign challenges[...] However, in functional liberal democracies with an entrenched rule of law, domestic political challenges are manageable and rule-bound and political succession is accepted as an inevitable process. Leaders have subscribed to the rules[...] If they try to break these rules, there are strong political institutions in place to check their ambitions. If they are successful in breaking these rules and permanently overcome these institutional checks, this process would per definitionem transform the political system from a liberal democracy into a semi-authoritarian or authoritarian system of government.

This view is an oversimplification. The reality of institutional checks in nondemocratic regimes is more complex. Certain nondemocratic subtypes are more likely to have formal or informal institutional checks. Accounting for these checks via a tailored enabling condition is more robust than simply assuming via regime type to

gauge the likelihood of omnibalancing. It is true that checks and balances do not function in nondemocratic regimes as they do in democracies. Regime type can certainly be quick guide to decide if a leadership or regime is more or less likely to omnibalance. However, a blanket assumption on the ability or tendency of leaders to omnibalance based on regime type is inaccurate.

Regime type is more fluid than Düben argues above. For instance, Düben argues if a democratic regime were to omnibalance, they would cease to be democratic. Yet, the example of Trump (above) demonstrates, omnibalancing does not require “permanently” removing institutional checks. In Trump’s case, his omnibalancing attempts were thwarted by an individual, Vindman, not an institutional check. This underscores Hyde and Saunders’s (2020, p. 387) argument that even democratic institutions can be manipulated.

Düben’s position reflects a rigid, black-and-white understanding of regime type and politics. Cianetti and Hanley (2021, p. 72) caution against analyses driven by regime type, but without a “sense of what might be going on politically.” In reality, nondemocratic regimes exhibit a range of characteristics, particularly in closed or single-party systems (Peceny & Butler, 2004, pp. 569–570). Leaders in single-party regimes, such as those with Communist origins in China or Vietnam, may face veto players within the party leadership institutions, such as the politburo. In military dictatorships, leaders may face veto players within the military command. By contrast, personalist or hegemonic electoral authoritarian regimes (like those in Belarus and Russia), are generally less constrained than the closed nondemocratic subtypes with institutional checks (ibid.). These electoral authoritarian regimes have spent decades subverting formal institutions and establishing informal ones, all while performing aspects of democracy. Closed regimes, being dictatorial by design, have developed a different institutional culture that can, in some cases, produce constraints on leadership.

The most effective approach is to assess on a case-by-case basis the degree to which institutional checks upon a leader are degraded or missing. Regime-type can be used as a suggestive rule-of-thumb, but not as an absolute enabling condition.

2.3.4.4 Low State Capacity (administrative vs coercive)

The fourth omnibalancing enabling condition assumes when a state possesses low administrative and/or low coercive capacities (collectively referred to as state capacity), the leadership is more likely to seek external support to balance internal threats. State capacity is defined as the ability of the state to achieve its objectives (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2019, chapter 1 para. 60). This conceptualisation depends on a state's bureaucracy and security services. High state capacity equates to a state's ability to successfully implement its plans, whether this is enforcing laws, providing public services, or waging war. Low state capacity is characterised by the state's inability to achieve its goals due to a weakened or ineffective bureaucracy or security apparatus.

The low state capacity enabling condition replaces the weak leader enabling condition. The traditional omnibalancing theory, as proposed by David's (1991, pp. 236, 252–253), relied on the leadership being "weak" as an enabling condition. However, this section argues his conceptualisation of weakness is problematic due to its association with outdated with teleological theories of modernisation, stereotypes of the Third World, and the vagueness of the category itself. The assumption that less developed, unconsolidated states—prevously categorised as Third World states—are inherently weak oversimplifies the complexities of state capacity and ignores the diverse realities of these states.

The concept of weakness, as employed in traditional omnibalancing theory, is problematic, particularly when tied to outdated and imprecise categories, such as Third World or developed versus developing states. Omnibalancing was a reaction to

the realist assumption of the unified state. Minor states (not major powers) were disunified and used external alignment to balance internal threats. The states can have their politics driven by internal threats and are, therefore, weak. The leadership and state being assumed as weak relies on the distinction between developed, consolidated states and less-developed, unconsolidated states—commonly associated with the Third World. This developed/undeveloped and consolidated/unconsolidated distinction can introduce analytical flaws about the states under study.

After the Cold War, omnibalancing has been applied to states with developing-world economies. These states often were either previously categorised as Third World states or now shoulder problems once associated with the Third World, such as state failure, autocratic regimes, instability, poverty, and so on (R. A. Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, 2014, pp. 19–20; Nonneman, 2005a, pp. 9–17; Selján, 2020, p. 10; Strakes, 2011, pp. 95–96). These states have been classified as “developing” or “unconsolidated”—labels that have, in many analyses, replaced the Third World categorisation (R. A. Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, 2014, p. 20). These newer labels, however, carry forward the same or other problematic assumptions. For example, there is an assumption that these states comprise an analytical group—the developing world. But as Beswick argues, “for anyone who has ever lived or worked in or on a developing country, it is perhaps impossible to accept David’s contention that there are fundamental similarities between Third World states which despite their differences justify considering them as a coherent category of analysis” (Beswick, 2011, p. 4). In 2016, the World Bank announced it would no longer distinguish between the two groups in its annual World Development Indicators, showing “the blurring of the boundaries between ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ countries is now formally recognized” (Horner 2020, p. 416). What has become known as “post-development” thinking has examined how Third World and global North versus South categorisations were actually social constructions to justify

foreign intervention and control (Horner, 2020, pp. 416–418). The claim of weakness is linked to groupings such as “developing” versus “developed”, which have replaced the Third versus Second/First World categories. The limits of these groupings are unclear and are unsuitable as an analytical category.

More practically, the assumption of weakness can simply be wrong. As noted above, Third World leaders are inherently weak and illegitimate. The idea that developing (previously Third World states) are weak is not always true (Beswick, 2011, pp. 6–7). Some leaders have considerable domestic power and control. For example, a military dictatorship may provide little for its citizens and thus be seen as illegitimate, but it may have substantial formidable security apparatus, such as in Zimbabwe or North Korea (Byman & Lind, 2010; Hove, 2017). And at the international level, as Beswick (2011, pp. 6–7) notes, weakness can be a grey zone for regime survival. A client state’s vulnerability can be a resource to attract support from an invested patron state.

Other scholars (such as Hinnebusch, 2003; Nonneman, 2005) link weakness and omnibalancing via modernisation theory. But this connection is also problematic. The underlying logic is developing countries (like their third world predecessors) are modernising states that tend to be disunified and weak. They are inclined to omnibalance internal threats with external support. Modernising states are unstable “unless the development of political institutions keeps pace with the expansion of political participation” (Huntington, 2006/1968, pp. 397–398). The right balance between a state’s political institutions and mass political participation is referred to either “consolidation” or the right “level of state formation” (R. A. Hinnebusch, 2003, pp. 74–76). The higher the level of consolidation, the lower the level of international dependency and trans-state penetration. As Hinnebusch and Ehteshami (2014, p. 20) state:

> where regimes are institutionally consolidated, society is a source of resources and support that leaders can mobilize for the conduct of assertive

> foreign policies. Where regimes are unconsolidated, society is a source of internal threats that have to be “omni-balanced” against. Thus, to understand states’ foreign policies, one must understand the internal features of the state.

Consolidated states are unlikely to omnibalance, because they face fewer internal threats. For example, in a country with strong democratic institutions, leadership turnover tends not entail high risk situations in many nondemocratic countries. Regimes in unconsolidated states, therefore, are more likely to omnibalance, because they more often face internal threats and must look for external support to survive. In this case, weakness implies arrested or incorrect institutional development.

This theoretical approach carries a value-laden teleology. Consolidation assumes that all modern states progress towards capitalist economies and democratic regimes. For example, nondemocracies like China or Russia, “could not be consolidated absent democratization giving citizens the rights needed to feel the state was ‘theirs’” (R. A. Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, 2014, p. 15). In these cases, state institutions are used for control, instead of promoting mobilisation of society. Such states can only ever be “semi-consolidated,” and never fully formed states (R. A. Hinnebusch, 2003, pp. 80–85). Nevertheless, state formation theorists acknowledge exceptions; high levels of institutional consolidation and stability can be achieved through a strong economy with limited political participation, as seen in capitalist nondemocratic China (R. A. Hinnebusch, 2003, pp. 80–83). This value-laden approach, therefore, resembles the debate over developed versus developing countries (Watkins, 2020, p. 659). It raises the question that weakness is, in fact, linked to insistence on a particular regime type—democracy—which itself is an unsatisfied agenda about how states ought to modernise, rather than the objective characterisation of a functional state.

The solution is to drop the value-laden assumptions of weakness. The more objective, precise, and useful enabling condition of administrative and coercive state

capacity should replace it. Indeed, Miller (2006, paras 9 and 23) and Miller and Toritsyn (2005, pp. 330 and 332) were headed in this direction when they argued that leader(s) can have "power[…] concentrated in a strong state apparatus" and develop "strong executive branches, which legitimated and institutionalized the power of the respective leader" but still be "weak." Weakness is, therefore, a measure of capacity not authority. The leader(s) may have firm control various state structures (intelligence services, security forces, command over the military, etc.), but these may not have the capacity to counter all threats to the leadership.

The utility of dividing state capacity into administrative and coercive components is linked to key features of omnibalancing: legitimacy and the need to counter threats to survival. If a state does not provide goods and services for its citizens (embodied in the administrative component), then a leadership's legitimacy can suffer. It may also create a separation between the regime elites and citizens, who identify elites with the administrative apparatus. The lack of coercive capacity literally means a leadership will struggle to counter threats and may seek external support. Legitimacy and repression are key features of nondemocratic regime survival, which are also captured by these administrative and coercive components (Gerschewski, 2013a, 2023). And like weakness and illegitimacy compound each other in David's traditional omnibalancing, when both administrative and coercive state capacity components are low or fail, this can compound threats for the regime, too. Low state capacity can generate opposition to the leadership and, at the same time, deprive the leadership of the ability to counter it. This increases the likelihood the leadership would seek outside support via omnibalancing.

Scholars have developed many ways to measure state capacity (Vaccaro, 2023). Due to the small-N, case study, process-tracing approach of omnibalancing, the method to account for administrative and coercive state capacity should be decided by the researcher on a case-by-case basis. For comparative studies, researchers might use composite, quantitative measures, such as the Fragile States

Index (Fund for Peace, 2024). Indicators within the index measure key features of omnibalancing, such as state apparatus and public services measuring coercive and administrative state capacity respectively (Fund for Peace, 2017, pp. 6–7 and 10–11). The index also measures state legitimacy and elite fragmentation (the relevance of these measures is discussed in subsequent revised enabling conditions below) (ibid., pp. 10–11). It should be noted, however, the Fund for Peace does not provide detailed information about how these measures are created. Thus, the index should be used as a general guide supplemented by other data (quantitative or qualitative).

In sum, omnibalancing's reliance on the concept of "weakness" as a enabling condition is problematic due to its association with outdated and imprecise categories such as the Third World and the developed versus developing states distinction. The traditional notion of state weakness oversimplifies the complexities of state capacity, ignoring the diverse realities of different states. This dissertation advocates for replacing the value-laden concept of weakness with a more objective measure of state capacity, divided into administrative and coercive components. This approach better captures the dynamics of legitimacy and repression in nondemocratic regimes and provides a more precise and practical framework for understanding how state leaders might seek external support to balance internal threats. The section also suggests that state capacity should be measured on a case-by-case basis, using tools like the Fragile States Index, while acknowledging the limitations of such indices.

2.3.4.5 Low Legitimacy

This enabling condition is no different from David's original conception. The understanding of low legitimacy is informed by Gerschewski's (2023, pp. 69–72) definition of legitimacy for autocratic regime survival. Low legitimacy generates a relational and asymmetric disconnect between ruler and ruled. At very low levels, the ruled reject or do not recognise the entitlement claim of the ruler as being justified. In conditions of very low legitimacy, the ruled do not follow the ruler based on an

internalised obligation to obey, but rather out of compulsion, fear, or mere compliance without genuine acceptance. This dissonance undermines the ruler's authority and erodes the bond that would otherwise sustain the ruler's power, leading to a fragile or contested rule. Thus, if the leadership lacks legitimacy, there is a disunity within the state between the rulers and the ruled. It is easy to see how low legitimacy can also generate threats. As the leadership's authority is questioned, other elites (especially if the state's elite are fragmented) may seek to challenge or supplant it. The ruled may rebel against the leadership. In such conditions, the leadership is assumed to be more open to the idea of omnibalancing threats to their survival.

2.3.4.6 Fragmented Elite:

When the elite members of a political regime (democratic or nondemocratic) are fragmented, the resulting isolation, internal opposition, and instability can create significant threats to the survival of the incumbent leadership, making omnibalancing more likely. A fragmented elite arises when the regime fails to co-opt or bind its members effectively, leading to disunity and independent pursuits that undermine regime cohesion. Co-optation is a strategy to align the interests of key groups, like the military and business sectors, with those of the regime by offering incentives or employing intimidation (Gerschewski, 2023, pp. 105–110). Binding, a form of co-optation, ties the elite's survival directly to the regime's success, reducing their independence (ibid.). Without successful co-optation, elite fragmentation can destabilise the regime, as it weakens the unity necessary for maintaining control and can heighten the need for omnibalancing.

A fragmented elite greatly increases the likelihood of internal threats. Powerful elites or different factions within the elite may vie for power or resist the regime's control. This aligns with the omnibalancing focus on internal threats, which can become as significant, if not more so, than external threats in shaping the regime's behaviour. A fragmented elite is a common feature in competitive electoral

authoritarian regimes (Levitsky & Way, 2010). A competitive electoral authoritarian regime is a type of civilian regime where “formal democratic institutions exist and are perceived as the primary means of gaining power” (ibid., p. 5). However, these regimes are characterised by significant abuse of state resources and authority by incumbents, which creates a heavily skewed playing field in favour of the ruling party (Levitsky & Way, 2010). While opposition parties are allowed to contest elections and may even pose a serious challenge to the incumbents, the electoral competition is unfair due to manipulation, fraud, and other authoritarian practices that undermine true democratic processes (ibid., p. 12). Thus, although competition is genuine, it is deeply imbalanced. This environment can foster divisions among elites as they vie for power and influence within an unstable system that does not guarantee their position. The unfairness of this system, combined with the real possibility of power shifts, can lead to conflicts among elite factions, as some may align with opposition forces, while others may become disillusioned with the incumbent’s overbearing and underhanded tactics. Co-optation and binding elites to the regime are essential in these types of regimes (ibid., p. 26). This is partly why politics in Ukraine, which has long functioned as a competitive electoral authoritarian regime (D’Anieri, 2012; Vanderhill, 2013, p. 141; A. Wilson, 2015a, pp. 311–321 and 330–347), have been so turbulent. The fragmented elite create threats for the incumbent regime.

The presence of a fragmented elite challenges the effectiveness of co-optation as a survival strategy. When elites are not unified and have diverging interests, the regime may struggle to co-opt all factions effectively, leading to cracks in the regime’s control and increasing the likelihood of threats to the leadership. Enabling conditions can feed on one another, too. This can be demonstrated with elite fragmentation leading to the Georgian Rose Revolution. By the 2000s, the long-serving Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze was deeply unpopular and elites began abandoning the ruling party (Welt, 2010, pp. 157–161). Georgia was commonly referred to as a failed state (Jones, 2015, chapter 6 para. 1). In 2000, the

leadership's political party, the Citizens' Union of Georgia (CUG), started to disintegrate. As the elite fragmentation spread, so did the number of threats. By 2001, defections included former CUG chairman Mikheil Saakashvili, who would participate in protests against the leadership and go on to become the president of Georgia after Shevardnadze (Welt, 2010, pp. 157–158). By 2003, Shevardnadze had neglected coercive capacity, too, not paying his police forces for three months (Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 55). This meant that relatively small crowds of protesters together with opposition elites were able to topple his regime (ibid., p. 55). At the very least, Shevardnadze had low legitimacy and lacked coercive capacity. Together with a fragmented elite, threats and vulnerabilities coalesced together to bring down the regime.

The reasons for Shevardnadze's failure to omnibalance are complex and beyond the scope of this dissertation. A fragmented elite adds complexity to the regime's decision-making processes. Leaders may have to consider multiple, often conflicting, elite interests when making alignment decisions. This complexity increases the likelihood of omnibalancing as leaders may be forced to make external alignments or take other actions that serve immediate survival needs rather than long-term state interests. In the case of Georgia under Shevardnadze, however, omnibalancing was complicated by the fact that both the regional power, Russia, and the international power, the United States, did not support Shevardnadze's regime. Russia backed separatist regions within Georgia, such as Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Welt, 2010, pp. 167–168). The Bush administration was supporting democracy promotion at this time and viewed support for Shevardnadze as unacceptable (ibid., 183). Omnibalancing does not seem viable in these conditions.

Another example of elite fragmentation and an area for future omnibalancing research is Brexit.[4] Brexit under UK Conservative Party can be seen as

[4]. The author would like to thank his advisor, Prof Andrew Wilson, for this suggestion.

omnibalancing, particularly when viewed through the lens of elite fragmentation. UK Prime Minister David Cameron's decision to hold the Brexit referendum was a strategic move to manage internal divisions within the Conservative Party, which was deeply split over the issue of EU membership (Dunin-Wasowicz, 2016; Shipman, 2016, chapter 1 para. 12). By calling the referendum, Cameron aimed to appease the Eurosceptics in parliament and within his own party, prevent a split that could weaken his party's unity, and save his own office (Oliver, 2016 Introduction, para. 4; Shipman, 2016, chapter 1 para. 22 and 36). This classifies as omnibalancing, because Cameron is using the UK's external alignment with the EU (and realignments with non-EU countries, such as the United States and India) to counter threats to his leadership within the Parliament to save his own office and party, which is experiencing elite fragmentation.

When the referendum resulted in a vote to leave the EU, subsequent Conservative leaders, Theresa May and Boris Johnson, were forced to navigate the complex and contentious process of negotiating the UK's exit from the EU. Their external alignments and negotiations with the EU were heavily influenced by the need to maintain party unity and avoid exacerbating internal divisions (Wager, 2019, para. 5). The Conservatives' handling of Brexit, therefore, can be viewed as a drawn-out omnibalancing project, where external alignments with the EU were shaped by the imperative to manage internal threats to party cohesion and leadership survival.

To be sure, Brexit had many drivers—not just omnibalancing. It is widely accepted among academics that "Brexit is a complex phenomenon comprising a set of highly contingent combinations of factors over an extended [time]" (Baines et al., 2020, pp. 751–752; McConnell & Tormey, 2020). Indeed, Brexit does not appear to qualify as omnibalancing in the traditional sense. For example, the threat to the leadership that omnibalancing typically involves is in contexts where the state's existence or leadership's lives are at risk. In the case of Brexit, the Conservative Party's internal divisions, while significant, did not pose a life-threatening, existential

threat to the leadership and other elite members of the Conservative government. Additionally, the UK's democratic institutions, including parliamentary sovereignty and a relatively stable political system, provided mechanisms for managing internal party disputes without resorting to the kind of drastic external alignments seen in classic cases of omnibalancing (such as those described in David 1991). All the same, Brexit is literally a case of external alignment being used to balance internal threats to the leaderships continued survival in office. Therefore, more research needs to be done to see if Brexit under the UK Conservatives fully meets the criteria of omnibalancing.

In light of the above discussions (on Brexit and Trump), it would be productive to study whether omnibalancing as a strategy is more applicable or likely in parliamentary systems, such as the UK's, compared to presidential systems, like that of the United States, or compared to semi-presidential systems, as in much of the post-Communist and post-Soviet space, such as in Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, and Hungary (Brunclík & Kubát, 2019; Elgie, 2011, 2016). The dynamics of parliamentary systems, where leadership is more directly tied to party cohesion and legislative support, may create conditions that resemble omnibalancing when internal party threats arise (Andeweg et al., 2020). Conversely, in presidential systems, where the executive has a distinct separation from the legislature, the mechanisms and pressures that drive omnibalancing could manifest differently (Linz, 1990, 1994). In semi-presidential systems, the dual executive structure may introduce a unique set of pressures that could influence the likelihood of omnibalancing (Elgie, 2011; Shugart, 2008). Further research is needed to explore how structural differences between executive systems—across both democratic and nondemocratic regime types—influence the likelihood and nature of omnibalancing. This exploration could provide deeper insights into how political systems shape leaders' strategies for managing internal threats through external alignments.

2.3.4.7 Vulnerable Geopolitical Position

A state located within a regional environment where it faces significant external threats or pressures can exacerbate or amplify internal security challenges. This condition is characterised by contentious relationships with neighbouring states, regional rivalries, or external actors who may support internal opposition groups. Such a geopolitical environment heightens the regime's perception of insecurity and influences its strategic calculations, leading it to seek external alignments or support to counterbalance both internal and external threats, thereby ensuring the regime's survival. This condition is based on Hinnebusch's (2003, pp. 91–92) discussion of "a state's geopolitical position[…] in the regional system, shaped by its resources, size of territory and population and the strategic importance or vulnerability of its location, shapes its ambitions".

A vulnerable geopolitical position often means that a state is situated in a region where it faces significant external pressures or threats, such as hostile neighbours, regional rivalries, or external actors supporting internal opposition groups. This external environment can exacerbate existing internal threats or even create new ones. For example, if a neighbouring state is supporting a dissident group within the country, the internal threat becomes more severe due to external backing. An example of this is Russia supporting rival political groups in Ukraine or Moldova (Haynes, 2020, chapter 9; Vanderhill, 2013). In such scenarios, the regime may perceive these compounded threats as critical to its survival, prompting it to engage in omnibalancing to secure external support to counter these threats.

A vulnerable geopolitical position often leads to a heightened perception of threats, both internal and external. The regime may feel surrounded or besieged. This fortress mentality—much like a sense of crisis—can increase the leadership's sense of insecurity (Houghton, 2020). This perception of vulnerability may drive the regime to take preemptive or defensive actions in its foreign policy, seeking foreign partnerships that help mitigate these perceived threats. Omnibalancing theory

argues that such external alignments are motivated by the need to address internal stability; a vulnerable geopolitical position, therefore, makes this connection between external alignments and internal threats even more explicit and pressing.

A vulnerable geopolitical position can reinforce other enabling conditions, creating a condition feedback loop. For example, it can exacerbate the effects of a fragmented elite, as different factions might seek external support, further destabilising the regime. As the fragmented elite receive external support, more elites abandon the regime. As more elites abandon the regime, they also seek external support or join the factions already receiving support. At this point, a chain reaction may happen where the number of defecting elites start affecting state capacity, legitimacy, and so on. A vulnerable geopolitical position can, thus, have an amplifying effect on other enabling conditions.

A vulnerable geopolitical position enriches the omnibalancing framework by directly linking external geopolitical pressures with the regime's internal security strategies. The aim is to create more awareness of the internal-external linkage of threats that Beswick (2011, pp. 5–6) spoke of, showing how a state's internal threats can often have links to its regional or international environment. This condition provides a more comprehensive understanding of why and how regimes in geopolitically sensitive regions engage in omnibalancing.

In revising omnibalancing's theoretical framework, key enabling conditions have been redefined to enhance its analytical precision and applicability. First, the presence of internal threats remains central, but the focus is now on the complexity and blurred boundaries between internal and external threats, with a recommendation to apply omnibalancing primarily in crisis situations. High stakes for leaders, particularly in authoritarian regimes, are highlighted as a crucial factor driving risky and drastic actions to ensure survival. Trump's authoritarian style of politics and his dealings with Ukraine demonstrates how high stakes for office can

affect even democracies, which supports the theoretical assumption that omnibalancing is for all regime types. The degradation or absence of institutional checks is also an important adjustment to omnibalancing's enabling conditions. Accounting for these is a more nuanced approach for assessing how weakened constraints enable omnibalancing across different regime types. The traditional notion of state weakness is replaced with a more objective measure of state capacity, divided into administrative and coercive components, to better capture how low capacity increases the likelihood of seeking external support. Low legitimacy continues to be a key condition. It leads to a fragile rule and internal disunity, making omnibalancing a more likely strategy. The concept of a fragmented elite introduces the idea that internal divisions among elites exacerbate instability and compel regimes to engage in omnibalancing to navigate conflicting interests. Lastly, a vulnerable geopolitical position, where external threats amplify internal challenges links regional pressures directly to internal security strategies. Together, these revisions provide a more comprehensive and context-sensitive framework for understanding when and why regimes turn to omnibalancing.

2.4 Theory: Authoritarian Learning and Positive Policy Emulation

This section explains the theoretical logic underpinning authoritarian policy emulation. It explores how and why regimes observe, adapt, and publicly claim to adapt, policies from peers—specifically, from China—for the purpose of regime survival. The theory of authoritarian learning and emulation is essential for establishing the plausibility, mechanisms, and empirical markers to answer this dissertation's research question: Have regimes in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus used their bilateral relations with China to enhance authoritarian persistence from 2006 to 2016? This dissertation's focus is on positive, peer-to-peer authoritarian learning (previously defined in 2.2.3 above), which is the adaptation of models or practices in

one nondemocratic regime that are perceived as effective for stability and longevity in other nondemocratic regimes (Golosov, 2017; S. Hall & Ambrosio, 2017).

For the learning to be authoritarian, the political agents doing the learning must be autocratic. The countries studied in this dissertation are nondemocracies. China is an authoritarian, one-party state (Koesel et al., 2020, pp. 10–11; Shambaugh, 2008; G. Wu, 2016). A group of secretive elites (the party), not the populace, select national political leaders. Within this study's 2006–2016 timeframe, incumbent regimes in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus have been shown to represent authoritarian subtypes. Russia is defined as a hegemonic electoral authoritarian, party-based regime (Diamond, 2002, p. 25; Pavlovsky, 2016, pp. 10–11). This type of regime holds multi-party elections, which are not competitive. But Russia is not fully authoritarian, because democratic institutions exist and popular elections are still held. Ukraine is a competitive authoritarian regime (Levitsky & Way, 2010, pp. 5 and 12). The incumbent regime uses authoritarian methods, such as election fraud, tampering with institutions, violence or harassment, and bribery to create an uneven playing field for competitors (A. Wilson, 2015a, pp. 311–321 and 330–347). Belarus is a hegemonic electoral authoritarian, personalist regime (Trantidis, 2008). Like in Russia, elections are superficial. But it is personalist, rather than party-based, because the political system serves a single leader and that leaders' allies (Astapenia, 2025). Therefore, the regimes in this dissertation meet the theoretical selection criteria for studying authoritarian learning.

This dissertation theorises that nondemocratic regimes learn from each other and to emulate successful survival strategies, particularly under conditions of external and internal threat. Recent scholarship identifies several mechanisms and motivations for such learning and emulation. These are relevant to the behaviour of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus from 2006 to 2016 in their relations with China.

At their core, autocratic regimes are driven by the imperative to maintain power (Gerschewski, 2013a, 2023). Because challenges to regime longevity (such as popular uprisings, elite fragmentation, economic crisis, etc.) threaten their survival, autocrats are especially attuned to both the failures and successes of similar regimes (Goldring & Greitens, 2020, p. 321). In the post-Soviet region, established authoritarian leaders (e.g., Lukashenka and Putin) have sought to study both the downfall of peers (e.g., Colour Revolutions, Arab Spring) and the best practices of survivors to inform their own consolidation strategies (Hall, 2023, pp. xii–xiv, 6–7, 14).

Authoritarian resilience—the ability to survive and adapt in changing domestic or international circumstances—depends on the capacity to learn (M. Gallagher & Hanson, 2013, p. 187). Learning is essential because static strategies are eventually overwhelmed by new threats. This is exemplified by Chinese efforts to learn from Soviet collapse (Lang, 2018, pp. 154–156; Marsh, 2003). Policy adaptation informed by external examples becomes a functional requirement. Indeed, as the global normative environment shifts towards greater acceptance of autocracy and different international orders, copying or adapting best practices from peers becomes both more legitimate and less costly in international terms (Ambrosio, 2010, pp. 380–81; Cooley & Nexon, 2025; Flockhart, 2016; Flockhart & Korosteleva, 2022). Appropriateness and effectiveness are twin logics.

Learning is theorised as a process of policy diffusion, whereby the prior adoption of certain policies or institutional forms alters the probability of adoption by others (Ambrosio, 2010, p. 378; Hall, 2023, p. 17). There are multiple ways regimes can learn; this dissertation focuses solely on positive learning. Lang (2018, pp. 153–154) identifies three sources of learning: (1) from other authoritarian states (just described above as “peer-to-peer”); from democratic states (nonpeer-to-nonpeer); and (3) from domestic experiences/subnational models (internal adaptation and experimentation). This learning process can also be either “positive” or “negative”

(Lang 2018, p. 153; Mooney, 2001, p. 105). The idea of positive and negative learning comes from social learning theory, which puts forward the idea that individuals learn by observational modelling; that is, a person observers another doing something, and then chooses to do something similar (Rogers, 1983, pp. 304–307). Extending this theory to the state or to a regime, policymakers look at the practices of other governments to innovate their own policies (Hall, 1993, p. 289). The learning process is positive when a regime finds useful policy models in other jurisdictions and adapts them to their own national context. For example, in 1993 and 1994, the Jiangsu province cities of Wuxi and Suzhou built industrial, business parks, which were essentially copies Singapore's model to attract foreign investment and technology (Brautigam & Tang, 2011, p. 70). But if a regime seeks to avoid undesirable policy outcomes observed in another country, this is an example of a negative learning process. Negative learning is seldom hands-on: governments tend not to invite foreign bureaucrats to observe policy failure or regime collapse. Instead, undesirable outcomes often act as a signal to other regimes, from which to draw their own conclusions. For example, Chinese, top policymakers' efforts to understand the causes of Soviet collapse is an attempt to learn from negative example (Guihai, 2010, pp. 511–514). "In short, positive learning comprises efforts to replicate; negative learning, meanwhile, denotes those seeking to avoid the replication of policies and outcomes observed elsewhere" (Lang, 2018, pp. 153–154). Negative learning is not studied here, because the dissertation hypothesises that China is a model to emulated, not a cautionary example to be rejected. This by no means rules out negative learning might also take place, but that is for another research project to investigate.

Learning mechanisms include:

1) Direct exchange of best practices (formal bilateral visits, organisational networks, training programmes, joint exercises) (such as the synchronisation of propaganda between Russia and Belarus after 2020; see Bykouski, 2023, p. 156);

2) Imitation of specific legal or institutional arrangements (e.g., NGO laws, media controls, economic zone structures) (Dupuy et al., 2021; Lang, 2018, p. 149);
3) Reactive adaptation to negative models (pre-emptive crackdown, information control after observing regime failure elsewhere; see Hall, 2023, pp. 51–75);
4) Positive selection of success models (adoption of Chinese models of internet control, as discussed later in the case studies of this dissertation);
5) Elite networks and informal channels (Hall, 2023, pp. 21–29).

In this case of this dissertation, regimes would seek to copy best practices from China's own model for stability. A model for stability refers to policies, which contribute to three mutually reinforcing processes: co-optation, strategic repression, and legitimation. Drawing on Gerschewski (2013a, p. 14), the analysis treats China's model for stability as a portfolio of policies and institutions designed to reinforce co-optation, strategic repression, and legitimation—foundational pillars of authoritarian survival. Regimes under study are theorised to emulate elements of this model in for regime survival.

China has been seen by post-Soviet autocracies as a template for legitimacy and policy innovation, from economic management to mechanisms of social control (Levy, 2009; Liaison Office for Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovych, 2012b; Xinhua News Agency, 2015). Exploring claims of policy transfer or explicit emulation of Chinese practices (internet controls, management of civil society, etc.) draws directly on this theoretical framework. This interlinks with omnibalancing theory, too. Alignment with China is not solely material. The choice is also ideational and institutional. Leaders facing acute threats to survival may seek external alignment and in order to copy policies. This is a duality that the literature on learning/emulation helps to explain. However, a crucial distinction is made between substantive policy learning, where Chinese practices are meaningfully adapted or institutionalised, and performative/symbolic emulation, where regimes merely invoke association with China for domestic legitimation (what will be called 'authoritarian branding' in the case study and comparative dissertations later in this dissertation). Belarus, in

particular, will illustrate this difference. Thus, this mixture of omnibalancing and authoritarian learning theory explains why and how Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine might draw on their relationship with China to buttress regime survival, especially in moments of legitimacy crisis or policy failure.

Theory on authoritarian learning and diffusion provides an explanatory lens and analytic template (discussed in section 2.5 below) for this dissertation. It clarifies both motivations (survival, legitimacy, adaptation) and mechanisms (diffusion, emulation, lesson-drawing, reactive adaptation) by which regimes in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus may leverage their bilateral relations with China to enhance authoritarian persistence.

2.5 Research Design, Methodology, and Methods

Section 2.5 specifies how the dissertation translates its theories into a workable set of methods. It first justifies a two-stage, mixed-method design: computer-assisted SA followed by explaining-outcome process tracing. It argues neither tool alone could resolve the study's twin tasks of mapping receptiveness towards China and tracing causal mechanisms (2.5.1). Subsection 2.5.2 states the dissertation's analyticist methodological position, which reconciles a realist ontology with constructivist attention to meaning, thereby permitting quantitative and qualitative evidence to be combined within a single epistemology. Subsection 2.5.3 operationalises the revised omnibalancing model: seven enabling conditions are rendered as indicators, structured into a truth-table, and embedded in a stepwise process-tracing template. Subsection 2.5.4 explains the sentiment-analysis method and demonstrates it is fit for purpose. It also explains how the resulting time-series statistics will guide episode selection and contribute to triangulation. Finally, sub-section 2.5.5 outlines the most-similar, power-differentiated case design centred on Belarus, Russia and Ukraine, and defends the 2006–2016 study timeframe.

Together, 2.5.1 to 2.5.5 provide a roadmap from theory to evidence. The criteria by which the dissertation's claims are justified and made explicit.

2.5.1 Multi-Method Logic

This section clarifies the logic of the dissertation's two–stage, mixed-methods research design. The objective is two-fold: (1) to chart when and where the three post-Soviet regimes expressed receptivity towards China as a potential source of authoritarian know-how, and (2) to determine whether the same regimes actually leveraged their Chinese connection for either (a) policy emulation or (b) omnibalancing to buttress regime survival in moments of acute domestic peril. Meeting the first objective requires broad, systematic mapping; meeting the second mandates fine-grained, mechanism-centred reconstruction. Therefore, this dissertation has a mixed methods research design (Hesse-Biber, 2022, pp. 619–622). This section argues that no single method can satisfy both evidentiary demands. A deliberately sequenced combination of large-n, computer-assisted SA and small-n, explaining-outcome process tracing (PT) therefore offers the most defensible route to inference.

SA and PT (explained in detail in sections 2.5.3 and 2.5.4 below) are complementary inferential methods. Each delivers a distinct type of leverage. SA provides a replicable, quantitative measure of elite attitudes. By applying a validated RuSentiLex-based lexicon to 71,000 Russian-language speeches, interviews and press releases (2006–2016), SA establishes longitudinal patterns of official sentiment towards China (these figures are accounted for in section 2.5.4 below). The output answers the descriptive "when" and "how well disposed are top policymakers to China?" questions at a quantity and detail impossible with manual content analysis coding.

PT resolves causal "how" and "why" questions. Drawing on the revised omnibalancing model (section 2.3) and an explaining-outcome variant of PT (section

2.5.3), it reconstructs the sequence of perceptions, decisions, and trans-governmental exchanges that link a sharply defined domestic threat to an externally oriented survival strategy.

The two methods serve non-overlapping inferential purposes. Importantly, this means they are neither substitutable nor hierarchically nested; they are sequential and iterative.

The research design creates a four-stage approach to application and interpretation. Stage 1. Exploratory mapping. SA is first run on the country's (Belarus, Russia's, or Ukraine's) full corpus to generate quarterly sentiment series for the regime. Statistical and visual inspection identify dependent variable inflection points (meaning changes in sentiment towards China): quarters in which positive or negative references to China spike (or fail to spike) in sentiment.[5] Spikes are "a point in time at which there is a sharp increase followed by a rapid decrease in measurements of the dependent variable" (Zedeck, 2014, p. 346). These statistical phenomena are distinct and are easy to spot when visualised. These sentiment peaks and troughs are treated as authoritarian learning-plausible windows.

Stage 2. Policy emulation search and crises episode selection. The second stage has two purposes. First, it uses the learning-plausible windows as a timeframe to scour official documents, news reports, and speeches for evidence of policy transfer from China. Second, in anticipation for the omnibalancing explaining outcome PT method, the SA peaks and troughs are combined with an inventory of domestic crises (e.g. gas wars, electoral upheavals, legitimacy shocks). This yields a shortlist of episodes where heightened rhetorical warmth coincides with elevated survival risk—*prima facie* candidates for policy emulation or omnibalancing.

Chapter 2. [5]. In retrospect, the author wishes they implemented a strict statistical test in their method. For example, a statistical threshold definition for sentiment spikes, such as: a spike is defined as at least one standard deviation above (or below) an eighteen-quarter moving mean.

Stage 3. Within-episode process tracing. For each selected episode, PT reconstructs the causal chain. At times, SA scores serve as background context and, where appropriate, as hoop tests for rhetorical convergence. Hoop tests are when evidence is found that in theory might certain, but they are neither very unique or hard to find (Beach & Pedersen, 2019, p. 248; Van Evera, 1997, p. 31). Therefore, they require further checks, such as triangulation with other evidence to be counted as relevant (Flick, 2018, p. 530, 2022, p. 656).

Stage 4. Cross-case synthesis. At this stage, findings are aggregated across the three country cases to adjudicate the dissertation's core propositions on authoritarian learning and omnibalancing.

What would be lost with a single-method design? Applying SA alone without triangulation would leave three gaps. First, it cannot discriminate between genuine lesson-drawing and cheap talk. Second, it cannot identify the domestic trigger that gives rhetorical admiration operative significance. Third, it cannot verify whether borrowed policies were actually enacted or whether alignments extracted usable resources.

Process tracing in isolation would face symmetrical weaknesses. First, it would lack an objective, pre-defined procedure for delimitating critical junctures, creating the potential for selection bias. Second, it would struggle to compare the relative intensity of pro-Chinese dispositions across time and between regimes. Finally, it could not easily detect aborted or merely contemplated episodes of learning. SA provides a bird's-eye-view for data selection and evaluation from emergent speech patterns.

The paired design delivers broad temporal coverage and deep within-case explanation. Consider the fit with the empirical context. Authoritarian foreign-policy decision-making is opaque; archival releases are partial and often manipulated (S. Hall & Ambrosio, 2017). Computed text analysis exploits one of the few large,

publicly available data streams—official speech—that autocrats themselves curate for legitimation. Yet speeches are strategic; PT is indispensable for triangulating them with leaked materials, budgetary data, memoirs, and so on. The combination therefore mitigates source bias through methodological triangulation (Flick, 2022), an approach consistent with the analyticist epistemology adopted in section 2.5.2.

This design is thorough. It provides more levels of analysis and mixed evidentiary standards. SA offers cross-temporal description at the macro level; PT supplies micro-level causal process observations (elite defections, draft-law circulation, credit-line negotiations). By design, the quantitative component satisfies the transparency and replicability criteria prized in positivist scholarship, and the qualitative component meets the thick-description standard expected in interpretivist work on authoritarian politics. The blended strategy thus addresses the “mixed evidentiary standards” critique levelled at the diffusion and learning literature (section 2.2.4).

The research design also provides additional safeguards. Method-specific weaknesses are counter-balanced across the design. Lexicon-based SA may misclassify sarcasm or indirect speech; triangulation and close reading checks these anomalies by reading full transcripts. PT may succumb to confirmation bias; SA pre-registers temporal boundaries.

This dissertation’s multi-method research strategy is both necessary and uniquely fit for the research question. By integrating computational mapping of elite attitudes with qualitative reconstruction of causal mechanisms, it is possible to generate systematic, triangulated evidence responsive to the central theoretical and empirical challenges of studying authoritarian persistence, learning, and international alignment in the post-Soviet space.

The next subsection (2.5.2) formalises the methodological stance that allows these heterogenous tools to be combined within a single epistemic framework.

2.5.2 Methodology

The methodological foundations for this dissertation are a hybrid-interpretivism that integrates a positivist ontology with a subjective epistemology, what Jackson (2011, pp. 141–155) terms “analyticism” (Della Porta & Keating, 2008, pp. 21–25). Within this framework, the analyticist acknowledges the existence of an objective reality of facts but asserts individuals must construct abstract theories to interpret and explain this reality (Jackson, 2011, pp. 143–146). These theories, in turn, shape and influence our understanding of the facts. Theories about the world are inherently intertwined with the world they seek to explain, yet they remain subject to refinement and evolution as new theories emerge (ibid., p. 143). In essence, the analyticist is a constructivist with a firm commitment to the positivist foundations of reality (ibid., pp. 141–142). “This is the home of IR theorists such as the Weberian Morgenthau and the structural-functionalist Waltz” (Neumann, 2011, p. xiv).

This methodology has several practical implications for researchers. Analyticism suggests that theories should not be viewed as direct representations of reality but as tools that help to organise and make sense of empirical data (Jackson, 2011, p. 146). This means that researchers should focus on the practical utility of theories rather than their correspondence to an objective reality. The researcher seeks to craft case-specific narratives rather than seeking to formulate generalisable laws; models are not universally applicable but are instead tailored to the specifics of the case at hand (ibid., pp. 152–153). The proximity of the researcher to the cases and theories under study means the researcher should be transparent about their theoretical and value-laden assumptions (ibid., pp. 144–146). Finally, comparison between cases is valuable only insofar as it helps to highlight the peculiarities of each case (ibid., pp. 152–153). In sum, this methodological position is particularly well-suited to omnibalancing’s constructivist-realist approach to IR, this dissertation’s rational choice heuristic model of autocratic states, its more value-free enabling

conditions discussed above, and the abduction-driven inquiries of explaining-outcome process tracing.

2.5.3 Process Tracing within the Omnibalancing Framework

This section argues omnibalancing is really a kind of process tracing framework. In the process, it explains in detail two methods-based contributions of this dissertation: explaining why omnibalancing essentially prescribes two methods (seemingly not acknowledged by other users of omnibalancing): (1) enabling conditions and (2) process tracing. The section concludes with a table that operationalises enabling conditions and allows their comparison across cases, and a figure transforms this dissertation's transformed version of omnibalancing into a process-tracing framework.

It should already be abundantly clear that enabling conditions are central to this dissertation's theoretical and practical methods. This dissertation has used the term frequently in sections 2.3.1 and 2.3.3, but it does not appear in other omnibalancing studies (David, 1991; Düben, 2023; E. A. Miller, 2006c; Welz, 2022). Indeed, their recognition is a method-based clarification provided by this dissertation. Therefore, the next two paragraphs will clearly define their features and use. Their role is to identify contextual conditions surrounding the crisis event under study and to better explain the causal path towards omnibalancing. Enabling conditions are contextual factors whose presence make a particular outcome more likely. A factor is "anything that contributes to a result or has a causal relationship to a phenomenon, event, or action" (Zedeck, 2014, p. 128). They are not scope conditions, because they do not set "empirical and theoretical limits on the extent to which an inference can be generalised" (Goertz & Mahoney, 2009, p. 307). The way to understand Omnibalancing's enabling conditions, which make a regime more or less likely to omnibalance, is to view their presence or absence respectively as normal or abnormal. This contrast is inspired by Cheng and Novick's (1991, p. 85) examination

of causes versus enabling conditions (that are defined differently in their paper than here). It is normal (meaning more probable) when omnibalancing takes place and many or all the enabling conditions are present. But it is abnormal (meaning less probable) when omnibalancing to takes place and few or none of these conditions are present, even though it is theoretically possible. German sociologist Max Weber referred to these types of enabling conditions as "'coincidental' causes of the effect" (Jackson, 2011, p. 149). These enabling conditions can be causes. Low legitimacy, elite fragmentation, and low administrative and coercive capacities can cause a regime to omnibalance. But enabling conditions should not be confused with scope conditions; qualitatively, enabling conditions are sufficient rather than necessary scope conditions.

How many enabling conditions are necessary for omnibalancing to take place? There is no required number of enabling conditions for omnibalancing. The revised framework stipulates seven enabling conditions, yet it does not propose them as a deterministic threshold at which omnibalancing "must" occur. They are conceived as probabilistic catalysts. The greater the number that coexist in the run-up to a decision point, the higher the likelihood that rulers will seek an external alignment to neutralise domestic peril. By design, therefore, there is neither a minimum nor a maximum count that mechanically triggers the strategy. This places the conditions analytically closer to background factors that heighten opportunity and motivation, rather than to scope conditions that would bar the theory's application when absent.

Are a minimum number required for omnibalancing? No, there is no minimum number. But it is theorised here that at least some enabling conditions will accompany a severe crisis for the regime leadership. However, while a crisis can suggest threats for the regime and high stakes from the regime's removal from office, the crisis's main analytical task is to simply discipline case selection and guards against the "quotidian omnibalancing" risk identified earlier. In practice, crises—temporal episodes combining immediate threat, time pressure, and

uncertainty—tend to concentrate several enabling conditions simultaneously and thus provide the most fruitful windows for process tracing.

Are some more important than others? It depends. While all seven conditions are formally symmetrical, their substantive weight is context-sensitive. The presence of significant internal threats together with high personal stakes for the leadership usually functions as a gateway pair: without them, the willingness to omnibalance in the face of potential high costs seldom arises. Beyond that, salience shifts with circumstance. In a geopolitically exposed small state, for example, their vulnerability to predatory neighbours may outweigh considerations of elite cohesion. By contrast, in a resource-rich petro-state, collapsing administrative capacity can be the decisive issue. The relative importance of each condition is therefore evaluated inductively within each case, rather than assigned ex-ante hierarchical weights. This is why process tracing is such a useful tool to study omnibalancing.

It should be noted that enabling conditions do share qualities with scope conditions. When enabling conditions are present, they have a generalising effect that tends to narrow the range of evidence for the case under study (Goertz & Mahoney, 2009, p. 307). This is extremely useful when studying “causal mechanisms” and “process tracing” (ibid., pp. 312–313). In the context of omnibalancing theory, enabling conditions support causal “equifinality”—a condition with scope condition factors when different causal paths can lead to the same outcome (Goertz & Mahoney, 2009, pp. 314–315). This emphasises the probabilistic, sufficient nature of omnibalancing enabling conditions. In this context, the presence of enabling conditions can have a causal effect on a leadership’s choice to omnibalance. However, they are sufficient, not necessary. Thus, multiple cases may have very different causes but arrive at the same outcome. These conditions also have a cross-case comparison utility. If conditions are present across more than one case, this can create grounds for further study and fresh theory building. Therefore, when studying more than one case, a key use of enabling conditions is to improve

homogeneity among test cases. Much like scope conditions, enabling conditions can increase comparability and generalisability.

Omnibalancing is a good fit for the explaining-outcome process tracing (PT) method. Explaining-outcome PT is a method used to develop a comprehensive, case-specific explanation of a particular historical outcome by pragmatically combining multiple theories and causal mechanisms (Beach, 2020, p. 302; Beach & Pedersen, 2013, pp. 156–159, 2019, pp. 281–287). Unlike the more well-known theory-generating or testing process-tracing (for example, see Winward, 2021), it focuses on crafting a minimally sufficient explanation for the unique aspects of a single case, without aiming for generalisability across other cases (for a recent example of explaining-outcome process tracing, see Hauter, 2023). Omnibalancing theory also relies on a single case, *post hoc* evaluation. The researcher selects a past event (or sequence of events) over a particular time period for a given state and regime, and then constructs a causal narrative explaining why a regime omnibalanced (or not). Omnibalancing, like explaining-outcome PT, “does not seek to create synthetic grand theories but instead is a more pragmatic strategy for capturing the multiplicity of causes and linking them to outcomes” that produce or fail to produce omnibalancing (Beach & Pedersen, 2019, p. 283). Omnibalancing is, itself, a combination of multiple theories and tends to use multiple causal mechanisms to support its claims (David, 1991). The aim of explaining-outcome PT (to paraphrase Beach & Pedersen, 2019, p. 288) is to attempt to craft a comprehensive explanation of the “big and important things” in the case of omnibalancing itself. Cross-case comparison will used by this dissertation to highlight unique differences and similarities between cases.

Explaining-outcome PT is also ideal for use with this study’s revised version of omnibalancing, because explaining-outcome PT is uniquely suited for studying crises (Beach, 2021, para. 3). According to Beach (2021), crises are typically characterised by their complexity, high stakes, urgency, and uncertainty, and decision makers

navigate these crises through non-linear processes that require careful tracing of the sequential actions and reactions that shape outcomes. This mirrors the objectives of the revised omnibalancing theory, which argues that during crises, authoritarian leaders must contend with a combination of internal and external pressures. The rich observational and mechanistic-causal detail required by this method also complements omnibalancing's seven enabling conditions (discussed above) as they play out under the acute pressures of a crisis.

Explaining-outcome PT allows researchers to unpack and trace the chain of events, mechanisms, and decisions that underlie a regime's attempt to navigate a crisis. The revised omnibalancing theory presented above emphasises the need to analyse these events in detail, as the leadership must weigh various factors across internal and external levels to stay in power. The causal mechanism approach enables a macro-overview of the case while also engaging with key micro-level evidence at each critical juncture of the crisis. The aim is to prevent what Hedström and Ylikoski (2010, pp. 58 and 64) label as "lazy mechanism-based storytelling". Although, this study uses a minimalist application of PT (Beach, 2021, para. 17). In minimalist variant, the causal mechanisms are explained but they are not examined in at a theoretical level and the key evidence is not rigorously evaluated (ibid., para. 18). Indeed, where possible, evidence is applied for triangulation (Flick, 2022, p. 656), where multiple pieces and types of evidence generate "a surplus of knowledge. For example, triangulation should produce knowledge on different levels, which means they go beyond the knowledge made possible by one approach". This provides a rigorous methodological approach to examine how leaders respond to crises at multiple levels (internal and external) and how their decisions about foreign alignments are aimed at dealing with immediate domestic threats. But explaining-outcome PT seeks the macro-narrative and less the fine-grained verification of evidence. This works for crises, which can be chaotic. Thus, explaining-outcome PT, therefore, fits the omnibalancing framework well.

Furthermore, the explaining-outcome PT method helps mitigate the “Sword of Damocles” problem of omni-present threats. Recall, this is risk of quotidian omnibalancing—the temptation to see instances of balancing behaviour everywhere (see section 2.3.4 above). Because explaining-outcome PT is case-driven, it restricts the scope of analysis to specific, temporally bound events where the conditions for omnibalancing are explicitly triggered. The emphasis is on clearly identifying the “trigger conditions”—such as domestic turmoil, elite defections, or external meddling—that initiate the crisis, as well as tracing the leadership’s subsequent steps in response. This method injects caution into the analysis. The researcher is less likely to label non-crisis and non-case related evidence as evidence of omnibalancing.

The following table 2.1 and figure 2.4 demonstrate how this dissertation will operationalise the seven enabling conditions, wireframe the PT process, and finally subject the findings to comparative analysis. These tools are explained here, so their use in the case study section is understood. The revised enabling conditions are shown in Table 2.1 (below), titled “Revised Omnibalancing Enabling Conditions.” The case under investigation of omnibalancing is denoted as a lower-case “c” (as opposed to an upper-case letter), indicating that omnibalancing typically involves a small number of cases, often one to three. Each of the seven enabling conditions is treated as (un)observed background factor vectors, labelled Z_1, Z_2, Z_3, and so on. The term “vector” is borrowed from Gerring (2017, p. 63) and denotes that enabling conditions may be a complex entity—a combination of different factors (e.g., collections of causes and effects)—rather than a single factor. The outcome, omnibalancing, is treated as the dependent variable, Y.

The majority of the cells in the truth table contain binary indicators: “Yes” or “No” (1 or 0) for the presence or absence of a condition. The state capacity enabling condition, which includes both administrative and coercive capacities, is treated as a combined variable with two possible states: “High” or “Low” for each capacity. To

reflect the importance of each component, this condition is valued at 2: 1 for administrative capacity and 1 for coercive capacity. Thus, “High” is numerically expressed as 0, and “Low” is expressed as 1. While assigning ‘High’ as 0 and ‘Low’ as 1 may seem counter-intuitive, it reflects that low state capacity is conducive to omnibalancing; therefore, it is the presence of low capacity that is being monitored. In cases where the presence or absence of a enabling condition is ambiguous, an additional third indicator, “Ambiguous,” is included in the cells of the truth table. This ambiguity is numerically represented as 0.1, allowing for a straightforward interpretation of the results, where the decimal portion of the score indicates the number of ambiguous conditions.

Omnibalancing as PT is depicted in Figure 2.4 (below), titled “Omnibalancing as Process Tracing Causal Mechanism Framework.” The seven revised enabling conditions appear in a single column under the heading “Enabling conditions” on the far left of the figure. Immediately to the right is a truth table matrix of the individual state under study, presented in a vertical column format resembling the structure described in Table 2.1 (also below).

The next column introduces the process tracing framework with the headings “Mechanism,” “Action,” and “Agent.” Following this is the “Trigger” column, which identifies the event or key events that initiate the process leading to omnibalancing. The top cell identifies the “Trigger” mechanism, the middle cell describes the actions involved in the triggering event, and the bottom cell names the actors responsible for those actions. A right-pointing arrow (in between the action and agent cells) visually represents the linkage and progression of the causal chain from the trigger to the outcome.

Table 2.1 Revised Omnibalancing Enabling Conditions

c Cases	Z_1 Presence of Internal Threat(s)	Z_2 High Stakes for Leaders	Z_3 Institutional Checks Degraded or Absent	Z_4 Low State Capacity (Administrative & Coercive)		Z_5 Low Legitimacy	Z_6 Fragmented Elite	Z_7 Vulnerable Geopolitical Position	Y Omnibalancing
State	Yes or No or Ambiguous	Yes or No or Ambiguous	Yes or No or Ambiguous	Low or High or Ambiguous	Low or High or Ambiguous	Yes or No or Ambiguous	Yes or No or Ambiguous	Yes or No or Ambiguous	Description
Value	1 or 0 or 0.1	1 or 0 or 0.1	1 or 0 or 0.1	1 or 0 or 0.1	1 or 0 or 0.1	1 or 0 or 0.1	1 or 0 or 0.1	1 or 0 or 0.1	Total Value

Table source: This enabling condition truth table was created by the author. The value of 1 denotes the presence of the enabling condition. 0 indicates the enabling condition is absent. The value of 0.1 indicates ambiguity.

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Figure 2.4 Omnibalancing as Process Tracing Causal Mechanism Framework

Enabling condition	Case (State)	Mechanism:	Trigger	Part 1	Part 2	Etc.	Outcome
Presence of Internal Threat(s)	Yes or No or Ambiguous	Action:	Description of the action that the agent performs to start the causal mechanism	Description of the action that the agent performs to drive the causal mechanism on	Description of the action that the agent performs to drive the causal mechanism on	Etc.	A description of how the internal threat(s) was (or were) omnibalanced
High Stakes for Leaders	Yes or No or Ambiguous						
Institutional Checks Degraded or Absent	Yes or No or Ambiguous						
Low State Capacity (Administrative & Coercive)	Low or High or Ambiguous						
	Low or High or Ambiguous						
Low Legitimacy	Yes or No or Ambiguous						
Fragmented Elite	Yes or No or Ambiguous		→	→	→	→	
Vulnerable Geopolitical Position	Yes or No or Ambiguous	Agent:	Name of agent(s) performing the action	Name of agent(s) performing the action	Name of agent(s) performing the action	Etc.	

Source: This causal mechanism framework is adapted from Winward (2021, p. 560).

The column to the right of the Trigger represents the next “Part” of the process tracing causal chain, which drives the process forward. Each part corresponds to another causal mechanism within the process. In Figure 2.4 (above), these parts are labelled “Part 1,” “Part 2,” and then “Etc.” appears, indicating that the causal chain can vary in length depending on the case. Finally, the last column is titled “Outcome”. The cell beneath the Outcome contains a description of how the internal threat(s) was (or were) omnibalanced.

This section has translated the revised theory of omnibalancing into an operational template that can be applied empirically and compared across cases. By specifying seven enabling conditions, recasting them as vector-type background factors, and embedding them in an explaining-outcome process-tracing schema, the dissertation converts a previously amorphous concept into a falsifiable causal mechanism. The accompanying truth table disciplines case selection and cross-case comparison, while the step-wise causal-chain diagram ensures that evidence is assessed sequentially and that inferences are grounded in explicit trigger-to-outcome links rather than post-hoc rationalisation. Together, these methodological refinements guard against the Sword of Damocles tendency to see omnibalancing everywhere and furnish a transparent protocol for the three country narratives that follow in the case studies.

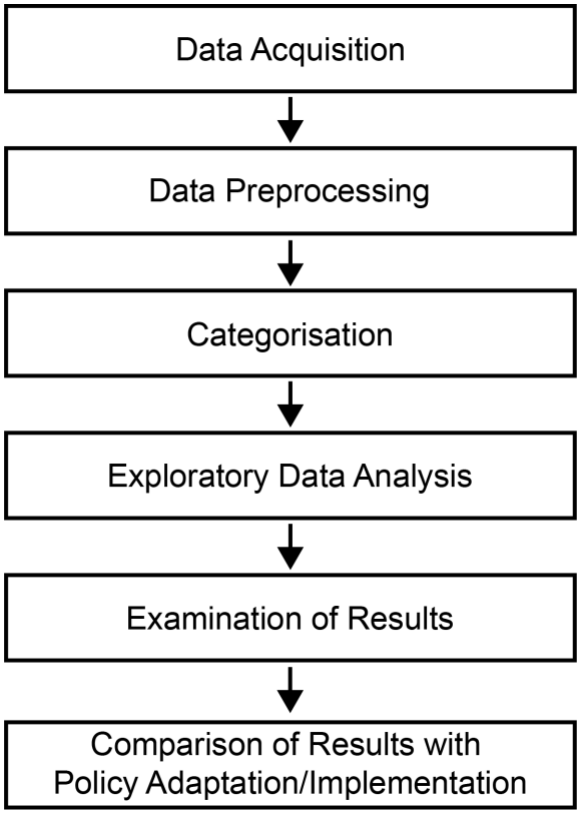
2.5.4 Sentiment Analysis as a Tool for Mapping and Guiding Enquiry

Consistent with the sequential, mixed-methods logic articulated in section 2.5.1 (above), this section explains, justifies, and demonstrates the sentiment analysis (SA) method. SA is deployed here as an exploratory mapping instrument that identifies temporal inflection points in elite discourse and thereby informs subsequent process-tracing efforts. SA can reveal when, and with what intensity, post-Soviet leaders signal warmth or cooling towards Beijing. It is limited in that it cannot by itself establish that such rhetoric caused policy emulation or delivered regime-preserving

resources. Therefore, SA is paired with traditional authoritarian triangulation research methods to produce evidence. SA's value is, therefore, supportive and indicative: it sharpens case selection, bounds the search for mechanismic evidence, and supplies a replicable baseline against which qualitative findings are triangulated.

Section 2.5.4 proceeds in four steps out of the six for the full SA method. Figure 2.5, "Steps for Using Sentiment Analysis to Trace Authoritarian Learning", presents a diagram of the full SA method. The steps covered in this section are: (1) data acquisition, detailing the corpus and scraping protocols; (2) data preprocessing, including sentence segmentation and lemmatisation; (3) categorisation, outlining the adapted RuSentiLex lexicon and scoring algorithm; (4) exploratory data analysis, which interrogates the validity and robustness of the SA method. Steps 5 and 6 are part of the case study sections. They are touched on here so the reader is aware of the methods pipeline. Step (5) examination of results, isolating sentiment spikes for each country; and (6) comparison of those spikes with documented instances of policy adaptation, the point at which SA outputs are integrated with the qualitative evidence marshalled in later chapters.

Figure 2.5 Steps for Using Sentiment Analysis to Trace Authoritarian Learning



Source: author's composition.

2.5.4.1 Step 1. Data Acquisition

For the current study, a total of 71,515 Russian language texts published between 01 January 2006 to 31 December 2016 were collected.[6] A text consists of the sentences spoken by an incumbent president, prime minister, or head minister of foreign affairs from a single speech, interview, or official press release; the text corresponds to one speech, interview, or collection of direct quotations from a press release given by a top policymaker on a particular date. The choice of top policymakers is to reflect the strong influence leaders and the officials close to them (their inner circle) have on policy in these regimes (Ambrosio, 2017, pp. 203–204; Pavlovsky, 2016, pp. 10–16; Rudyj, 2020, p. 198). For Russia, 14,165 texts were

[6]. To download the collected texts by country, visit https://pjbraga.github.io/rub_corpus_and_code/corpus/.

collected for Vladimir Putin, Dmitry Medvedev, and Sergei Lavrov. For Ukraine, 51,827 texts were collected for 12 policymakers (four presidents and eight prime ministers).[7] For Belarus, 5523 texts were compiled. It was only possible to collect texts made by Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenka. Online resources for other top Belarusian policymakers were scattered, limited, or non-existent.

The sources for these texts are online, official government archives. Details for Belarusian, Russian, and Ukrainian sources are provided in the case study chapters (3, 4, and 5). The choice was made to use Russian language texts for four reasons. First, often many press-releases and sometimes speeches did not have English language translations. This was the case for all three case study countries. Second, Russian is the one language that was all three case study countries produced official documents in. Third, mass translating the Russian texts into English seemed unnecessary and might result in data loss. Finally, the same SA resources were not available in Ukrainian. Not to mention, the author understands Russian, but not Ukrainian. For these reasons, the language of SA is Russian.

2.5.4.2 Step 2. Data Preprocessing

Once the right data is collected, the second step is preparing it for analysis, otherwise referred to as “preprocessing.” This step tends to be the most labour intensive aspect of SA. Preprocessing involves a series of data handling procedures to prepare the speeches for SA. A description of this process can be viewed on a reproducibility archive website created by the dissertation’s author (Braga, 2021c).

[7]. Ukrainian Presidents include Viktor Yushchenko (2005–2010), Viktor Yanukovych (2010–2014), Oleksandr Turchynov (interim President in 2014), and Petro Poroshenko (2014–2019). Prime Ministers include Yuri Yekhanurov (2005–2006), Viktor Yanukovych (2006–2007), Yulia Tymoshenko (2007–2010), Oleksandr Yurchynov (2010), Mykola Azarov (2010–2014), Sergei Arbuzov (Interim Prime Minister in 2014), Arseniy Yatsenyuk (2014–2016), and Volodymyr Groysman (2016 to 2019).

2.5.4.3 Step 3. Categorisation

The following section describes the SA categorisation process. Categorisation, also called classification, is the automated process of identifying opinions in text and deciding their sentiment. This is essentially the “analysis” part of SA. The categorisation is a function of two parts: the RuSentiLex Lexicon (a dictionary of sentiment bearing words and their corresponding sentiments) and an algorithm (a series of mathematical rules to decide the sentiment for each sentence processed). This process is described in detail on the author’s archive website (Braga, 2021c).

Table 2.2, Categorisation Examples, below gives examples of some of the analysed sentences. The “Source” column cites the origin of the example. Examples are either from a test dataset (where the sentiment is known beforehand), or from the research corpus built in the data acquisition step (described above). The “Sentence (translation)” column contains the example sentence, which has been translated by the author. The “Expected Sentiment” column indicates whether or not the sentiment of the sentence was known beforehand. The “Sentiment Tags” column shows the number of sentiment-bearing words or n-grams in the sentences found by the lexicon. “Pos” corresponds to positive sentiment words found, “Neg” to negative words found, and so on. The last column in table 2.2 shows the sentiment decided by the two-stage algorithm. The first sentence is an example of a noisy sentence. Noise refers to text elements that can confuse or slow analysis, such as spelling errors, slang, informal speech, emojis (ideograms and emoticons), sarcastic statements, and so forth. Notice the noise in the first example sentence, such as the brackets symbolising smiley faces and an asterisk equating to a kiss. The first sentence is correctly coded positive. The second example sentence is also ruled positive. Although its sentiment is not known beforehand, it is quite clearly positive about China. Categorisation correctly decides the sentiment of the third, noisy sentence. But the fourth sentence is classified as negative when it appears (to the

author's judgement) to be either positive or ambiguous. Table 2.2 gives some idea of the abilities of the RuSentiLex lexicon and the algorithm developed for this study.

Table 2.2 Categorisation Examples

Source	Sentence (translation)	Expected Sentiment	Sentiment Tags	Sentiment
Positive Sentiment Test Dataset (Rubtsova, 2015)	Yesssss)) You… You… You and only you…)*	Positive	Pos = 1, Neg = 0, Neu = 0, Amb = 0	Positive
Scraped Data (Vladimir Putin)	Today, we probably have the highest level inter-governmental relations in history (if a very short period in Soviet times is not taken into account); today, relations with China are well-established and very friendly.	Unknown (this is not a test sentence); it appears to be positive	Pos = 3, Neg = 0, Neu = 1, Amb = 0	Positive
Negative Sentiment Test Dataset (Rubtsova, 2015)	Fubar, turns out only one week of school has passed! I'm worn-out like I've been studying for a month. :(	Negative	Pos = 0, Neg = 1, Neu = 0, Amb = 0	Negative
Scraped Data (Aleksander Lukashenka)	The Chinese are acting aggressively and proactively in the world today.	Unknown (this is not a test sentence); it appears to be ambiguous	Pos = 0, Neg = 1, Neu = 0, Amb = 0	Negative

Source: Rubtsova (2015) and the author.

Categorisation accuracy tests performed on the categorisation results demonstrate RuSentiLex dictionary and the algorithm are capable of analysing policymakers' words. The F1 scores (an accuracy measure calculated from the harmonic mean between precision and recall)[8] attained by this study's sentence level analysis—tested against Rubtsova's positive and negative sentiment test sets—are

[8]. Precision measures the proportion of correct versus false-positive sentiment predictions. Recall measures the proportion of correct versus false-negative predictions (Sarkar, 2019, pp. 200–204).

78.69 and 83.99 percent respectively (see table 2.3, Accuracy Test Results, below) (Sarkar, 2019, pp. 200–204). This is well above the 70 percent standard (Schmidt & Burghardt, 2018, p. 146). More discussion of accuracy can be found on the reproducibility archive website (Braga, 2021c).

Table 2.3 Accuracy Test Results

Test Dataset	Precision (%)	Recall (%)	F1 Score (%)
Positive Sentiment	92.05644	68.727094	78.699248
Negative Sentiment	85.072902	82.9452956	83.9956279

Source: to access the positive and negative sentiment test datasets used here, visit http://study.mokoron.com/. The test datasets were created by Rubtsova (2015).

Finally, before moving on to the exploratory data analysis, a theoretical and practical issue must be addressed. With all this discussion of measuring policymakers' sentiments, do policymakers actually mean what they say? That is, does a policymaker's positive sentiment language about another country really mean they have a positive view of that country? Or is it just lip service?

The issue is policymakers may not always tell the truth. They can over-praise bilateral relationships, especially when they may have much to gain. The Wikileaks cables contain multiple examples of diplomats saying one thing publicly, while saying another thing in private (Burns, 2006; Hunt, 2019, p. 75). Policymakers may also have opinions, which appear counter intuitive. For example, former US President Donald Trump was vocally positive about Russia and critical of US allies (Siddiqui, 2019). Despite this, the contemporary relationship between United States and Russia is considered to be at its lowest level in decades (Burns, 2019). Equally, policymakers can over-play negative issues. Duterte is negative about the US, for example, but still works closely with the US concerning military matters (Grossman,

2020). Thus, using what politicians say as an empirical measure requires some questioning.

So, is it possible to go by what policymakers say? The short answer is: eventually. The timeframe, quality, and quantity of data gathered for this study does much to solve this question. The sheer quantity of data adjusts the results for the particular bilateral relationship. The collected data here spans more than a decade and the quotations about China number in their thousands. Over time, a policymaker and successive policymakers, who speak repetitively about a country over many years, create their own pattern of positivity or negativity. For example, a policymaker that is prone to high praise would have this reflected in the results. Another politician, who is terse, would also eventually form a less positive pattern in response to the bilateral relationship. The key, then, is not the volume of praise for another country, but the frequency of that praise over time in relation to external events; the researcher must consider how sentiment changes relative to itself over time and to external events. In addition, from a qualitative standpoint, (where possible) more than one policymaker has been recorded for each country. The intention is to even-out the sentiment scores and avoid individual biases of opinion and expression. The task is to consider changes in sentiment over time in relation to multiple events.

In certain cases, politicians can occasionally be genuine. Bilateral relations are occasionally expressed in genuine terms. The Russia-China relationship is one example. From Snow (2023, p. 497):

> If the rapport between [Vladimir Putin and Hu Jintao] lacked the effusiveness of the Yeltsin–Jiang interaction it was enhanced by the similarity of their cool, reserved temperaments and the sheer frequency of the meetings between them as they conferred face to face five or six times a year. One Western journalist commented that the pair ‘couldn’t seem to stay out of each other’s capitals’, and they earned themselves in some circles the collective label of ‘Pu and Hu’. Their prime ministers met with a similar regularity, with Hu’s premier Wen Jiabao remarking in 2007 of a session with Putin’s premier Dmitri Medvedev, ‘We didn’t even use prepared speeches’.

This suggests that, at least with the analysis of Russian policymakers' speeches about China, there might be a level of genuine sentiment expressed in what they say.

It is also important to note that policymakers in authoritarian regimes may also copy from sources which they do not have a positive sentiment towards; the point of copying is to take what works. But if another regime is continually praised, rather than disparaged, there is arguably a greater likelihood of policymakers being open to the idea of emulating a range practices from it. In addition, if relations between two regimes are good, there tends to be greater interaction and interchange between them. Interaction and interchange provide opportunities for exposure of policymakers to practices and policies. Therefore, a positive view of another regime is suggestive of conditions being present for copying to take place.

Together, the combination of SA within the authoritarian learning framework is not so much a fool-proof solution to the difficulties of proving policy emulation, but rather a further strengthening of the existing method. The empirical aspect of SA should not go unmentioned either. A quantitative measure of what people say, when, and the sentiment of what is said is difficult for current approaches to match in a comparable volume. The intention is to strengthen the inference between cause and effect. So far, the situation remains that (Hall & Ambrosio, 2017, p. 150):

> the best studies of authoritarian policy transfer/learning are going to be those which are the most precise in outlining the clear similarities in policies, are able to demonstrate a clear relationship between the originator and the recipient, and illustrate that the adoption of later policies was driven by a need to react to similar circumstances.

The addition of SA will hopefully better demonstrate the relationship between "the originator and the recipient."

Researching authoritarian learning requires multiple methods, such as comparisons of policy documents, and close readings policy debates and official

state media. SA will not replace these qualitative methods, but triangulate and strengthen support for them.

2.5.4.4 Step 4. Exploratory Data Analysis

To test the statistical relevance of the SA results, this study uses exploratory data analysis (EDA). EDA uses visual models and the consideration of external factors (for example time-series patterns such as seasonality or major political events like wars, economic crises, etc…) that might influence or otherwise invalidate results. The aim is to test other, more likely explanations for significant time-series results beyond what was originally hypothesised. For example, while this study hypothesizes that positive sentiment towards China may be linked with Chinese policy adaptation, maybe positivity is linked with something else, such as trade balances or an annual bilateral summits. EDA is “to identify trend, seasonality and correlation” (Rajan, 2018). So, where SA indicates when someone is having opinions about a particular subject, EDA helps the researcher consider phenomena, which might have impacted these opinions.

In addition, EDA can test assumptions about the data. For this study, it is assumed policymakers speak differently about one regime to another. Policymakers use more positive sentiment-bearing language with countries they have closer, more developed ties with. They are also more negative about countries with more fraught bilateral relations. This should be reflected in the SA results. By comparing Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian policymakers’ sentiment towards regimes other than China, it is possible to test this assumption.

EDA reveals important findings. The assumption about policymakers showing different sentiment with different bilateral relationships is correct; the SA results are sensitive enough to show differences between countries. It is also shown that certain phenomena have a predictable influence on policymaker sentiment. The stimuli that often produces spikes in positive sentiment include: (1) high-level, official state visits

(specifically presidential visits); and (2) credit (including foreign assistance, investment, and loans). It also appears certain political-economic events, such as Russia's annexation of Ukraine, the 2008 financial crisis, and regional disagreements can influence both positive and negative sentiment, depending on the bilateral relationship. There are also bilateral interactions that do not produce an impact. Examples of influences (or the lack thereof) are noted in all SA result visualisations (figures 2.6–2.8 and figures in the case study chapters below). The following section summarises the EDA process and discuss these findings.

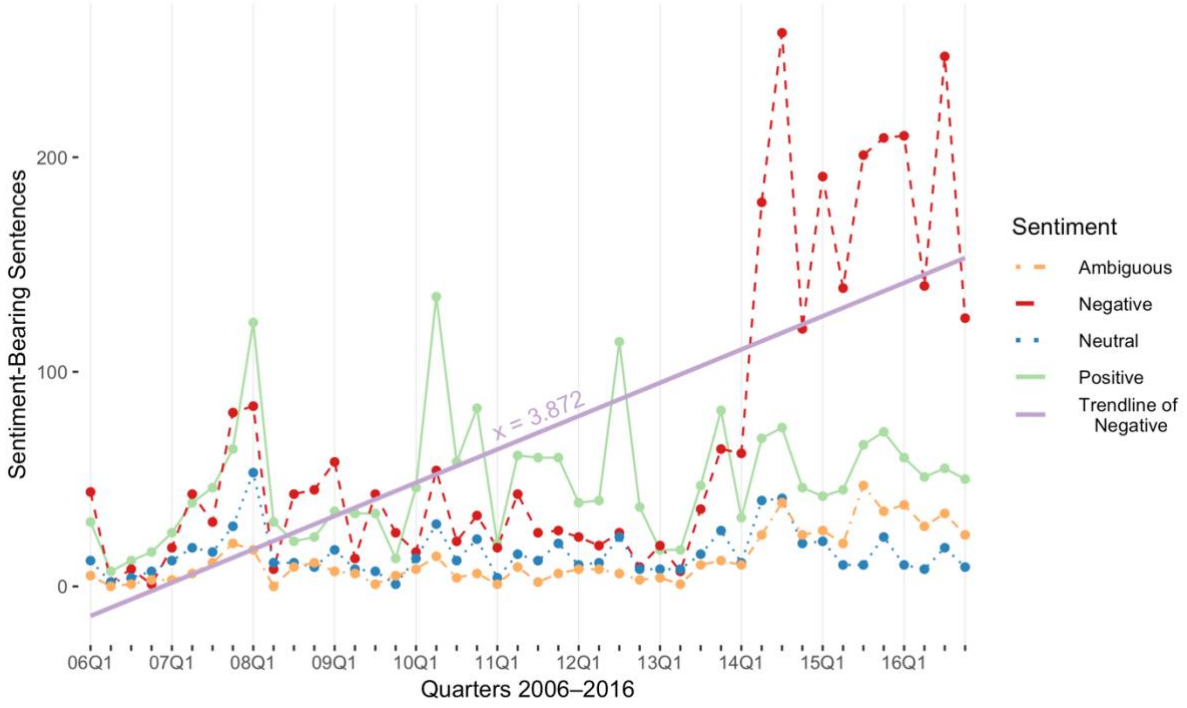
To test the sensitivity of RuSentiLex, top policymaker sentiments towards multiple countries were compared.[9] The countries selected to test sensitivity were assumed to fit one of three descriptions of bilateral relations: (1) poor or declining, (b) neutral or static, or (c) good or improving. In total, 22 different bilateral relationships with Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus were compared.

The comparisons show policymaker sentiment exhibited a pronounced change from country to country. In fact, SA appears to be an excellent way to objectively confirm general claims about the status of bilateral relations between two countries. To prevent this dissertation from being intolerably long, only country comparisons with Ukraine are shown to demonstrate SA result sensitivity. Ukraine is a particularly example good to show, because Ukraine's dataset has the most potential issues and, at the same time, its external relations have been turbulent, and this is reflected in its bilateral relationships. The issues encountered by Ukraine's dataset are inaccuracy in categorisation from RuSentiLex lexicon, and patchiness with data collection. But the issues are not detrimental.

[9]. The bilateral relationship plots tested for Russia include Finland, Mongolia, India, and the United States, and China. For Ukraine they include Estonia, Latvia, Finland, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Russia, Turkey, and China. For Belarus they include Armenia, India, Poland, Uzbekistan, Venezuela, and China. And out of curiosity, Russia's, Ukraine's, and Belarus's bilateral relationship with the European Union—treating the bloc as a single unit—was also tested.

Three figures (below) demonstrate the sensitivity of this study's SA results. Figure 2.6 "Sentiment Towards Russia" is an example of declining relations. Successive Ukrainian presidential administration exhibit strained (under President Yushchenko), improving (under the pro-Kremlin President Yanukovych), and then poor and declining (after the Russian annexation and under President Poroshenko) relations. Figure 2.7 "Sentiment Towards Kazakhstan" is an example of cordial and static relations. Ukrainian policymaker sentiment towards Kazakhstan is positive and remains largely unchanged. Lastly, figure 2.8 "Sentiment Towards Turkey" displays good and improving relations. This relationship is a good example, because it shows how the souring of Ukraine's and Turkey's relations with Russia impacts Ukrainian policymaker sentiment.

Figure 2.6 Sentiment Towards Russia: An Example of Turbulent and Worsening Relations. Language Used by Top Ukrainian Policymakers, 2006–2016.



Source: Official press releases, and speech and interview transcripts from various iterations of the Ukrainian "Government Portal" (Government Portal, 2017; Internet Archive, 2020). For a downloadable archive of all sources, visit https://pjbraga.github.io/rub_corpus_and_code/corpus/.

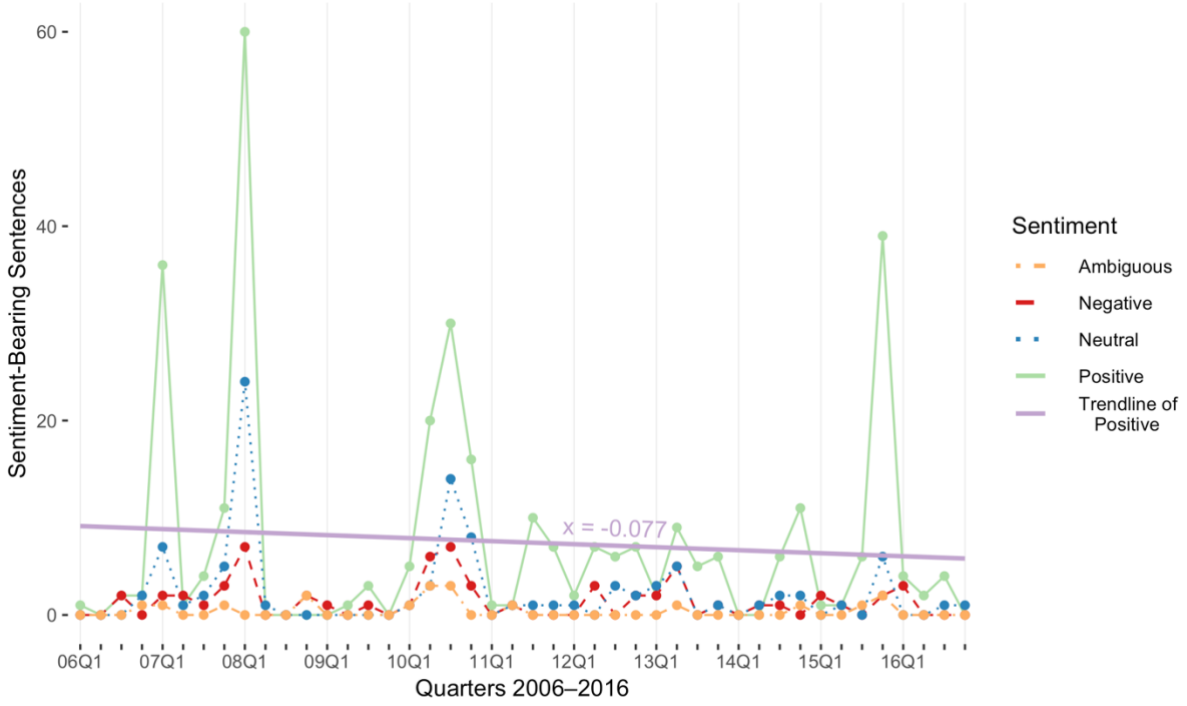
The following features are common to all figures. The x-axis, labelled "Quarters 2006–2016," presents the gathered data (from 2006 to 2016) in quarters. A four character tag indicates the year and first quarter. The characters "06Q1," for example, denotes the first quarter (January, February, March) of 2006. The y-axis, labelled "Sentiment-Bearing Sentences," tallies the number of sentences categorised by the lexicon-based SA program. Four line colours and patterns track the differing language-bearing sentiments: a green, solid line for positive sentiment; a red, dashed line for negative sentiment; a blue, dotted line for neutral (non-sentiment bearing) language; and an orange, dot-dash line for ambiguous sentiment. A solid, purple trendline rises or descends across the graph. The trendline shows the average change (trend) for the single, most prevalent sentiment—either positive or

negative. Atop the trendline is a marker, “x,” indicating the trendline slope to three decimal places. After comparing 22 different bilateral relationships against the target countries, it appears any trendline slope value $x \geq 0.1$ or $x \leq -0.1$ indicates a change in bilateral ties—either improving or deteriorating relations. Any other values for x tended to coincide with static, unchanging relations—poor relations remain negative, and good remain positive, and the proportion of positive to negative sentiment stay relatively unchanged. The list titled “Sentiment” to the right of the line-plot provides a legend of the sentiments and trendline. On certain plots, there are boxes with white coloured text inside.

Figure 2.6 (above) depicts Ukrainian top policymakers’ sentiment bearing language towards Russia. It also reads like an echocardiogram of bilateral relations over the 2006–2016 period. Relations are described as “turbulent,” because of the shifting positive and negative line-plots. During the pro-Western Yushchenko administration (2005–2010), negative and positive sentiments exchange places frequently. Negative sentiment spikes in Q1 2006, Q4 2007–Q1 2008 , and Q4 2008–Q1 2009 reflect natural gas disputes with Russia. The negative spike in Q3 2008 is a reaction to the Russo-Georgian War (over the Russian-backed self-proclaimed republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia). But when Viktor Yanukovych becomes president in Q1 2010, his regime’s warmer inclination towards Russia is instantly visible in Figure 2.6. There is a sustained rise in positive sentiment for his time as president (2010–2014). But interventionist Russian foreign policy leads to a “worsening” relationship. Policymakers’ positive sentiment takes a nose-dive in Q1 2014 with the eruption of the Maidan Protests (mass demonstrations in Kyiv’s Maidan square over Ukraine’s future political, economic, and cultural orientation towards the European Union or Russia), Yanukovych’s subsequent fleeing the country for asylum in Russia, and Russia’s annexation of Crimea. The trendline of negative sentiment has a slope $x = 3.872$. This demonstrates the deterioration of relations over time. By the time Poroshenko assumes the presidency in late Q2

2014, the massive spike in negative sentiment reflects his regime's animosity towards Russia. Key events in the Ukraine–Russia bilateral relationship are clearly visible in the SA results.

Figure 2.7 Sentiment Towards Kazakhstan: An Example of Cordial, Static Relations. Language Used by Top Ukrainian Policymakers, 2006–2016.



Source: See source data for figure 2.6 (above).

The second example to test the sensitivity of the SA results is a visualisation of cordial, static relations. Figure 2.7 (above) shows Ukrainian presidential and prime ministerial sentiment-bearing language towards Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan is a minor, but important partner for Ukraine. Ukraine has long provided Kazakhstan "an important connection with European markets and institutions" (Weitz, 2014). To maintain this connection, Kazakh officials have worked to keep relations stable "regardless of the changes in government in Kyiv" (Putz, 2015; Weitz, 2014). Their hard work is clearly reflected in Figure 2.7. For the 11-year period, the sentiment-bearing language of top Ukrainian policymakers towards Kazakhstan has remained

largely unchanged. As the Figure 2.7 title states, the overwhelmingly positive sentiment reflects “cordial” relations. The x = -0.077 trendline shows a very slight decline in average positive sentiment—so slight it can be considered to have remained “static.”

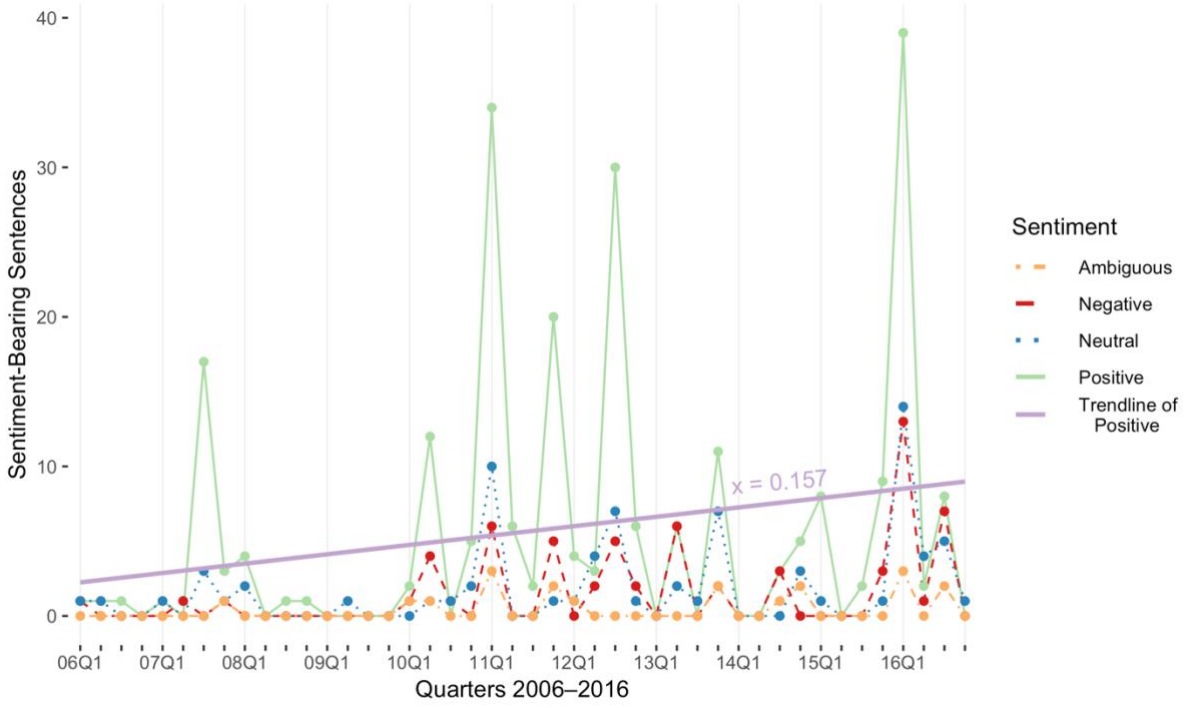
Key events in the Ukraine-Kazakhstan bilateral relationship are reflected in Figure 2.7. These events emphasize consistency and stability. In Q1 2007 and Q1 2008, spikes in positive sentiment reflect the signing of the second Ukraine-Kazakhstan bilateral “action-plan” to improve bilateral relations (Liaison Office for the Ukrainian President, 2007), and opening ceremonies for alternating years of national culture in either country (Liaison Office for the Ukrainian President, 2008a). In Q1 2008, pro-Western Yushchenko was happy to announce that relations were “stable and promising” (Liaison Office for the Ukrainian President, 2008b). The spike in Q2–Q3 2010 is where the Moscow-leaning Yanukovych signed another, largely analogous, bilateral action plan with Kazakhstan (so similar it was simply referred to as “road-map 3”) (Liaison Office for Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovych, 2010a, 2010b). Low-level jumps in positivity through 2013 are innocuous events where Yanukovych congratulates Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev (1990–2019), for his birthday for example, and a when fourth “road-map” is signed (Liaison Office for Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovych, 2013b). During the Maidan Protests and annexation of Crimea, Kazakh officials “kept a low profile… [and did not] explicitly criticize the Russian, Ukrainian, or Western governments” (Weitz, 2014). This lack of communication with Ukrainian policymakers is reflected in the almost non-existent sentiment levels in Q1–Q2 2014 (this may account for the slightly negative trendline). The final two spikes in Q4 2014 and 2015 are where Kazakh officials meet with Ukrainian counterparts to actively re-establish ties with Poroshenko. Unsurprisingly, Q4 2015 features the signing of a fifth road-map (Liaison Office for the Ukrainian President, 2015). Embodied in sentiment spikes, the SA results highlight key events

of the bilateral relationship. These events emphasize (quite successful) Kazakh efforts to keep relations “cordial” and “static.”

It should be noted Figure 2.7 also exposes some of the inaccuracy of sentence-level, lexicon-based SA. In Q1 2015, negative sentiment from Ukrainian policymakers briefly rises above positive sentiment. In reality, Ukrainian policymakers were not being negative about Kazakhstan. Indeed, at that time Ukraine was receiving humanitarian aid from Kazakhstan to help civilians in the separatist Luhansk region (Government Portal, 2015a). Instead, the SA algorithm is not sophisticated enough to detect the subject of these sentences. The categorisation program notices “Kazakhstan” is being referred to, and there is negative language in the sentence. What it cannot discern is the negative language is about the unfortunate situation in Ukraine, and not directed towards Kazakhstan. Occasionally, this sort of error happens—to even the best SA programs (B. Liu, 2015). This inaccuracy is why every major spike of positive sentiment is accompanied by an identical, mini-spike in negative sentiment. This mini spike is likely the same type of misclassification error demonstrated here. Despite this, the SA results do seem to accurately reflect policymakers’ sentiment towards bilateral partners. So, this kind of level of accuracy (shown in Step 2 above to sit around 78.69–83.99 percent) is acceptable.

The final example to demonstrate policymaker sentiment changes from country-to-country is figure 2.8 (below). This visualisation of SA results suggests ties between Ukraine and Turkey are growing closer. The ratio of positive (green, solid line) to negative (red, dashed line) sentiment is substantially greater. Starting Q2 2010, there is a clear increase in sentiment frequency, with a brief drop in 2014. The trendline of positive sentiment has a slope of $x = 0.157$, which is greater than 0.1 and suggests bilateral ties are improving. There are only three quarters (Q2 2013, Q3 2014, and Q3 2016) where negative sentiment is comparable to positive sentiment. However, there is a conspicuous lack of any sentiment from Q1 2006 to Q1 2010.

Figure 2.8 Sentiment Towards Turkey: An Example of Steadily Improving Relations. Language Used by Top Ukrainian Policymakers, 2006–2016.



Source: See source data for figure 2.6 (above).

An examination of bilateral events in conjunction with sentiment spikes confirms—to an extent—what is suggested by the cursory reading of Figure 2.8. An absence of pre-existing obstacles meant post-Soviet, Ukrainian-Turkish relations have been friendly (Maksak et al., 2012, p. 62). Ukraine's ties with Turkey have needed to accommodate the conflicting requirements of normalised relations with Russia, but also Ukraine's continued independence (Sezer, 1996, p. 90). Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea erased the former condition, and then the acute souring of Russo-Turkish relations over the November 2015 downing of a Russian bomber by Turkish jets prompted Ukraine and Turkey to pursue deeper ties. This development is visible in the largest, Q1 2016 spike. In February and March 2016, Ukraine and Turkey exchanged high-level visits (Varfolomeyev, 2016). Both sides voiced their intentions to deepen bilateral ties (Liaison Office for the Ukrainian President, 2016). Other positive spikes from Q2 2010 until 2016 are either meetings

of the “Ukraine-Turkey High Level Strategic Council” (created at the instigation of Turkey in Q1 2011), ongoing discussions for a bilateral free-trade zone, and the harmonising of visa regimes. It hasn’t all been smooth sailing, though. Occasional disagreements arose over transit of Ukrainian liquified natural gas across the Bosporus (Government Portal, 2014). But with the benefit of hindsight, bilateral ties have continued deepen like the Figure 2.8 trendline suggests. Throughout the late 2010s, defence cooperation has intensified (Kasapoglu, 2020). Figure 2.8 reveals much about the Turkish-Ukraine relationship.

The gap in any recorded sentiment from 2006 to 2010 represents a pitfall of this study’s data on Ukraine: some official speeches, interviews, and articles cannot be found. Mentioned above in “Step 1: Data Acquisition,” in 2018, publicly available archives on previous Ukrainian administrations were taken offline. To reassemble as much of the original archive as possible, this study used the Wayback Machine online archive. And even when they were not lustrated, Ukraine’s pre-2010, official online catalogues of policymakers’ texts appears to be inconsistent.

This pitfall does not scupper Ukraine’s SA results. Instead, it requires a more thorough examination of bilateral events (meetings, agreements, and other interactions) when interpreting Ukraine’s data. For example, the SA results for Ukraine-Turkey do not feature policymakers’ discussion on numerous bilateral events in 2006 and 2007, such as the March 2006 “Joint Action Plan,” the April 2006 Black Sea Forum inauguration, or Prime Minister Yanukovych’s visit to Turkey in January 2007 that deepened ties “in every field” (Özdal & Demydova, 2011, p. 32). For whatever reason, Wayback Machine did not archive texts on these events (or maybe they were never properly catalogued to begin with). Nevertheless, the SA result do reflect scholars’ conclusions about the Ukraine-Turkey relationship. They are considered to be steadily improving, with breakthroughs in 2010 and 2015 (Bari Urcosta, 2018; Liaison Office for Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovych, 2011). Both of these events are clearly displayed on Figure 2.8 above. To make sense of the lack

of sentiment, additional rigour is required. Despite the missing data, Ukraine's SA results are still revealing and useful.

Figures 2.6 to 2.8 (above) demonstrate the SA results are sensitive to display different types of bilateral relations. So, when viewing Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian policymakers' sentiment towards China, it is assured the data is sensitive to relevant political-economic events and interactions individual to each country's relationship with China. Each figure above is markedly different; the differences in the figures reflect policymakers' opinions that change according to interest, need, and circumstance. Indeed, it appears that diachronic SA can—as Lasswell originally hoped Quantitative Content Analysis might track the "symbolic expressions of hostility between the USA and the USSR" (K. Williamson et al., 2018, p. 462)—act as an empirical demonstration of bilateral relations.

Next, EDA tested for phenomena that might influence or otherwise invalidate results.[10] Potentially influential phenomena used to test the SA results make up five groups: (1) domestic, regional, and international political-economic events; (2) foreign assistance from China; (3) trade flows, such as imports, exports, balance of payments, and trade volumes; (4) economic growth data, such as real year-on-year GDP growth rates; and (5) official presidential visits. Domestic, regional, and international are defined in terms of the parties involved with an event. For example, protests alleging falsification of election results (like the 19–24 March 2006 presidential election protests in Belarus) is considered a local political event. A regional event would be something like the April 2010 Kharkiv Pact between Russia and Ukraine, which extended Russia's lease on naval facilities in Crimea until 2042. An international event would be the 2009 Euro Crisis or the 2011 capture and murder of Muammar Gaddafi. Foreign assistance (which includes aid) from China is Chinese

10. To view the data used to conduct the EDA, see the variable guide displayed in Table A1 "EDA Variable Tags, Data Types, and Groupings" in this dissertation's Appendix below, then visit https://pjbraga.github.io/rub_corpus_and_code/code/ to download the EDA file.

state-backed loans (credit), which must be repaid. Foreign aid equates to grants not requiring repayment. Official presidential visits are when a president from one country visits another, for example when Chinese President Hu Jintao landed in Simferopol, Crimea, and then drove to Yalta on 18 May 2011. These phenomena were compiled for each Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus for the 2006–2016 period.

EDA revealed positive and negative sentiment were affected by official presidential visits, the announcement and disbursement of credit from China (including aid), and certain political-economic events, such as Russia's annexation of Ukraine or the 2008 Russian financial crisis. Trade flows did not appear to affect sentiment. To be sure, positive sentiment and trade volumes trended upward for Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. But trade volumes with China trended upwards with all the world's countries over the period. GDP growth did not appear to influence policymaker sentiment towards China. Belarus, for example, had wild swings in GDP growth, but its sentiment towards China was consistently positive.

None of the phenomena appeared to invalidate the SA results. If positivity had been tied closely to exports to China, for example, it would be necessary to alter the focus of the study. This would suggest that trade is the biggest driver of policymaker sentiment. It would be harder, therefore, to separate positivity over trade exports from a growing interest in Chinese policies—or at least both would have to be considered at the same time. But EDA of the SA results did not demonstrate any of these sorts of connections. Neither do jumps in positivity after the announcement or (occasionally) after the disbursement of Chinese credit invalidate the results. These are examples of bilateral interaction between China and a target country; these represent important developments in bilateral relations, so changes in sentiment are expected. Indeed, this shows the SA program is functioning correctly. Changes in sentiment after particular local, regional, and international events were also expected. Indeed, there were so many events, that it is sometimes hard to untangle which (local, regional, or international) had the greatest effect. In general, though, it

was found that one event—Russia's annexation of Crimea—had the most pronounced effect on all the target countries' relations with China.

EDA has proven the SA results are fit for purpose. The assumption that policymakers use different sentiment-bearing language depending on the country they're speaking about appears to be safe.

2.5.4.5 Step 5. Examination of Results

It is reasoned policy transfer is most likely when either (a) there is a noticeable and sustained period of raised positivity, or (b) a spike in positivity cannot be explained using EDA—and therefore the spike is an outlier—and the positivity appears to be spontaneous interest among policymakers about China. In practice, this step combines EDA with a fine-gained inspection of data behind the visualisations.

The need to examine the SA results is connected with the chapter's central hypothesis: if policymakers see China in a positive light, they will be more likely to copy policies from China. In practice, this means pairing positive sentiment towards China around the same time policies are implemented, which can be shown to have been developed in or to have originated from China. Policymaker positivity about China is a type of inferential evidence: it creates a link between the originator and receiver of a policy. This is the hypothesis of the chapter.

To support this hypothesis, it follows copying should take place at times of heightened positivity about China. "Times of heightened positivity" are shown in two ways. The first is a noticeable and sustained increase in frequency (rate of occurrence) of positivity. If there is much interaction with China, there tends to be lot of positive, official dialogue about China. During this time of increased interaction (relative to times before or after), it is logical that peer-to-peer, authoritarian learning might take place. The second time of heightened positivity is possible is when there is an outlier: a spike (a visible jump) in sentiment, which cannot be explained by

EDA. EDA has shown sharp changes in sentiment tend to correlate with a presidential visit, the announcement or disbursement of Chinese credit, or a major political-economic event. But if there is a spike in positivity without any of these phenomena present, then, it is reasonable to assume one of the reasons the spike might be happening is due to gaining policymaker interest in China. So, the reason for the outlier must be found, so it can be determined whether the outlier actually represents policymaker interest in China. Therefore, the current step searches for periods of sustained positivity and outlier spikes in positivity. When outliers are found, the reasons behind them are investigated.

For each country-specific time-series the quarterly sentiment counts are first normalised by total sentence volume to mitigate variation in source coverage. Spikes or periods of heightened positivity were identified through visual inspection. These algorithmic flags are then close-read and qualitatively judged by the author. The set of spikes is plotted on the master figures inserted in the empirical chapters, with consistent annotation and iconography, thereby providing a parsimonious visual guide to moments of unusual rhetorical warmth or chill.

2.5.4.6 Step 6. Comparison of Results with Policy Adaptation/Implementaiton

The validated spike log forms the entry-point for qualitative inspection of positive authoritarian learning. For each spike the research assistant compiles a contemporaneous chronology (plus or minus one quarter) of formally adopted laws, regulations and bilateral agreements, drawing on national legislative databases, ministerial communiqués and reputable media archives. Candidate measures are coded by policy domain (e.g. censorship, investment facilitation), locus of initiative and stated rationale. Using a structured, paired comparison the chronology is juxtaposed with pre-existing Chinese practices derived from secondary scholarship and PRC primary sources. Where functional or design congruence is observed, the match is subjected to two qualitative tests: (1) a hoop test asking whether the adopting elite explicitly cited China as a reference; (2) a smoking-gun test seeking

evidence of direct Chinese technical assistance, training, or financing. The findings are evaluated in consideration of contemporary scholarship.

2.5.5 Case Selection and Timeframe

This study employs a three-case, most-similar (in their regime type) but power-differentiated (which is relevant in terms of testing omnibalancing theory—see section 2.3 above) case-design centred on Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine (Meur and Gottcheiner 2009, p. 209–213 and 218). All three are post-Soviet, electoral or hegemonic authoritarian regimes that began to cultivate expanded links with the People's Republic of China in the mid-2000s (see the case study chapters), yet they differ markedly in material weight: Russia is a recognised great power, Ukraine a mid-sized state, and Belarus a small state. This variation permits an examination of whether scale conditions the scope for drawing on China in support of regime security, while the shared Soviet legacy, contiguous geography and linguistic proximity minimise unrelated heterogeneity. Each state also occupies a distinct corridor on the over-land component of the Belt and Road: Belarus as an entry node to the EU, Ukraine on the Black Sea, and Russia as China's direct Eurasian interface (Braga & Hall, 2019; Braga & Sangar, 2020). These commonalities and contrasts make the three well-placed for the process tracing the mechanisms specified in the revised omnibalancing and authoritarian-learning framework.

This dissertation's timeframe is confined to January 2006–December 2016. Three considerations guided this choice. First, 2006 marked a pivotal phase in China's global strategy as it sought to strengthen economic and political relationships abroad. China's "Going Global" (走出去, ***zou chuqu***) policy gained traction in 2006 (Brautigam & Tang, 2011, p. 70; Rudyj, 2021, p. 14). Outward investment accelerated, the initial Confucius Institutes in the three capitals opened, and Chinese credit lines to post-Soviet partners began to rise (please see the case study chapters for supporting evidence). Simultaneously, each case country entered

a period of acute domestic stress. Belarus confronted Russia's normalisation of gas-prices shock (E. Korosteleva, 2011, p. 571; RIA Novosti, 2010), Russia experienced the 2012 Bolotnaya Protests (Pomeranz, 2023), and Ukraine underwent the corruption of the Yanukovych regime and the 2014 Maidan protests (A. Wilson, 2015a). The 2006 intensification or tie with China and then 2010-plus acute crises give the case countries an approximate common point of departure for testing omnibalancing. Second, 2016 provides an artificial but necessary terminus. By that date, Russia's annexation of Crimea, the oil-price collapse, and Western sanctions had transformed the regional setting. For China, the region had more risks and fewer advantages. For Ukraine, the Crimean deep-water port project was no longer viable. From a data collection standpoint, in 2019 Kyiv's new administration had removed large parts of the presidential and ministers' web archives. Extending the series beyond 2016 would therefore generate uneven source coverage—especially for Ukraine. A roughly decade-long span also offers symmetry for comparing pre- and post-crisis phases within each country.

References to episodes outside the 2006–16 interval are retained only when they illuminate causal processes rooted in, or initiated during, the focal decade. For example, mention of the 2020 street protests in Belarus serves to illustrate the long-term limitations of the industrial-park strategy agreed in 2011, without entering the process-tracing chain itself (see the Belarus case study chapter). Likewise, citations of the post-2018 contraction in China's overseas investment are employed solely to contextualise the decision to close the series in 2016 (see also the case study chapters). No empirical claims about authoritarian learning or omnibalancing rest on evidence drawn from outside the declared timeframe.

This bounded and transparent delimitation enables the inquiry to exploit a coherent body of primary material while preserving comparability across cases and time.

2.6 Conclusion: Synthesis for Case Studies

This chapter demonstrates how the dissertation combines a revised, regime-type-neutral formulation of omnibalancing with a complementary framework for authoritarian learning within a mixed-method research design. Seven enabling conditions, derived from the revised omnibalancing theory, specify when rulers are most likely to seek external alignment to counter acute domestic threats. Explaining-outcome process tracing was adopted to uncover the causal sequences linking those conditions to concrete alignment choices. SA supplies a longitudinal map of elite attitudes that guides episode selection and offers an additional, quantifiable source of evidence. The choice of Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine has a clear logic: the three cases share a post-Soviet legacy and comparable sub-types of electoral authoritarianism, yet they differ markedly in scale and in the texture of their relations with China. This permits careful cross-case comparison without sacrificing context. A common observation window (2006–2016) secures comparability by focusing on the first decade of China's 'going-out' policy and the onset of the Belt and Road, while still capturing the region's major crises—the 2008–09 financial shock, Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, and the resulting reconfiguration of regional alignments.

The synthesis of theory and method generates three expectations that structure the case studies that follow. First, where multiple enabling conditions coincide with a domestic crisis, one should observe an externally oriented survival strategy whose costs to the state may exceed its benefits to society; the Belarus and Ukraine chapters trace such attempts. Secondly, where internal threats remain limited or where alternative resources insulate the regime, alignment with China is likely to reflect conventional power-political calculations rather than omnibalancing logic; this emerges from the Russian case. Thirdly, periods of sustained or anomalous positivity in the sentiment series identify the most plausible windows for authoritarian learning; policy diffusion claims in each empirical chapter are therefore tested only within those pre-specified intervals, reducing the risk of confirmation bias.

By treating the sentiment data as a guide rather than as a surrogate for causal process evidence, the study preserves a replicable entry-point for other scholars working on opaque political systems. The enabling-condition truth tables and process-tracing wireframes set out here will reappear in the empirical and evaluation chapters, allowing the reader to evaluate whether the predicted factors and empirical indicators actually emerge in practice.

The stage is, therefore, set for the case studies. Chapter 3 analyses Belarus's attempt to use Chinese finance and the Great Stone Industrial Park to buttress a faltering rent-distribution model; Chapter 4 examines why Russia's deepening collaboration with Beijing, while significant, was not driven by acute regime insecurity; Chapter 5 reconstructs how the Yanukovych administration sought, too late, to mobilise Chinese credit and diplomatic support during the Euromaidan crisis. Taken together, the three case studies will demonstrate both the explanatory reach but also the limits of the revised omnibalancing–authoritarian-learning synthesis. But they will also show how far the international dimension can substitute for eroding domestic rule.

Chapter 3. Belarus

> I adopted China's step-by-step economic reform style in Belarus and believe that the most important prerequisite for economic development and economic reforms is social stability.
>
> — Aleksandr Lukashenka, Belarusian President[11]

3.1 Case Study Introduction

Aleksandr Lukashenka's claim to have "adopted China's step-by-step economic reform style", although inauthentic, foreshadows the argument advanced in this chapter: between 2006 and 2016 Minsk sought engagement with Beijing both to compensate for the progressive erosion of Russian energy rents and to brand its own economic, China-linked modernisation as a guarantor of "social stability". Process-tracing is used to argue the Belarusian leadership did pursue a China-centred omnibalancing strategy, but the attempt yielded only limited, symbolic gains. The strategy was anchored in successive credit lines and the Belarus–China Great Stone Industrial Park. Four of seven enabling conditions for omnibalancing (acute internal threat, high personal stakes, degraded institutional checks, and a vulnerable geopolitical position) were clearly present and contributed to the decision of the regime to omnibalance internal and external threats to regime survival. Allthesame, repeated failures to meet Chinese loan conditionality, together with recurrent Russian coercion, exposed the strategy's weaknesses and left the regime structurally dependent on Moscow. Sentiment analysis of 5,523 presidential speeches corroborates this description of events and foreign relations with China. The data shows a decade-long rise in positive references to China, punctuated by spikes around loan announcements and leadership visits. This period was not

[11]. See Xinhua News Agency (2015).

matched by any substantive transfer of policy instruments beyond the co-creation of a special-economic-zone, the Belarus–China Great Stone Industrial Park.

The chapter proceeds in four steps. Section 3.2 reconstructs the domestic, regional and international context within which an energy-social-contract crisis unfolded for the Lukashenka regime. The contraction of Russian subsidies forces the option of China as a prospective “third wing” of Belarusian foreign policy. Section 3.3 reports the sentiment-analysis results, identifies statistically significant date-ranges for investigation, and uses these date ranges to qualitatively search for authoritarian learning or data on omnibalancing. Section 3.4 employs explaining-outcome process tracing to map a seven-part causal mechanism that links Russian price pressure in 2006 to Xi Jinping’s 2015 endorsement of Belarus as a Belt and Road “pearl”. It is used to argue how and why the Belarusian regime’s omnibalancing strategy stalled. Section 3.5 summarises the findings.

The opening quote by Lukashenka is, thus, doubly instructive. On the surface, it signals positive sentiment for Chinese policies. But in practice, it is a rhetorical device through which the regime ambitiously branded its own ad-hoc rent-seeking in the prestige of an ascendant, world power. The gap between the promise of Chinese-style growth and the reality of conditional credit and unmet milestones frames the empirical enquiry that follows.

3.2 Context

Section 3.2 situates this case study’s empirical analyses by reconstructing the domestic, regional, and international settings within which the Lukashenka regime devised its authoritarian persistence strategy between 2006 and 2016. It argues that the regime’s policy choices in this period should be understood against three inter-locking developments. First, the Lukashenka regime functioned according to a centralised but bargaining-laden system of policy generation in which the Presidential Administration, security chiefs, and “courtier-business” elites formed a

coalition dependent on the regime. Second, a progressive shrinking of Russian energy rents compelled Minsk to recalibrate the social contract from welfare provision to security protection. Third, a volatile external environment made Belarus geopolitically vulnerable. The timeframe is punctuated by trade wars, the 2008–09 financial crisis, and Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea. This geopolitical vulnerability was combined with the growing appeal of cultivating China as a supplementary "third wing" of Belarusian foreign policy. By mapping these pressures, the section provides the baseline against which later sections trace Belarus development a China-focused omnibalancing strategy.

3.2.1 Overview of Policy Generation and Policy Trends in Lukashenka's Belarus

This section on policy generation is essential to understanding Belarus's omnibalancing strategy between 2006 and 2016. It lays the groundwork for how the Lukashenka regime operates, explaining the intricate relationship between the nomenklatura, business elite, and the presidential administration. This context is important because it helps the reader grasp how internal policies are crafted in response to both domestic and international pressures, shaping the survival strategies of an autocratic regime. The section highlights key elements, such as the social contract between Lukashenka and the population, and the shifting role of external rents and security concerns, illustrating how internal and external threats are managed. Without this understanding, it would be difficult to appreciate how foreign relations, particularly alignment with China, are instrumentalised to maintain regime stability. This preparatory knowledge frames the omnibalancing analysis, showing how Belarus navigates external partnerships not only to deter foreign threats but also to reinforce domestic control.

In the timeframe of this study, 2006–2016, policy generation in Belarus under Aleksandr Lukashenka is characterised by a centralised, top-down approach where power is heavily concentrated in the presidential administration. The key actors

involved in policy making include the nomenklatura (influential members of the state bureaucracy), the business elite, and Lukashenka himself, alongside his inner circle. Interaction and negotiations between these groups means power—while dominated by Lukashenka and the Presidential administration—is not monolithic (Balmaceda, 2014b, pp. 107–111). Policy is geared towards maintaining Lukashenka's control and legitimacy. In the time frame, the foundations for control and legitimacy change. As will be shown in the sections below, from 2006–2014, the control and legitimacy rest on the economy, which becomes increasing precarious. From 2014 onward, the regime shifts the foundations of its regime to being a domestic and regional provider of security. The regime uses its position to channel benefits to key (winning coalition) actors and the Belarusian people.

The most important policy decisions in Belarus are made by the presidential administration. The nomenklatura that make up the presidential administration form a parallel centre of power to Belarus' law making institutions, the Parliament and Council of Ministers (Balmaceda, 2014a). "The presidential administration's 'legislators' effectively make the nation's laws. Some departments of the Administration duplicate the work of the ministries. They make any number of key decisions that determine the policy of the state" (Astapenia, 2014a). Within the presidential administration, the most powerful body is the security council. It is composed of former key members of the administration and government (Astapenia, 2014b, 2016). The security council and members of the business elite form Lukashenka's winning coalition. It is important to note that while all significant policy decisions are made at the level of the presidential Administration, "the liability for faults and the results of these decisions lies with the Council of Ministers" (Balmaceda, 2014b, p. 36, footnote 13).

Participation of the country's business elite is essential to state policy. In an interview with Gordon, a Ukrainian news website, Stanislau Shushkevich described the difference between Belarus' oligarchs and those of Russia and Ukraine. "The

reality is that only courtier-business flourishes [in Belarus]. All these seasoned and experienced businessmen, they are president Lukashenka's pocketbook" (Poskannaia, 2015). In effect, the country's richest businessmen are beholden to Lukashenka, who uses them to facilitate the running of the state (Balmaceda, 2014b; Frumkin, 2015). This will be explained in more detail in the wireframing section below.

Until the mid-2000s, this fusion of actors—the nomenklatura, the business elite, and the presidential administration—was chiefly concerned with energy imported from Russia and the rents it created. Energy transit from Russia into Europe provided external rents that accounted for 9–16 percent of Belarus' budget revenues (Balmaceda, 2014b, p. 10, footnote 36). These revenues enabled Lukashenka's regime to provide Belarusians with welfare programmes and state employment reminiscent of Soviet times. The state budget ran a loss, which was made up by external energy rents. This formed the basis of a social contract: Lukashenka could rule unchallenged as long as living standards improved. As will be elaborated on below, this changed when Russia slowly stopped subsidising the Belarusian regime.

3.2.1.1 Domestic Policy Trends:

The trends in Belarusian domestic policy originate from Lukashenka's social contract. The 2006–2014 social contract was the following. In exchange for modest improvements in living standards, economic stability and security, Lukashenka's regime enjoys public support (Trantidis, 2008, pp. 7 and 10). Lukashenka reinforces support for this social contract by connecting it with Belarusian national identity. The first aspect of this identity is associated with Soviet nostalgia. Belarus was a leading Soviet Republic in both Net Material Product (the Soviet version of GDP) growth and living standards (Braga, 2014). The modern Belarusian identity has its origins in Soviet Belarus. The second aspect is tied to a latent panslavism—an anti-West cultural and historical connection with the once Soviet, linguistically close, brother

Slavs, for example in Russia and Ukraine (Braga, 2014). Control of the state media also enables Lukashenka to smother any competing or opposing ideas.

Lukashenka once remarked that “Belarusians are just Russians, but with the mark of quality” (Feduta, 2005, p. 604). This statement summarises Lukashenka’s social contract well. Soviet nostalgia, pan-slavism and perceptions that quality of life is better than in Russia are all contained in Lukashenka’s sentiment. Thus domestic policy is oriented around maintaining this social contract, because it is essential to the regime’s legitimacy. The major domestic threat, therefore, is from dissent of Lukashenka’s social contract and protests against his regime. Dissent of the social contract also includes the threat of contenders to Lukashenka rule—alternative political parties and presidential hopefuls, for example.

The social contract from 2014 to 2016 is based on security (in reaction to the 2008 and 2014 Russian wars against Georgia and Ukraine) and “soft Belarusianisation” (Marin, 2020), which relates to the state promoting sources of cultural and identity, which serve to generate patriotism without the need for ideology.

3.2.1.2 Regional Policy Trends:

Belarus has traditionally been important for the region as a transit country. Policy has worked to maintain this role. As will be shown in the case study sections below, Belarus aims to establish ties with multiple partners to balance its foreign policy and to act as a pivot point for trade between the EU and the CIS. Recently, EU analysts have resurrected the idea that Belarus could be “bridging geopolitical dividing lines in Europe” (Togt, 2017). This would feature Belarus acting more in line with EU standards of good governance. But “Lukashenka has never sought real dialogue with Brussels: his policy is just an ‘attempt to change the geopolitical supplier of rents’” (A. Wilson, 2011, p. 259).

Regional threats take the form of trade wars, contagion from Ukraine and Russian hard power intervention. Trade wars take place at unpredictable times, partly because of unpaid Soviet era or post-Soviet 1990s debts, or because Russian diplomacy often involves suspending trade subsidies. Like Ukraine, Belarus has reoccurring energy disputes with (E. Korosteleva, 2011; Plaschinsky, 2012; Sotiriou, 2014).

The 2014 Maidan protests in Ukraine and Russia's the annexation of Crimea brought different threats. The regime became concerned of Maidan-style protests taking place in Belarus (A. Wilson, 2015b). However, the perceived lawlessness and economic hardship in Ukraine have, in fact, increased domestic support for Lukashenka. He is seen as a provider of security (A. Wilson, 2016). The other concern from Ukraine is its growing ties with the EU. Belarus is cautious of Ukraine's trade agreements with the EU, because it may result in greater competition for Belarusian products (Preiherman, 2016).

There is also the potential threat of Russia attempting to topple Lukashenka's regime. Belarus is often compared to a Russian "puppet," "province" or "vassal" state (Gubarevich, 2016; Poskannaia, 2015). However, Lukashenka and his administration are also known to clash diplomatically with Russia when its interests are threatened. A well publicised incident was when Belarusian security services detained Vladislav Baumgertner, the chief executive of Russian fertiliser group Uralkali. The action was in retaliation to perceived moves by Russia to reduce the price of potash fertilizer, which is a major export and source of foreign currency in Belarus, and thereby weaken the Belarusian economy (Weaver & Sharman, 2013). There is a reoccurring discussion in Belarus dating back to the deterioration of relations with Russia in the mid-2000s over whether the Kremlin might topple Lukashenka, because of his independent approach to foreign policy (Astapenia, 2017; Bogutsky, 2015; A. Wilson, 2011). Since the annexation of Crimea, Belarusian security was very careful to quell any overt, non-Belarusian expressions of nationalism. For example, there were

arrests of several Belarus-phobic authors (Astapenia, 2017). The regime is wary of any excuse that might give Russia a reason to “protect” Russian speakers in Belarus as it did in Crimea.

3.2.1.3 International Policy Trends:

Belarus’ international policy is driven by the need to generate internal rents. As relations have worsened with Russia, Belarus has needed to find new foreign partners. Political conditionality, targeted sanctions and isolation from the international community make up international threats. Belarusian aimed to occupy a middle ground between Europe and Russia so not to become too reliant on either. However, unlike Ukraine, Belarus’ cultivation of foreign policy has been deliberate and purposeful (D’Anieri, 2012). Belarusian foreign policy has not been made incoherent by oligarchs with competing allegiances. Lukashenka has attempted to use this multivectored policy to play Europe off against Russia to gain the most benefits for his regime. Since Crimea’s annexation, Lukashenka has been edging back towards the West (Foy, 2015).

A threat to Belarusian international policy is isolationism from the West. When Lukashenka’s regime behaves in ways western governments do not like, such as imprisoning political opponents, rigging elections or persecuting NGOs, the tendency in Western foreign policy is to cut or freeze ties with Belarus (E. Korosteleva, 2016; J. Korosteleva, 2012). Election crackdowns generate isolation from the West.

Another threat coupled with isolation is over-dependence on Russia. Russia tends to dictate diplomatic and trade relations with Belarus, which can impair Belarus’ foreign policy. A central issue for trade with China is the EAEU. In theory, the EAEU is supposed to remove barriers to trade and harmonise regulations between members Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan. However, Russia has been prone to dictate conditions within the international body. The EAEU, like its predecessor the Eurasian Customs Union, has been mired in disagreements.

In particular, Belarus and Russia cannot agree on certain tax and tariff issues. This is of particular concern for Belarus in attracting foreign direct investment from countries like China (Bohdan, 2015). Shortly before the EAEU's formalisation, Lukashenka called Russia's behaviour in barring the trade of Belarusian meat products "stupid and brainless" (Michel, 2015). As Lo (2015, p. 80) accurately notes, "Moscow's approach bears the mark of Soviet pseudomultilateralism."

Within this policymaking context, the crisis selected for omnibalancing analysis in section 3.4 is the protracted unravelling of Belarus's post-Soviet "energy-social contract", triggered by Moscow's decision (announced in 2006 but foreshadowed by the 2004 gas dispute) to replace concessionary pricing with market-based prices. Cheap Russian hydrocarbons had underwritten Lukashenka's legitimacy by funding Soviet-style welfare, state employment, and controlled utility tariffs. Once the Kremlin began to "pragmatise" prices, these rents contracted, exposing the budget, the Belarusian rouble, and the President's popularity to severe strain. The instability that followed, which was punctuated by the 2011 balance-of-payments crisis, double-digit inflation, and episodic shortages of basic goods coincided with street protests, and Western sanctions following the December 2010 election crackdown. Taken together, the external shock (Russia's subsidy withdrawal) and the attendant domestic turbulence constitute the clearest episode of regime vulnerability within the 2006–2016 timeframe and, therefore, provide the most suitable test case for an omnibalancing analysis.

3.3 Sentiment Analysis Results

Section 3.3 reports the computer-assisted sentiment analysis (SA) of 5,523 public interventions by President Lukashenka between 2006 and 2016 that mention China. After a description of the corpus (3.3.1), two subsections (3.3.2 and 3.3.3) present the quarterly time-series visualisation and then a close reading of its key features. The graphs plot positive, negative, neutral and ambiguous sentences

referencing China. Positive and negative sentiment are overlaid with contextual markers (presidential visits, the announcement or disbursement of Chinese credit, and major regional shocks). The section highlights three patterns: (1) a gradual, statistically discernible rise in positive sentiment towards China across the decade; (2) a series of pronounced spikes, both upward and downward, that coincide with high-level bilateral exchanges and with the 2008–09 and 2014 external crises; and (3) the notable absence of any comparable increase in negative language. These findings furnish the empirical baseline for the subsequent interpretation (3.3.3) and complement the selection of events examined in the process-tracing analysis that follows in section 3.4.

3.3.1 Corpus

For Belarus, 5523 texts were compiled.[12] It was only possible to collect texts made by Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenka. Online resources for other top Belarusian policymakers were scattered, limited, or non-existent. A description of the corpus data collection, preprocessing, categorisation, and exploratory data analysis (EDA) details can be found in this dissertation's Chapter 2 (above), in section 2.5.4.

3.3.2 Graphical presentation of quarterly scores

The following features are common to all the sentiment analysis graphs in case study chapters and appear on figure 3.1 below. The x-axis, labelled "Quarters 2006–2016," presents the gathered data (from 2006 to 2016) in quarters. A four character tag indicates the year and first quarter. The characters "06Q1," for example, denotes the first quarter (January, February, March) of 2006. The y-axis, labelled "Sentiment-Bearing Sentences," tallies the number of sentences categorised by the lexicon-based SA program. Four line colours and patterns track the differing language-bearing sentiments: a green, solid line for positive sentiment; a red, dashed line for

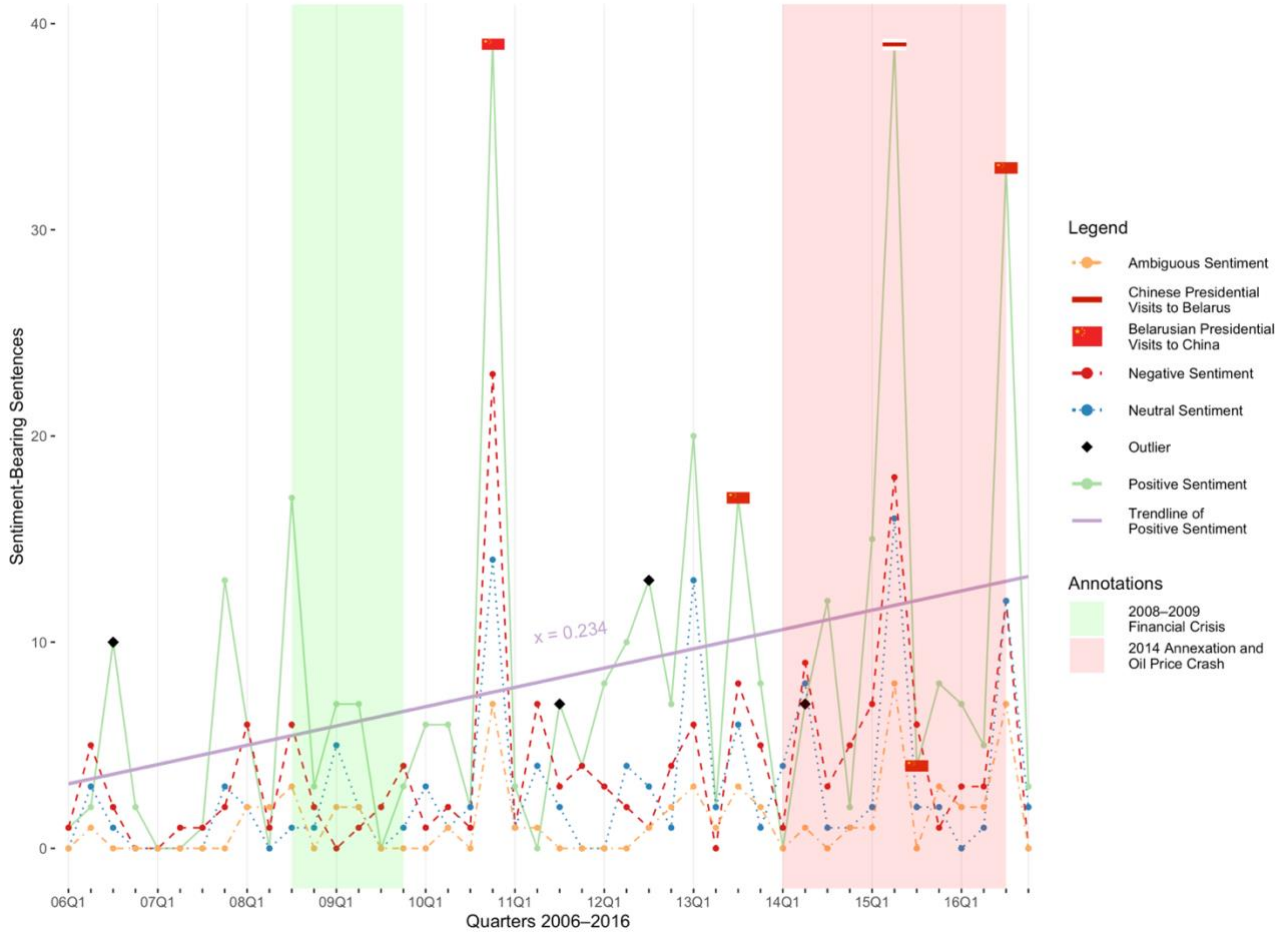
[12]. To download the collected texts by country, visit https://pjbraga.github.io/rub_corpus_and_code/corpus/.

negative sentiment; a blue, dotted line for neutral (non-sentiment bearing) language; and an orange, dot-dash line for ambiguous sentiment. A solid, purple trendline rises or descends across the graph. The trendline shows the average change (trend) for the single, most prevalent sentiment—either positive or negative. In Figure 3.1, this is positive sentiment. Atop the trendline is a marker, "x," indicating the trendline slope to three decimal places. After comparing 22 different bilateral relationships against the target countries, it appears any trendline slope value $x \geq 0.1$ or $x \leq -0.1$ indicates a change in bilateral ties—either improving or deteriorating relations. Any other values for x tended to coincide with static, unchanging relations—poor relations remain negative, and good remain positive, and the proportion of positive to negative sentiment stay relatively unchanged. The list titled "Sentiment" to the right of the line-plot provides a legend of the sentiments and trendline. "Annotations" is a secondary legend highlighting political-economic events that continue for a sustained period. The green shading indicates the interval of Russia's "2008–2009 Financial Crisis," which was a period of economic hardship and uncertainty for the country. The red shading, tagged as "2014 Annexation and Oil Price Crash," points to two successive destabilising events. First, in Q1 2014, Russian special forces annexed Crimea and established break-away states in Ukraine's Donbas region. Second, around Q3 2014, a global oil supply glut caused a world-wide price crash. Recovery only began Q3 2016—hence the red shading ending at this time. The Minsk I and II talks brought some mediation to the issue by Q1 2015, which is why the red shading does not continue indefinitely. Belarus is economically dependent on Russia and is geographically bordering Ukraine. It is assumed, therefore, these events also have a strong impact on Belarus. These events are indicated on the visualisations, because policymaker behaviour may be different during these times in reaction to the uncertainty caused by events.

Figure 3.1 (below) depicts Belarusian policymakers' (Lukashenka's) sentiment towards China from 2006–2016. A Chinese flag indicates a Belarusian presidential

trip to China. The Belarusian President makes four official trips to China (Q4 2010, Q3 2013, Q3 2015, and Q4 2016), which are shown by a Chinese flag being placed on the peaks of positive sentiment related to them. A Belarusian national independence flag indicates a Chinese presidential trip to Belarus. There is just one official Chinese presidential trip to Belarus in the 2006–2016 timeframe in Q2 2015. A black diamond represents an outlier in positive or negative sentiment. An outlier is a spike (a sharp increase followed by a rapid decrease in the dependent variable) or trough in positive or negative sentiment that is unexplained by relevant events (such as a presidential visit) or seasonal and cyclical phenomena (such as annual meetings). There are four outlier diamonds in figure 3.1, but there are five outlier events on the graph (the fifth diamond has been covered by a Chinese flag indicating a Belarusian presidential trip to China). There are unexplained positive sentiment outlier spikes at Q3 2006 and Q3 2012. There are three positive sentiment outlier troughs (meaning unusually low levels of positivity) at Q3 2011, Q2 2014, and Q3 2015. The first four spikes occur without any associated presidential visits, announcements of Chinese financial aid or assistance, or major political or economic events between Belarus and China. However, the presidential trip in 2015 is an outlier because the very low levels of positivity. Indeed, the negative sentiment is higher than positive sentiment, which is highly unusual.

Figure 3.1 Belarusian President Lukashenka's Sentiment Towards China and Sentiment-Influencing Events, 2006–2016



Source: Official press releases, and speech and interview transcripts for Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka (Presidential Press Service of the Republic of Belarus, 2006 to 2016). Dates on the x-axis are read "06Q1" as 2006, first quarter, "07Q1" as 2007, first quarter, and so on.

The notable aspects of figure 3.1 factor around a steadily increasing, but erratic positive sentiment. The (solid, purple) trendline of positive sentiment has a slope x = 0.234, which is greater than 0.1 and, thus, suggests deepening bilateral ties over time, rather than staying static or worsening bilateral relationship. There are ten quarters (Q2 2006, Q2 2007, Q3 and Q4 2009, Q2 2011, Q4 2011, Q1, Q2 and Q4 2014, and Q3 2015) where the number of negative sentiment-bearing sentences mentioning China (represented by a red, dashed line) is greater than or equal to positive sentences (solid, green line). Although (looking at the y-axis "Sentiment-Bearing Sentences"), the number of negative sentences on these negative spikes are not great (they are never greater than 10 sentences). Overall, positive sentiment dominates the graph. Neutral and ambiguous sentiment (blue, dotted and orange, dot-dash lines respectively) are almost always less than either positive or negative sentiment, and are thus irrelevant. President Xi Jinping officially makes one visit to Belarus in Q2 2015. President Lukashenka, by contrast, visits China three times (in the third quarters of 2013, 2015, and 2016). Oddly, President Lukashenka's Q3 2015 visit to China has very low positivity. There is less coverage of this trip, which was referred to as a "working visit," rather than an official visit (Press Service of the Belarusian President, 2015). This is likely to have been a trip to formally renegotiate the Chinese loans and conditionality, which were attached to the large lines of credit just announced by Xi Jinping earlier that year. This result was a well-publicised return trip by Lukashenka shortly after in September 2016 where the two sides agreed to "switch[…] bilateral cooperation from credit to direct investments" (Rudyj, 2021, p. 12). The final feature is the four outlier spikes in positive sentiment in Q3 2006, Q3 2011, Q3 2012, and Q2 2014.

After examination, the negative sentiment in figure 3.1 might better reflect ambiguity—sentiment that could be positive or negative but requires more context. This ambiguous-negative sentiment is specific to Lukashenka's manner of speaking. For example, in Q2 2009 Lukashenka comments, "The Chinese are acting

aggressively and proactively in the world today. You think they're all—Russia, India, USA—reaching out to China for no reason?" In the same erratic passage, he implies dislike of the IMF and friendship for Muammar Gaddafi and Silvio Berlusconi (Presidential Press Service of the Republic of Belarus, 2009). The quoted sentences are positive about China. But a program that analyses sentence-by-sentence would struggle to spot this. For instance, Lukashenka's word for "proactively" ("nastupatel'no") and "reaching out" ("potianut'sia") can also be used to express aggression or negativity in other contexts. Like this example shows, Lukashenka's more relaxed, conversational style means his sentences tend to be difficult for this study's—really any study's—rigid, dictionary-based SA program to process. This is reflected in figure 3.1's lively negative sentiment. The negative sentiment might better be coded as "ambiguous" instead, because Lukashenka's sentences tend to require further reading or insider knowledge to accurately code their sentiment.

An inspection of the outliers identifies Q3 2006, Q3 2011, and Q3 2012 as significant markers for potential Belarus-China policy exchange. The Q2 2014 outlier is not a "true" outlier, because it is during the Ukraine crisis. All the same, there are no presidential visits or credit from China, so it has been included. After examination, though, the Q2 2014 outlier appears to be unimportant. By contrast, the Q3 2006 and Q3 2011 outliers are products of major, symbolic turning points in Belarus-China relations. In July 2006, Lukashenka mentions China as "[t]he most important foreign policy partner of Belarus" in his annual independence day speech—he has never spoken of China in an annual speech before (Presidential Press Service of the Republic of Belarus, 2006b). In August, Lukashenka holds a meeting with the heads of all foreign ministries to outline a realignment of Belarusian foreign policy. This appears to be the first time where Lukashenka publicly lays out the plan for Belarus to use its position within the Eurasian Economic Community (now the EAEU) to act as a "bridge between Western Europe, China, the Far East, [and] Southeast Asia":

> [Just as important as it is to develop a North-South transport corridor with Russia, India, and Iran,] the same is true with the attraction of Chinese capital to create logistics facilities on the trans-European route of the Silk Road. Chinese cargo turnover cannot be given to just anyone—this is the most 'tasty morsel' of transit cargo on the continent" (Presidential Press Service of the Republic of Belarus, 2006c).

The second outlier in Q3 2011, reflects Lukashenka's comments concerning, perhaps, the most influential meeting for the entire Belarus-China relationship. Wu Bangguo (吴邦国), Chairman and Party secretary of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress from 2003 to 2013 (making him China's chief legislator) visited Belarus 17–20 September 2011. During his visit, Wu negotiates the agreement "On financial cooperation in the field of privatization and attracting Chinese investments to Belarus in 2011–2013" between China and Belarus (MFA of Belarus, 2021). This laid out the legal framework "for the participation of Chinese investors in the privatization of Belarusian assets. It was this document that caused the greatest concern to the Kremlin" (Turarbekova, 2019). In addition, frameworks for the BelGee light-vehicle manufacturing joint project, the Belarus-China (later "Great Stone") Industrial Park, and other goods transit hubs (later to be integrated into the BRI) were set down. And in Q3 2012, Lukashenka mentions China in his independence speech multiple times, which is unusual (Press Service of the Belarusian President, 2012).

Again, EDA of the Belarusian SA results finds quite predictable spikes in positive language in relation to particular events. In figure 3.1 there are large positive sentiment spikes when credit lines are announced (Q4 2007, Q4 2010, and Q3 2014), funds are disbursed (Q3 2008, Q1 2013, and Q4 2015), or for (most) presidential visits (Q3 2013, Q2 2015, and Q4 2016). The two large spikes in Q4 2010 and Q2 2015 are examples of the official reaction after the announcement of large credit lines and joint projects between Belarus from China. After the large spike in Q4 2010, the frequency of positive sentiment language increases dramatically.

Positive sentiment-bearing language is far more frequent from 2012 through 2016, than in the 2006 to 2011 period. Q3 2006 and Q3 2012 are positive sentiment outliers—Lukashenka appears to speak positively about China without any form of stimulus from China, such as loans or an official visit. For whatever reason many spikes and important developments take place in Q3 and give the appearance of seasonality. However, there is no reoccurring Q3 event apart from Lukashenka's independence day speech, and thus this could simply reflect bureaucratic conveniences.

Which outliers are relevant for potential policy transfer? The outliers in 2006 and 2012 do fit the outlier definition. They appear unprovoked and Lukashenka's words appear to show genuine interest in deepening ties with China. During Wu Bangguo's visit, Lukashenka's language is in reaction to this meeting. So, Q3 2011 does not fit the definition of an outlier spike. However, it does mark a very important stage of development in Belarus-China relations. The Q2 2014 spike is from two rather mundane meetings: the welcoming of a new Chinese ambassador and a meeting with members of Belarus's China-linked business community. Thus, using figure 3.1 outliers as a guide, the years of 2006, and 2011–2012 could act as a heuristic timeframe to check for examples of policy transfer.

3.3.3 Interpretation: Belarus: Authoritarian Branding, Not Copying

For Belarus, it would be tempting to argue there are clear examples of peer-to-peer, authoritarian learning via Beijing to Minsk. This section argues that any policy transfer is symbolic rather than concrete. The best example of this is the Belarus-China Great Stone Industrial Park (GSIP). Policymakers have widely publicised the GSIP is based on a Singaporean concept developed in Suzhou, China (Rudyj, 2012, p. 47). The GSIP aims to become a "Belarusian Hong Kong," indicating the GSIP is more than just an industrial-logistics hub, but city-type entity that would exist like Hong Kong does within China—a different legal-economic structure within, but

separate from, Belarus (Rudyj, 2020, p. 253). But this is a type of branding, rather than Chinese policy retrofitted for Lukashenka's regime. The GSIP is, in fact, part of a wider regime strategy to revitalise the economy and its long-term survival. When Belarusian authorities link their policies with—and appear to learn or copy from—China, this is instead a kind of self-bolstering tactic: to link policy with an external regime or well-known example to build an appearance of acceptability and efficiency (and thereby indirectly add to an autocratic regime's legitimacy), while policy links to the external regime or example are only cosmetic. The Lukashenka regime self-bolsters by linking its approach to Chinese polices.

This study did not find convincing evidence of the emulation of Chinese policy in Belarus. Despite this, the Lukashenka regime has long cited its ability to learn from China's example. What explains this puzzle is, in practice, these claims are merely an excuse for the regime's pre-existing tendency for pervasive state control. A prime example is the economy. Authorities insist Belarus has a socially-oriented market economy with state controls. Despite disagreement from experts (J. Korosteleva, 2007, p. 224), they argue China's experience can inform Belarus's own development. Former Belarusian Ambassador to China Anatoly Tozik, a participant of the regime's initial foreign policy realignment to develop closer ties with China in the mid-2000s, recently noted "the experience of the Chinese policy of reform and openness is of great interest [in terms of] its application in Belarus" (BelTA, 2019). At the time of the realignment in 2006, Belarusian President Lukashenka made a revealing statement to a group of Ukrainian reporters (Presidential Press Service of the Republic of Belarus, 2006d):

> I was [in China] five times, even before the presidency, I studied [how China modernised their economy,] their experience in free economic zones, I know this experience very well. I became convinced the main thing is the state should be managed.

The last sentence is the main takeaway of Lukashenka's China studies. China's experience is less something to be learnt from, and more an example that reinforces an existing predisposition towards state involvement and control. The following section uses what appears to be a conspicuous example of emulating a Chinese policy for economic development, the GSIP, to demonstrate this point.

What is the purpose, then, of the regime's repeated linking of Belarusian policy with China? Instead of peer-to-peer learning, this promotes authoritarian persistence in a different way. The regime's linking their approach with Chinese policy exploits brand reliability. This is the expectation that a brand (and the entities associated with it) will deliver on its promises (Delgado-Ballester et al., 2003, pp. 36–38). But this form of branding becomes "authoritarian" when it works to justify an autocratic regime's legitimacy. Equating its approach with China, the regime implies similar results, such as strong economic growth. Support for (and the continued survival of) the incumbent regime, therefore, promises future economic prosperity.

This authoritarian branding process represents an indirect form of the bolster concept (Ambrosio, 2009, p. 105), where one regime provides assistance to another to resist democratisation or regime change. It is an indirect or softer form of bolster, because the source of assistance (China) is passive. China's presence—whether made in casual reference or part of a concrete bilateral project—is used to mobilise support for the regime's continued survival. Therefore, the Lukashenka regime's China branding might better be called self-bolstering.

The GSIP is a prime example of self-bolstering. One instance is how the park is invariably linked with China's vast, past experience of developing special economic zones (Kolkin, 2018). But self-bolstering is a tactic sitting within the wider, long-term regime survival strategy—the true purpose of the GSIP. The complex project cannot be reduced to an attempt to learn-and-copy China's success for autocratic purposes. Instead it is a macro-level effort to do what many other countries are doing—to

bandwagon with China's rise. It represents a major foreign policy shift to reduce Belarusian dependency on Russia and to ease anti-regime pressure from the West (primarily the EU). Most importantly, the GSIP is conspicuously attached to regime legitimacy. Success will revitalise the collapsing Belarusian social contract, providing new jobs and investment. "Belarus aims to develop its economy, upgrade its industry and diversify its trade" all from the GSIP (Zhou & Zhou, 2018, p. 2). China's role is to be source of funds, future trade-flows, and branding for this flagship project. Thus, China's involvement in the GSIP is a self-bolstering tactic within a wider strategy to revitalise an autocratic regime's legitimacy.

The first step to understanding the role the GSIP plays for Lukashenka's regime is to describe it accurately. "Industrial Park" is a misnomer. The park is a large territory (112.5 square kilometers), east of Minsk, which bears the status of a special economic zone (SEZ) paired with a 50-year, special legal regime (emphasising tax breaks) to promote business growth (Kolkin, 2018, p. 48). The plan for the park is to combine a traditional SEZ with (Rudyj, 2012, p. 48):

> a city of the future, which also has tourist, cultural, exhibition and social value in general… [to promote] the generation and implementation of ideas. The Chinese-Belarusian industrial park could, in fact, quickly become a "star city" (to use Soviet-era terminology), attracting new jobs, high wages, opportunities for development and self-actualisation of scientific personnel, entrepreneurs, and young people not only from Belarus, but also from other countries.

Two Chinese researchers, working with the EBRD and interviewing major Belarusian and Chinese drivers of the GSIP, describe this idea as "a 'five-in-one' international new city that is [1] eco-friendly, [2] liveable, [3] industrial, [4] dynamic and [5] innovative as well as a signature project on the Silk Road Economic Belt" (Zhou & Zhou, 2018, p. 2). The GSIP aims to be an industry-focused, Soviet-reminiscent "star city," trans-nationally integrated with China's Belt and Road

Initiative. This is why a former Belarusian Ambassador to China Kyrill Rudy describes the GSIP becoming a “Belarusian Hong Kong” (Rudyj et al., 2017).

The GSIP is nominally a Chinese-inspired project. In truth, its origins are mixed. The Lukashenka regime’s plan to use Belarus as a logistics hub for Chinese trade dates to the early-to-mid 2000s. In the early 2000s, there was a noticeable growth in trade between the EU and China, and various efforts were made to enhance overland trade links (Molotov, 2015, pp. 6–7; United Nations ECE, 2014, pp. 41–54). This coincided with the electrification in 2002 of the longest rail transit route in the world, the OSJD (Organization for Cooperation of Railways) Corridor One,[13] which runs from Poland, via Belarus, to China (United Nations ECE, 2014, pp. 55–56). The majority of this transit corridor runs on Russia’s trans-Siberian railway. Noted above, in August 2006, Lukashenka held a meeting of all the heads of Belarus’s foreign ministries to announce a foreign policy shift towards China. In particular, he spells out his aim for Belarus to be a logistics hub for Chinese trade. Lukashenka stresses the importance of “the attraction of Chinese capital to create logistics facilities on the trans-European route of the Silk Road. Chinese cargo… is the most ‘tasty morsel’ of transit cargo on the continent” (Presidential Press Service of the Republic of Belarus, 2006c). A project like the GSIP—which aims both to move and to stimulate trade from China with Central Asian and European nations—has long been an aim of the regime.

Not only has the regime long planned to bring China into a joint-trade project, but the GSIP itself is a new, largely untested concept. Participating Chinese officials and companies say the GSIP is different from what China has done in the past. Both the Belarusian and Chinese sides admit they “lack practical experience… and are are still exploring” (Zhou & Zhou, 2018, p. 5). This is, perhaps, part of the reason

[13]. The OSJD is an international organization established in 1956. Its function is to create, manage, and improve a common rail transport space across the Eurasian region (United Nations ECE, 2014, pp. 55–59).

progress was slow in the GSIP's early stages (Presidential Press Service of the Republic of Belarus, 2014). To offset risks, Chinese negotiators prompted the Belarusian side to make many of the initial investments and to attract participants to the project before Chinese assistance funds could be accessed (Shraibman, 2014a, p. 8; Sverdlov & Chalyi, 2014). Even after Xi Jinping's 2015 commitment to make the GSIP a "pearl along the Belt and Road Initiative" (MFA of the PRC, 2015), progress has been slow (Ezhednevnik, 2016). Part of the problem is a tendency to over-promise and under-deliver from the Belarusian side (Tsarik et al., 2020, p. 14). This evidence suggests the GSIP is a new project, not just another SEZ, and not something copied from China.

A central function for the GSIP is to maintain regime control while modernising the economy. Manufacturing at the park relates to the Belarusian state's dominance over the economy: Belarus's highly educated, but low paid work force. The average minimum wage in China is higher than in Belarus (MinFin Belarus, 2021; Zhang, 2019). State control and ownership still dominates the economy (Adarov et al., 2016, p. 47). Thus, GSIP participants can harness the low paid, local workforce (and paying less tax than the average Belarusian employer) (Great Stone Industrial Park, 2021), while the regime can benefit from the modernisation of its manufacturing sector and transfer of technical skills (Kolkin, 2018, p. 54). The separation of the GSIP's legal framework from the rest of Belarus suggests the regime could maintain its dominant position over state control, while making reforms when it deems safe, and holding back when necessary. The goal is for the regime to remain in control. This is what former Ambassador to China and key GSIP advocate Kyrill Rudy means when he says, "We are used to saying that if there is a market economy, there must be democracy, and if there is authoritarianism, there must be a command and administrative system for managing the economy. China is an example where there is no such connection… there can be a monopoly in politics, and competition in the economy" (TUT.BY, 2020). The GSIP is a strategy for the Lukashenka regime to

maintain political power, but also modernise its economy. This is a form of authoritarian persistence, because it is improving state legitimacy by improving the economy and leaving is political dominance unchanged.

The positive spikes in figure 3.1 above track the development of the GSIP. Coincidently, the 2006 and 2011 outliers occur at major turning points in the GSIP and China-Belarus bilateral relationship. Touched on earlier, the 2006 outlier is a product of Lukashenka's speech to the heads of foreign ministries announcing the foreign policy shift to China. Belarusian officials supposedly proposed the idea of a joint China-Belarus Industrial Park on Xi Jinping's first visit to Belarus on 24 March 2010, before he was CCP General Secretary (Zhou & Zhou, 2018, p. 2). The massive spike in Q4 2010 funds were announced for the project. The 2011 outlier spike was partly created by the bilateral agreements that formally created the China-Belarus Industrial Park. From this point on, President Lukashenka mentions China more frequently and with more positive language—the outlier in Q3 2012 is a product of Lukashenka mentioning China as a close bilateral partner in his independence day speech. When Xi Jinping visits China in 2015 and publicly announces China's commitment to the GSIP (and announces a series of beneficial credit lines for Belarus) there is a massive positivity spike comparable to when the project was originally started in 2010. The SA results are a good indicator of how dynamically and when important moments occur in the bilateral relationship. In the case of the GSIP, figure 3.1 acts as a timeline to its implementation.

Thus, the GSIP is not an example of copying Chinese policy. While the SA results provided a guide to key regime developments with China, the example of Belarus did not support the chapters original hypothesis. All the same, the project is linked with authoritarian persistence and China does play a vital role. What appears to be peer-to-peer, authoritarian learning is, instead, a self-bolstering tactic. Self-bolstering is an indirect form of obtaining support for the regime by associating its policies with Chinese success. The GSIP is conspicuously tied to the regime's long-

term survival prospects, because it promises to fix so many issues for the regime. Its purpose is to revitalise the economy (providing jobs and investment), to realign Belarusian foreign policy by reducing over-reliance on Russia and anti-regime pressure from the EU, and to keep the regime's monopoly of control. The GSIP is a strategic, macro-level gambit for authoritarian persistence. The project has too many moving parts to be reduced to an instance of policy emulation or authoritarian learning. While Lukashenka often cites how Belarus's system was inspired by Chinese governance, it would be hard to argue he was any less of an autocrat before his first trip China.

3.4 Process-Tracing Omnibalancing

Section 3.4 argues that the Lukashenka leadership pursued a China-focused omnibalancing strategy during the 2006–16 energy-social-contract crisis, yet the attempt proved internally inconsistent and ultimately insufficient. Process-tracing shows that Russia's progressive "pragmatisation" of gas prices triggered Minsk to reorient policy towards Beijing and to anchor this shift in the Belarus-China Great Stone Industrial Park. Four of the seven enabling conditions (internal threats, high stakes for the ruler, absent institutional checks, and a vulnerable geopolitical position) were clearly present. The legitimacy enabling condition was uncertain in this period. Finally, the high state capacity and the co-opted elite enabling conditions muted structural pressures rather than removed them. The process tracing causal mechanism unfolds through a seven-part sequence: (1) Russian price pressure; (2) the 2006 decision to cultivate a third wing with China; (3) a succession of Chinese credit lines and joint-venture announcements; (4) renewed Russian coercion; (5) difficulties meeting Chinese conditionality; (6) a parallel tilt towards the West after 2014; and (7) Xi Jinping's 2015 endorsement of Belarus as important to China's Belt and Road Initiative. These steps generated short-term rent redistribution and symbolic "self-bolstering", but they did not resolve the underlying dependency on Moscow. Instead, they created a feedback loop of unmet loan conditions, and locked

Minsk into a precarious three-vector China-Russia-West foreign policy. The outcome column of the wireframe (figure 3.2 below), therefore, records an omnibalancing attempt whose contradictions became visible well before the mass protests of 2020, highlighting both the explanatory value and the limits of omnibalancing for small, resource-dependent autocracies.

3.4.1 Trigger Event

To investigate omnibalancing with China for authoritarian persistence, this study selects the following crisis: the precarious maintenance of the Belarusian social contract beginning 2005, peaking though early 2010 to 2011, and subsiding after Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine. A social contract (in the post-Soviet context) is an implicit agreement between the regime and its citizens where the state provides social security and material benefits in exchange for political compliance and social acquiescence (Balmaceda, 2014a, pp. 522–523). In Belarus, this social contract is characterised by the continuation of Soviet-era expectations. The Lukashenka regime's legitimacy is closely tied to its ability to maintain stable (or rising) living standards and to provide reliable energy because it has developed domestic policies similar to Soviet leader Piotr Masheraw and later upheld by Lukashenka's regime (ibid). Cheap supplies of Russian energy (particularly natural gas and oil) play such an important role in the maintenance of this arrangement that energy expert Balmaceda (2013, p. 59) calls it the "energy-social contract". The conclusion of Belarusian attempts to omnibalance with China to address this energy-social contract crisis truly ends with the 2020 Mass Protests (Braga, 2021a). However, the Lukashenka regime's attempt to omnibalance with China is established in the timeframe of this dissertation and the contradictions of this attempt are also evident in this period.

The selected crisis has an indirect source: the Russian "pragmatisation"—meaning the gradual increase—of energy prices (E. Korosteleva, 2011, p. 571; RIA Novosti, 2010). This external relationship with Russia translated into an internal

issue for the Lukashenka regime due to the centrality of gas and oil dependency to the economy and social welfare (Balmaceda, 2014b, pp. 84–86). For example, Russian finance minister Aleksei Kudrin estimated natural subsidies to Belarus amounted USD $50 billion from 1996 to 2011 (A. Wilson, 2021, p. 230). The regime used cheap energy both for GDP growth and mainly for continuation of a Soviet-style social contract between the regime and Belarusian citizens. While pragmatisation was officially announced in 2006, the 2004 Belarus-Russia gas dispute and the testy negotiations that followed signalled that a crisis was brewing (Balmaceda, 2014b, pp. 120–127). “[R]ealising that Belarus’s dependence on Russia had become a major problem, the president launched a quest for new foreign partners (and markets) under the slogan ‘Foreign Policy with a Second Wing’” (Press Service of the Belarusian President, 2007; A. Wilson, 2011, p. 223). What emerged was an unsustainable situation where the Lukashenka regime attempted to cultivate and maintain three wings of foreign relations: one to Russia (and the EAEU), the second to the EU (and the West), and the third to China. This awkward image of a bird with three wings accounts for the title of this case study. This energy-social-contract crisis would manifest itself in street protests (BBC News, 2011), demonstrations (RFE/RL, 2010, 2011), diplomatic spats with Russia (Rezchikov, 2010; RIA Novosti, 2010), emergency loans (Seputyte & Lovasz, 2011), the stockpiling of unsold goods (Andrusz, 2011), inflation (Bershidsky, 2015), the issuing of emergency bonds (Maternovsky, 2010), food shortages and hoarding (Kudrytski, 2011; Kudrytski & O’Brien, 2011), and the sale of key state enterprises (Lovasz & Krasnolutska, 2010). Russia’s 2014 invasion of Ukraine reduced domestic pressure on the regime. The perceived lawlessness and economic hardship in Ukraine, in fact, increased domestic support for Lukashenka, who was seen as a provider of regional security (A. Wilson, 2016). The Belarusian social contract became a security contract.

The solution to over-dependence on Russia came to be embodied in the Belarus-China Great Stone Industrial Park (GSIP). The GSIP is central to this

omnibalancing case study. The idea to develop deeper ties with China originated in the early to mid-2000s. Lukashenka embraced the idea of deepening ties with China at least in late 2005 (MFA of Belarus, 2005). But an official policy to deepen ties with China was only articulated in 2006 (Presidential Press Service of the Republic of Belarus, 2006c). The architects of Belarus's China policy envisioned Belarus as one of China's "bridges" to Europe (Tozik, 2005; Yeliseyev, 2013, pp. 11–18). The keystone of this Belarusian-Chinese bridge came to be the GSIP. Belarusian officials reportedly suggested a China-Belarus Industrial Park during Xi Jinping's first visit to Belarus on 24 March 2010, before Xi become the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (Zhou & Zhou, 2018, p. 2). The GSIP began to take shape in 2011 (Belarusian Government, 2011), but progress was slow until 2015 (Presidential Press Service of the Republic of Belarus, 2014). The GSIP is based on a Singaporean concept developed in Suzhou, China (Rudyj, 2012, p. 47). But the GSIP aimed to become a "Belarusian Hong Kong," indicating the GSIP was more than just an industrial-logistics hub for BRI trade. The city-type entity would exist like Hong Kong does within China—a different legal-economic structure within, but separate from, Belarus (Rudyj, 2020, p. 253). It would represent a major foreign policy shift, reducing Belarusian dependency on Russia, enabling the regime to resist reform pressures from the West (primarily the EU) more effectively. The GSIP would anchor Belarus as a "pearl along the Belt and Road Initiative," as Chinese President Xi Jinping remarked in 2015 (MFA of the PRC, 2015). "Belarus [would aim] to develop its economy, upgrade its industry and diversify its trade" (Zhou & Zhou, 2018, p. 2). The separation of the GSIP's legal framework from the rest of Belarus suggests the regime could maintain its dominant position over state control, while making liberal reforms in the GSIP when it deems safe, but retaining control nationally. Thus, the participation within the BRI became a central piece to the regime's long-term survival plan.

To summarise, the crisis used to investigate omnibalancing revolves around the precarious state of the Belarusian social contract, a system where the government provides social and economic stability in exchange for political compliance, which became increasingly strained from 2005, peaked around 2010-2011, and was influenced by Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine. The crisis was exacerbated by Russia's pragmatisation of energy prices, which heavily impacted Belarus due to its dependence on cheap Russian energy to uphold its Soviet-style social contract. As Belarus faced the pressures of rising energy costs, the Lukashenka regime sought to diversify its foreign relations, including a strategic pivot towards China. This pivot aimed to reduce Belarusian reliance on Russia, particularly through the development of the Belarus-China GSIP.

The GSIP, initiated in 2011, became a key component of Belarus's authoritarian persistence strategy: to omnibalance domestic crisis and external Russian pressure using relations with China. By cultivating ties with China and embedding the GSIP within China's BRI, Belarus aimed to secure economic diversification, reduce dependency on Russia, and resist Western reform pressures. However, the omnibalancing approach, while strategically ambitious, contained inherent contradictions that ultimately undermined its effectiveness, which will be expanded on in the next sections.

3.4.2 Internal-Threat Profile: Belarus's Omnibalancing Enabling Conditions

The following section will indicate the presence, absence, or ambiguity of the seven omnibalancing enabling conditions outlined above. A short argument and supporting evidence will accompany each condition. The Lukashenka regime from 2006 to 2016 exhibited several enabling conditions for omnibalancing: the presence of internal threats, high stakes for the leadership's survival, a lack of institutional checks, and a vulnerable geopolitical position. The absence of two enabling conditions—the regime's high state capacity and a unified elite—reduce the number

of factors contributing to omnibalancing. Finally, there is ambiguity around whether low legitimacy is present as an enabling condition.

3.4.2.1 Presence of Internal Threats: Present

There is evidence to suggest the Belarusian regime perceived the presence internal threats to regime survival. These are identified as threats to survival due to the scale of protests (for example the clapping protests and street demonstrations in 2010 and 2011) not just in urban centres but in border areas as well (BBC News, 2011; RFE/RL, 2010, 2011), the severe pressure on the Belarusian economy (Kudrytski, 2011), and the resentment towards Lukashenka's leadership (Kudrytski & O'Brien, 2011). The crackdowns on these protests indicates the regime viewed them as serious challenges (Barry, 2011; A. Wilson, 2011, pp. 234–235). According to omnibalancing theory, the presence of such internal threats creates conditions for the regime to seek external support to suppress internal dissent, fitting the omnibalancing framework. Indeed, Belarusian studies scholar Andrew Wilson (2011, p. 209, 2021, p. 255) stands by his claim that the peak of the crisis within the period selected for analysis is the point where "the edifice crumbles" for the Lukashenka regime. The regime is under threat. Externally, there is an assertive Russia (Nilsson, 2022, pp. 515–516) and, internally, there signs of the regime becoming unsustainable.

3.4.2.2 High Stakes for Leaders: Present

The Lukashenka regime acted as if the costs of losing power were high. The aggressive security measures taken by the regime, particularly the Belarusian KGB's claims of pre-empting coups or assassination attempts (Hansbury, 2023, Chapter 4 para. 51), suggest the regime is perennially wary of domestic opposition and instability. These claims (likely invented) are used to justify a violent security response from the regime (United Nations, 2011, para. 51). The fact these operations are likely pre-planned and are implemented with little to no provocation (see Wilson, 2011, pp. 234–235) suggests the regime views the prospect of losing

power as a high-stakes event. Therefore, the condition is present during the 2006–2016 period, especially at when external Russian pressure and internal discontent were highest around 2010 and 2011.

3.4.2.3 Institutional Checks Degraded or Absent: Present

Lukashenka's removal of institutional checks was enabled by the 1995 and 1996 referendums. The former enabled the president to dissolve Parliament, the latter stripped the Constitutional Court of its power (Hansbury, 2023, Chapter 2 para. 38 and 42; A. Wilson, 2011, pp. 180–185). This gave Lukashenka the ability to enact presidential decrees unopposed. From 1995 to 1996, the Constitutional Court had struck down "no fewer than seventeen presidential decrees" (A. Wilson, 2011, p. 180). After the referendum, Lukashenka has the power to appoint six of the twelve Constitutional Court judges and (with cooperation from the "court qualification commissions") can remove a judge by presidential decree (Human Rights Watch, 1997, para. 22). This essentially removed the strongest check on Lukashenka's ability to dictate policies via presidential decree. The absence of checks aligns with the omnibalancing condition where leaders, without institutional barriers, are free to make alignment decisions that prioritise regime survival, even if detrimental to the state in the long term—such as selling state enterprises to firms with links to the Russian state (Seputyte & Lovasz, 2011).

3.4.2.4 Low State Capacity (Administrative vs Coercive): Absent

A relatively recent article by Dimitrova et al. (2021, p. 21 and p. 36) find that the Lukashenka regime has generally maintained a high state capacity—both administrative and coercive—since coming to power in 1994. The Lukashenka regime has consistently (and some allege intentionally) neglected the maintenance of the Belarusian military (Bohdan, 2014, pp. 10–12, 2022). However, internal security and public order have not been neglected. Wilk (2021, pp. 12–13) claims that since the 2000s, "spending on defence is lower than that for internal security and the protection of the legal order" (although Wilk only provides empirical data for

2018, 2019, and 2020). The omnibalancing enabling condition that low state capacity would might prompt a greater need to rely on external support does not seem to apply in this case. For 2006 to 2016, the regime had the ability to enforce its will through an effective bureaucracy and security forces, omnibalancing based on this condition is not applicable here.

3.4.2.5 Questionable Legitimacy: Ambiguous

Lukashenka's legitimacy, while questionable to some, was supported by a relatively high standard of living and the economic model propped up by Russian energy subsidies. But the model's dependency on Russia and the regime's reaction to Russia's economic pragmatisation raised doubts about its long-term viability. The crisis period selected here is the beginning of the end of the "Belarusian economic model", which some observers claimed sustained "the last planned, socially owned economy in Europe: an alternative economic agenda that has seen his country climb from 68th to 49th in the UN human development index" (Wilson 2021, p. 238; Clark 2005, para. 6). The model provided what Wilson (2021, p. 303) aptly calls "the supply of authoritarian public goods": moderate but steady improvements in living standards, employment by the state, growth of real wages, and the retention of social welfare programmes, such as pensions and medical care. By 2013, the quality of life in Belarus was still ranked by the United Nation's Human Development Index as the highest among former Soviet Union countries, apart from the Baltics (UNDP, 2013, pp. 148–149). In 2010, even as the crisis situation in Belarus gained more pressure, trust in the Belarusian president and government were at 59.2 and 58.8 percent respectively (Yefimova, 2011, p. 207). At the same time, almost 70 percent of survey respondents were considered rising prices the most serious problem in Belarus. And there were protests and demonstrations (BBC News, 2011; RFE/RL, 2010). In these circumstances, the regime's legitimacy is not entirely undermined but is vulnerable. Thus, the omnibalancing enabling condition of low legitimacy is ambiguous.

3.4.2.6 Fragmented Elite: Absent

The Lukashenka regime effectively co-opted the elite through rewards like state contracts and government positions (Frumkin, 2015; Hansbury, 2023, Chapter 4 para. 21; Poskannaia, 2015), resulting in a united ruling class. In an interview with Gordon, a Ukrainian news website, Stanislau Shushkevich described the difference between Belarus' oligarchs and those of Russia and Ukraine. "The reality is that only courtier-business flourishes [in Belarus]. All these seasoned and experienced businessmen, they are president Lukashenka's pocketbook" (Poskannaia, 2015). During the peak of the Russian pragmatisation crisis, peaking in 2010 and 2011, the regime did not see the type of defections it saw in the 2020 mass protests (S. Hall, 2023b, p. 15). This suggests in the 2006–2016 timeframe, the Belarusian elite can be understood to be co-opted to (meaning bound with) the Lukashenka regime. Theoretically, the absence of elite fragmentation diminishes the need for omnibalancing, as the regime does not face significant internal elite opposition, which might (in extreme cases) have required external balancing.

3.4.2.7 Vulnerable Geopolitical Position: Present

Within the 2006–2016 timeframe, Belarus's geopolitical position is precarious. There is pressure from both Russia and the EU and comes in various forms (Nilsson, 2022). This brief summary will touch on the most prominent forms of pressure. Russia seeks to dominate (rather than control) Belarus through bilateral institutions, such as the Union State, and ownership of key state assets. The Union State is a bilateral sovereign and economic integration project between Russia and Belarus. The project has served various uses since its creation in 1996 (Hansbury, 2019). The Kremlin under Vladimir Putin increasingly sought to use the treaties and structures of the Union State to isolate and peacefully absorb the territory of Belarus into Russia (ibid.). Belarus's position as an energy transit country has driven the Kremlin to protect itself from this being leveraged for economic or political blackmail (Jirušek & Kuchyňková, 2018, p. 834). For example, in 2011, Russian pressure was temporarily

reduced only when the Lukashenka regime gave up its 50 percent remaining stake in Beltransgaz (ibid.). The EU, on the other hand, tends to pressure Belarus with sanctions and represents a critical, alternative to governance that can inspire (and sometimes actively advocates for) domestic opposition. Indeed, the EU has not recognised an election in Belarus as “free and fair” since 1996 (Preiherman & Kosmehl, 2021, para. 7). This vulnerable geopolitical environment fits the omnibalancing enabling condition where external pressures influence a regime’s internal security calculations, prompting it to seek external alignments to offset internal threats that might be exacerbated or fed by these outside pressure.

To summarise, the presence of internal threats, high stakes for the leadership’s survival, a lack of institutional checks, and a vulnerable geopolitical position were identified as enabling conditions. The absence of a unified elite and high state capacity reduced the number of factors contributing to omnibalancing. The legitimacy of the regime was ambiguous, with some support from a relatively high standard of living and economic model, but doubts about its long-term viability due to its dependency on Russia. The regime effectively co-opted the elite, resulting in a united ruling class. The geopolitical position of Belarus was precarious, with pressure from both Russia and the EU.

Figure 3.2 (below), Omnibalancing Process-Tracing Wireframe for Belarus, tracks the process of Belarus’s omnibalancing strategy, triggered by Russia’s economic pressure. It follows how Belarus attempted to realign its foreign policy by adding an additional vector towards China, culminating in its role as hub in China’s BRI. The enabling conditions discussed above are displayed on the immediate left-hand side of the table. The enabling conditions, such as internal threats and high-stakes leadership, contributed to a causal process that positioned the Lukashenka regime to consider omnibalancing both external and internal threats. In theory, the presence of these conditions heightens the likelihood for omnibalancing, as each one represents a factor that makes external alignment (in this case, with China)

more appealing or necessary for the Belarusian regime's authoritarian persistence. The next section will discuss the process that led to Belarus's omnibalancing attempt in detail.

3.4.3 Truth Table

The following truth table, Table 3.1, lists the seven enabling conditions (Z1 to Z7) discussed in section 3.4.2 (above), which are factors potentially conducive to omnibalancing, with the final outcome (Y) indicating whether omnibalancing was attempted. Each condition is assigned a binary value (Yes = 1, No = 0), with ambiguous conditions assigned a value of 0.1 to reflect uncertainty.

Table 3.1 Omnibalancing Enabling Conditions Truth Table: Belarus

c Cases	Z_1 Presence of Internal Threat(s)	Z_2 High Stakes for Leaders	Z_3 Institutional Checks Degraded or Absent	Z_4 Low State Capacity (Administrative & Coercive)		Z_5 Low Legitimacy	Z_6 Fragmented Elite	Z_7 Vulnerable Geopolitical Position	Y Omnibalancing
State	Yes	Yes	Yes	High	High	Ambiguous	No	Yes	Attempted
Value	1	1	1	0	0	0.1	0	1	4.1

Table source: This enabling condition truth table was created by the author. The value of 1 denotes the presence of the enabling condition. 0 indicates the enabling condition is absent. The value of 0.1 indicates ambiguity.

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Table 3.1 translates the qualitative, threat assessments set out in section 3.4.2 into the Boolean truth-table (above). Each enabling condition (Z1–Z7) has been appraised narratively. The outcome of that appraisal has then been converted into a numerical entry by applying three simple coding rules. When the condition is judged present, the cell is coded “1” and recorded textually as “Yes”. When the condition is judged absent, the cell is coded “0” and recorded as “No”. Where the evidence points in both directions or remains inconclusive, the cell is assigned the intermediate value “0.1” and rendered as “Ambiguous”.

Section 3.4.2 argues that large-scale demonstrations, currency instability, and other manifestations of domestic discontent created a genuine internal threat for Lukashenka and his coalition. The 1995–96 constitutional changes had removed checks on regime power. Belarus’s location between a sanctions-prone EU and an increasingly coercive Russia exposed the state to continual geopolitical pressure. Therefore, four enabling conditions (presence of internal threats, high stakes for leaders, institutional checks degraded of absent, and vulnerable geopolitical position) receive a score of “1” in table 3.1 (above).

Conversely, 3.4.2 also argues the bureaucracy and the coercive apparatus remained capable. Rent distribution and cadre rotation kept the elite cohesive. Enabling conditions scores for administrative and coercive state capacity (Z4) and fragmented elite (Z6) are, therefore, all entered as “0”. This means the hypothesised omnibalancing facilitating factors of low administrative or coercive state capacity and elite fragmentation were not present. The low legitimacy enabling condition (Z5) is treated cautiously. Survey data and welfare indicators suggest respectable public approval, yet recurrent protests and the collapse of the energy-based social contract point to incipient erosion. This mixed picture justifies the “0.1”, “ambiguous”, coding for Z5.

Recorded in the right-hand column, the sum of the seven items indicates that four clear positives (plus one ambiguous) were present. The following 3.4.4 section, “Causal Narrative”, will examine how Belarus’s aggregate score of 4.1 (see column Y above) in enabling condition factors contributed to the “Attempted” omnibalancing with China.

3.4.4 Wire-framing of Causal Mechanism

Figure 3.2, “Omnibalancing Process-Tracing Wireframe for Belarus” (directly below), combines the Boolean assessment of enabling conditions (argued for in section 3.4.2 and summarised in table 3.1 above) into a step-wise process-tracing framework that guides the causal narrative developed in section 3.4.5 (also below). The left-hand column records the seven conditions whose presence, absence, or ambiguity was justified in 3.4.2 and coded in table 3.1. The adjacent column repeats those codings for the Belarus case, thereby anchoring the subsequent mechanism in its situational context. Moving right, the figure sets out the causal chain itself: a crisis trigger event, seven numbered causal mechanism parts, and the outcome. For each part, to top cell is a sequential header (e.g. “Part 1”, “Part 2”, etc.) the upper-middle cell summarises the action (e.g., “Places economic pressure“, “Realigns Belarusian foreign policy”, etc.), the lower-middle cells contain right-facing arrows to underscore temporal sequencing and the direction of the action (e.g., starting with the trigger but entering a feedback loop from parts 4 to 7), and the bottom cell identifies the action’s main agent (e.g., “The Kremlin”, “The Belarusian Leadership”, etc.). The final column states the process-tracing outcome (“Technocrats in the Lukashenka regime see a strategy of authoritarian persistence forming”). In short, the wireframe converts a list of factors into a falsifiable causal chain. It specifies who did what and when and provides a visual map that the narrative in 3.4.5 will address in prose form.

Figure 3.2 Omnibalancing Process-Tracing Wireframe for Belarus

Enabling condition	Belarus	Mechan-ism:	Trigger	Part 1	Part 2	Part 3	Part 4	Part 5	Part 6	Part 7	Outcome
Presence of Internal Threat(s)	Yes	Action:	Places economic pressure on Belarus by raising energy prices Date: 2006	Realigns Belarusian foreign policy to prioritise China Date: 02 August 2006	Conducts pragmatic relations with Belarus, raising gas prices, placing export duty on oil, and engaging in transaction disputes Date: 2007 onward	Announce joint development projects in Belarus Date: late 2009 through 2010	Conducts pragmatic relations with Belarus, pressuring the Belarusian economy Date: 2010 to 2012, then enters feedback loop	Struggle to meet joint commitments and Chinese credit conditionality Date: 2011 to 2014, then enters feedback loop	Tries to improve relations with the West Date: starts 2014, then enters feedback loop	Announces major role for Belarus along the BRI and extends lines of credit Date: 11 May 2015, then enters feedback loop	Technocrats in the Lukashenka regime see a strategy of authoritarian persistence forming, which uses Belarus as a manufacturing and distribution hub on the BRI to sustain the regime's social contract and shield it from Russian pressure.
High Stakes for Leaders	Yes										
Institutional Checks Degraded or Absent	Yes										
Low State Capacity (Administrative & Coercive)	High										
	High										
Low Legitimacy	Ambiguous										
Fragmented Elite	No		→	→	→	→	→	→	→	→	
Vulnerable Geopolitical Position	Yes	Agent:	The Kremlin	The Belarusian Leadership	The Kremlin	Officials from China and Belarus	The Kremlin	Belarusian officials	The Belarusian Leadership	The Chinese Leadership	

Source: This causal mechanism framework is adapted from Winward (2021, p. 560).

3.4.5 Causal Narrative

This section explores Lukashenka regime's strategic alignment with China as response to external pressures from Russia and internal threats to its survival through a process of omnibalancing. The process-tracing wireframe outlined here highlights the causal mechanism that led Belarus to seek stronger ties with China, prompted by a shift in Russian energy policies. As illustrated in the "Trigger" column of figure 3.2, this process began with economic pressure from the Kremlin, particularly through rising energy prices, which destabilised Belarus's heavily subsidised economy and threatened regime survival.

In response, the Lukashenka regime pursued a multi-faceted strategy to mitigate its dependence on Russia by fostering partnerships with China, while also managing internal discontent and maintaining regime legitimacy. Each part of the wireframe traces the steps taken by Belarus, from realigning foreign policy to prioritise China, to the gradual deepening of economic cooperation, and finally, to China's pivotal role in Belarus's participation in the Belt and Road Initiative. This process represents the Belarusian government's long-term effort to omnibalance, securing external alignments that could offset both internal instability and Russian economic pressure. The following describes the seven parts of the causal mechanism described in figure 3.2 (above).

The Lukashenka regime's attempt to omnibalance with China, in response to Russian external pressure and internal threats (including a collapsing social contract, strained legitimacy, and growing citizen discontent), was triggered by a shift in the Kremlin's energy policies. This is shown in the "Trigger" column of in figure 3.2 above. The actor is simplified to "the Kremlin". The action of the trigger is summarised as "Places economic pressure on Belarus by raising energy prices". The 2004 gas dispute signalled a pragmatic turn in Russia's relations with Belarus, highlighting the potential economic pressure of rising energy prices on Belarus due

to its heavy reliance on subsidised Russian energy for economic stability and social welfare.

This shift in Russian energy policy prompted the Belarusian government to seek alternative partnerships, most notably with China. This strategic realignment served as an omnibalancing act, aimed at mitigating the internal threats to regime survival induced by economic vulnerabilities. The 2004 gas price dispute (touched on in section 3.4.1 above) served as a trigger, compelling the Belarusian leadership to reduce its dependency on Russia and diversify its foreign relations to ensure authoritarian persistence. By 2006, the regime officially committed to external alignment with China, laying the groundwork to counterbalance the pressures resulting from changes in energy prices. This strategy aimed to develop a third wing of foreign policy to sustain the Lukashenka regime.

Part 1 of the process-tracing wireframe (in figure 3.2 above) outlines a significant shift in Belarusian foreign policy that lays the groundwork for a potential omnibalancing outcome. Triggered by the Russian pragmatisation of energy prices, the Lukashenka regime reconsiders its geopolitical alignments. As this explanation of part 1 of the causal process will argue, the regime understands the implications of this dependence on Russia and seeks to cultivate new alignments for authoritarian persistence. Deepening economic ties with China are identified as key to reshaping Belarus's economic resilience and regime survival.

As Balmaceda (2014b, pp. 117–118) notes, the 2004 gas dispute between Russia was a watershed for Belarus-Russia relations. The event provoked Belarus to reconsider its dependence on Russia. It was "the first time that Russia had completely cut off gas supplies to any state[... There were] dire predictions by Belarusian, Russian and Western observers that Belarus would not be able to withstand such increases and that, as a result, the regime would collapse" (ibid.).

Lukashenka seems to have been open to novel solutions. Anatoly Tozik, the head of a “pragmatic, economy-first” clan within Lukashenka’s regime, was bullish about developing ties with China (Tozik, 2005; A. Wilson, 2011, p. 208). Around this time, China is singled out as a pivotal foreign policy partner. Lukashenka makes his first state visit to China in late 2005 (MFA of Belarus, 2005). In June 2006, Anatoly Tozik is made Ambassador to China (Wikileaks, 2006a). Lukashenka, in his 2006 annual Independence Day speech, candidly acknowledges China’s newfound importance in Belarusian foreign policy (Presidential Press Service of the Republic of Belarus, 2006b). This signals a beginning of a deliberate move away from an over-reliance on Russia, instigating a realignment of its foreign policy.

A month later in August, the Belarusian President convenes a meeting with top foreign ministry officials where he underscores Belarus’ strategic position within the Eurasian Economic Community (Presidential Press Service of the Republic of Belarus, 2006c). Here, Lukashenka outlines intentions to use Belarus’ geographical advantage to connect Western Europe, China, the Far East, and Southeast Asia. The vision involves attracting Chinese capital for logistics facilities on the trans-European route of the Silk Road, indicating an ambitious push for a larger, more influential role in intercontinental trade.

In essence, Part 1 demonstrates a proactive response from the Belarusian Leadership to Russia’s pragmatisation of energy prices. It initiates a transformation of their former foreign policy by prioritising China as a pivotal partner, which is the first step for future omnibalancing endeavours. Figure 3.2 (above) identifies “[the] Belarusian Leadership” as the actor and “[r]ealigns Belarusian foreign policy to prioritise China” as the action of this part of the causal mechanism. While the ground for this shift is unofficially laid in 2005, this phase officially commences in 2006, with the reshaping of Belarusian foreign policy and the ambition of positioning Belarus as a key “bridge” in Eurasia (Tozik 2005).

The Lukashenka regime's enthusiasm for developing ties with China was not immediately reciprocated. Diplomatic cables reveal the realignment needed more than simply snubbing Taiwan and endorsing the one-China principle (Wikileaks, 2006b). In one cable, it is noted that "Minsk is asking for concessionary investments, loans, and trade, although Beijing is having difficulty finding any objects of economic interest in Belarus, unreformed economy" (Wikileaks, 2006b). Another cable features a Chinese diplomat being brutally frank after Belarusian insistence on more investment and loans from China. Minsk-based diplomat Jiang Xiaoyang supposedly told his interlocutors that "China's foreign policy is governed by pragmatism and not ideals [and] China is not interested in assisting Belarus dig itself out of its deep economic hole" (Wikileaks, 2007). The Lukashenka regime had to work harder to attract real support from China.

Part 2 of the causal mechanism for Belarus's omnibalancing with China shows the Kremlin acting pragmatically towards Belarus, further pressuring the already strained economic situation. Through a series of actions including raising gas prices, placing export duty on oil, and engaging in numerous transactional disputes, Russia maintained and increased pressure on Belarus. Figure 3.2 (above) lists "The Kremlin" as the agent of this second part of the causal mechanism and "Conducts pragmatic relations with Belarus, raising gas prices, placing export duty on oil, and engaging in transaction disputes" as the action that compels Belarus onwards to an omnibalancing strategy with China.

This phase from 2007 onward, witnessed numerous economic and political disputes between the two countries (E. Korosteleva, 2011, pp. 571–575; Nilsson, 2022, p. 515), with Belarus forced to pay thee to seven times the price for Russian natural gas compared to 2003 (Balmaceda, 2014b, p. 51). The Kremlin's increasing pressure culminated in a full-blown crisis in Belarus from 2010–2011; this is height of the crisis in the context of this study's 2006–2016 timeframe.

The Belarusian leadership was also faced with a domestic political dilemma, as they engaged in small steps of political liberalisation to de-escalate international sanctions, primarily from America and the EU (Bosse, 2012). However, the 2010 presidential election saw Lukashenka's position reaffirmed but with most electoral challengers arrested and a violent crackdown against protesters against the fraudulent results (A. Wilson, 2011, pp. 234–236). Renewed Western sanctions followed (Padhol & Marples, 2011). This better-value-for-money approach adopted by the Kremlin and the crisis situation it promotes internally in Belarus contribute to the Lukashenka regime's drive to develop a third foreign policy vector with China.

For Part 3 of the process-tracing causal mechanism wireframe, joint development projects announced between China and Belarus marked a critical stage in the deepening of their relationship. This is an important step to drive the Belarus's omnibalancing strategy forward. Part 3, which takes place between late 2009 through 2010, is as a pivotal moment in Belarus's efforts to realign its foreign policy towards China. Discussing these developments, Lukashenka says, "Our relations with the People's Republic of China have a strategic character" (Press Service of the Belarusian President, 2010). This quote begins this chapter and it highlights this development: the deepening of ties with China is not simply opportunistic, it is also a strategic shift away from over-dependence on Russia.

The joint development projects symbolised a greater seriousness on the side of China to deepen economic ties with Belarus. In practical terms, this included substantial credit lines (totalling approximately $16 billion). In late December 2009, deputy prime minister Andrei Kobyakov reported that China "is ready to grant a $5.7 billion loan to Belarus" (BelTA, 2009). Specifically, the "Eximbank of China provided a commercial credit line of $5.7bn to the Belarusian Government and, in March 2010, the China Development Bank launched an $8.3bn commercial credit line. In June 2010, the Chinese Government approved a $1bn preferential credit line, and, in September 2011, another $1bn preferential credit line followed" (Rudyj, 2021, p. 6).

The commercial credit lines tended to be 3–4.5 percent above the inter-bank lending rate (ibid). The preferential loans had much lower interest rates (just 2 to 3 percent), a five-year grace period, and a fifteen-year repayment period. The catch is that preferential loans have conditions, also referred to as being “tied” (ibid.). In truth, both commercial and preferential loans have various conditions, but the latter are more tied than the former. When receiving a commercial loan from China 30 percent of the of the contract value must involve Chinese companies (builders and suppliers) (ibid., pp. 5–6). When taking on a preferential loan, the ratio of Chinese equipment and contractors must be more than 50 percent of the value of the contracts developed with it. Indeed, international financial institutions often have better terms and interest rates, but they can often be tied to political conditionality. As Lukashenka said on his second trip to China as Belarusian President, “China’s investment has never had any political strings attached, therefore, we are more than willing to see China speed up its investment in Belarus on a larger scale” (Xinhua, 2010). It was these first credit lines which led to the creation of large-scale initiatives like the GSIP.

Opportunities for more complex engagements accompanied the credit lines. The idea of a jointly developed industrial-technology park was supposedly “voiced” during the visit of then vice-president Xi Jinping in March 2010 (Republic of Belarus, 2021), who followed shortly after the lines of credit. The author has no proof, but the timing of Xi’s visit is suggestive of early preparations for the Silk Road Economic Belt—the overland element for connectivity projects between China and Europe (later called the BRI)—which Xi would announce as Chinese president in September 2013 (Witte, 2013). The new range of possibilities encouraged the Belarusian leadership to develop ties further. This series of agreements with China creates the bellwether project for Belarus-China relations, the GSIP. Part 3 in figure 3.2 (above) has the actor as “Officials from China and Belarus” and the causal action as “Announce joint development projects in Belarus.” This sounds mundane, but the credit lines and joint projects, particularly what would become the GSIP, signify more

than just economic cooperation. They are the first successes of a major pivot towards a long-term, strategic partnership, which the architects of Belarus's China strategy (such as Anatoly Tozik and Kirill Rudyj) are using to establish a long-term omnibalancing strategy for the Lukashenka regime's authoritarian persistence—although they would not describe it in these terms (for more on this, see the sentiment analysis chapter of this dissertation).

Part 4 of the causal mechanism features the Kremlin's continued pragmatic relations with Belarus, characterised by heightened economic and political pressure from 2010 to 2012. This period is the height of the crisis for Belarus in the 2006–2016 timeframe. Russia incrementally increases pressure on the Lukashenka regime, raising energy prices and engaging in various transactional disputes (E. Korosteleva, 2011).[14] Despite Belarus's efforts to diversify its foreign policy, including strengthening ties with China, the Lukashenka regime had to bow to pressure from Russia for temporary reprieve.

In return for a freeze on gas prices and an emergency loans from the EAEU (Eurasian Economic Union), the Lukashenka regime was forced to sell its controlling stake in Beltransgaz, a critical state asset, to Russian state-owned Gazprom (Jirušek & Kuchyňková, 2018, p. 834; The Moscow Times, 2011). Part 4 in figure 3.2 above has "The Kremlin" as the actor and "Conducts pragmatic relations with Belarus, pressuring the Belarusian economy" as the action of this part of the causal mechanism. It further This demonstrates regime's inability to omnibalance Russian external pressure and internal discontent through its relations with China. Indeed, relations were still developing. Chinese loans and joint development projects were promising, but they were not sufficient to counterbalance Russia's economic leverage. This part of the mechanism highlights the limitations of Belarus's long-term

[14]. The author was in several of the electricity blackouts in Minsk as Russia, still wanting to let the Lukashenka regime know who was in charge, cut supplies (The Moscow Times, 2011).

omnibalancing strategy; the regime was still dependent on Russia despite a four-year effort to pivot towards China.

Part 5 of the process-tracing causal mechanism represents a repeat issue for the Belarusian regime: the various projects fail to produce the expected returns or, as with the case of the GSIP, Belarusian official struggle to attract foreign investment and meet Chinese loan conditions. This becomes a critical problem for the Lukashenka regime's efforts to develop ties to level where Chinese support can be used for omnibalancing purposes. Between 2011 and 2014, several joint China-Belarus projects do not go according to plan, including the GSIP. Much has to do with inexperience—mainly with the Belarusian planners, but also with the first major Chinese participant to the GSIP (Rudyj, 2021, pp. 7 and 15). Progress on the GSIP is very slow. While there is some minimal construction early on (such as choosing the site for the GSIP), construction of any large structures does not begin until 2014 (Shraibman, 2014b, p. 7). Chinese preferential (tied) loans were used to fund much of the initial projects and the GSIP (Rudyj, 2021, p. 6). The tied conditions required Belarus to rely heavily on Chinese labour and, crucially, purchase Chinese-made goods that were of unpredictable quality (Shraibman, 2014b, p. 5). As Belarusian officials found, the quality of some Chinese materials and equipment was suboptimal, leading to dissatisfaction and project delays. For instance, incidents such as sub-par Chinese turbines being installed at a Belarusian power plant or the foundations of structures failing domestic safety standards underscored Belarusian frustrations (Belarus Partizan, 2017; Shraibman, 2014b, p. 5). Five of the 30 projects begun in 2005 to 2015 had to be bailed out by the Belarusian state (Rudyj, 2021, p. 19). And by 2015, only seven companies have registered at the GSIP (ibid., p. 17). A condition of the Chinese loans required a certain number of companies bringing certain amounts of investment (Tsarik et al., 2020). Not meeting these conditions held back the release of funds. This is likely what led to the dismissal of key GSIP architect and China advocate Anatoly Tozik from his post of Deputy Prime Minister

(Yeliseyeu, 2015, pp. 99–100). It also resulted in Lukashenka furiously dressing-down the pro-China technocrats in the Belarusian government in February 2014 (BelTA, 2014). The failure of various projects and the inability to meet Chinese loan conditions significantly hindered Belarus's efforts to leverage its relationship with China for omnibalancing purposes, ultimately leading to frustration, delays, and political consequences within the regime.

Despite these challenges and structural difficulties, Chinese loans allowed Lukashenka to redistribute resources to reward his regime's winning coalition—courtier business elites and bureaucrats loyal to the president. By allocating contracts and credits to key figures, Belarus used its ties with China to contribute to the regime's internal stability. Although, this is simply an example of quotidian omnibalancing—there is no evidence did it saved the regime from a crisis. This usually takes the form of granting state contracts or ownership of new developments to business elites with close ties to Lukashenka. Vladimir Peftiev, Aleksandr Moshensky, Aleksandr Shakutin, and Anatolii Kapskii are ranked within the top 20 richest businessmen in Belarus (Ezhednevny Zhurnal, 2016). They are known to have close ties to Lukashenka and his family (J. Korosteleva, 2012, pp. 16–19). All of them have received either construction contracts or credits from Chinese loans to the Belarusian state (Ezhednevny Zhurnal, 2016). One analyst for a Russian business magazine names each of these men as being "pocketbooks" for Lukashenka (Frumkin, 2015). Regime supporters Nikolai Vorobei and Aleksei Oleksin (seventeenth and ninth richest men in Belarus respectively) have also received funds from China Merchants Group for construction at Minsk Airport (Ezhednevny Zhurnal, 2017). Thus, while the development of ties is slow, the regime does not neglect key regime elites that keep him in power. In doing so, relations with China are being used to co-opt elites closer to the regime. But this should not be used as evidence of omnibalancing.

Ultimately, the strain of managing Chinese conditionality while keeping regime elites on-side highlighted both the potential and limitations of this long-term omnibalancing strategy with China. To summarise these challenges, part 5 in figure 3.2 (above) has “Belarusian officials” as the actors and “Struggle to meet joint commitments and Chinese credit conditionality” as the action. This drove the regime to address these issues, which are captured in part 6.

Part 6 of the process-tracing causal mechanism in Belarus’s omnibalancing efforts with China starts in 2014 and is characterised by efforts of the Belarusian leadership to improve relations with the West. This shift was triggered primarily by Russia’s annexation of Crimea, which pushed the Lukashenka regime to present itself as a stabilising regional actor (A. Wilson, 2016). Minsk is promoted as a well-located neutral ground where Russian, Ukrainian, and Western negotiators can find a solution to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. This results in the Minsk 1 and Minsk 2 treaties. With this as a backdrop, the Lukashenka regime seeks to improve its ties with the West. Part 6 in figure 3.2 (above) has “The Belarusian leadership” as the actor and “Tries to improve relations with the West” as the causal action. The fact the 2015 Belarusian presidential elections were concluded without a violent crackdown helped efforts to relax Western sanctions (Foy & Barker, 2015). Ever the opportunist, Lukashenka takes advantage of Russia’s 2014 invasion of Ukraine to redefine his social contract—from a provider of incremental economic improvement (halted by Russian pragmatisation) to a provider of regional security—and to reach out to the West (A. Wilson, 2016).

This outreach to the West was also an effort to create economic diversification, attract investment, and secure a degree of independence from Kremlin pressure. This embodies what Wilson (2021, pp. 255–276) describes as Lukashanka’s juggling act. Lukashenka is making efforts to improve ties with the EU and gain better access to Western markets (Foy, 2015; A. Wilson, 2015d). At the same time, Lukashenka’s regime sought to balance these efforts with ongoing ties to China, using the GSIP as

a vehicle to engage with international markets, and present Belarus as a bridge between East and West. To do this, the GSIP (like Hong Kong within China) has a different legal-economic structure within, but separate from, Belarus (Rudyj, 2020, p. 253). With this separation, a great deal of effort was made to make sure the GSIP had a liberal ownership and tax structure, that there was convincing protection of property rights, preparations for WTO membership, and better relations with the EU (Foy, 2015; Kolkin, 2018). Lukashenka is seeking to maintain access to Russian markets but to keep Kremlin ambitions at bay. While Russia is always Belarus's most important partner, support from the Kremlin can be predatory. And in tandem, the Lukashenka seeks to attract Chinese investment and companies to Belarus and to be a bridge for China into various markets (A. Wilson, 2015d). This is the true function of the GSIP. It is not just an industrial park, it is also a logistics hub (Freight Week, 2019; Zhou & Zhou, 2018). The plan is to act as a manufacturing, development, and distribution hub for Chinese goods from around the world into Europe, Russia, and the post-Soviet Commonwealth of Independent States members (CIS). This was a precarious balancing act. But maintaining it created many opportunities for the regime. Its relative success at this balancing act drove it to push forward with its ambitious China omnibalancing plans, which will be elaborated in part 7.

The final part in the process-tracing causal mechanism centres around the Chinese leadership's decision to announce a major role for Belarus along the BRI. By mid-2015, Chinese President Xi Jinping officially visits Minsk and publicly endorsed the Belarusian GSIP as a distinctive element in the BRI. Xi's visit culminated in announcing the GSIP was "a pearl along the Belt and Road Initiative" (MFA of the PRC, 2015), signifying the park's (and Belarus's) pivotal role in China's BRI (Braga & Sangar, 2020). This high-level endorsement also came with two large expanded credit lines totalling $7 billion to Belarus (Custer et al., 2021; Tsarik et al., 2020, p. 9).

Despite Xi's words, the deal was not yet sealed. Shortly following Xi's visit, Lukashenka made a discreet "working visit" to China (Press Service of the Belarusian President, 2015). The trip was likely to renegotiate the terms of the Chinese credit lines. The aim was to reduce the number to tied loans on offer and to get greater direct investment from China. Shortly after, in September 2016 Lukashenka made much publicised visit where the two leaders agreed to "switch[…] bilateral cooperation from credit to direct investments" (Rudyj, 2021, p. 12). The BRI announcement and change in investment terms had a major practical impact. For example, from 2013–2015, China had invested just $25.7 million in GSIP (Rudyj, 2021, p. 13). But from 2016–2019, more than $100 million was injected into the park's development. FDI increased dramatically (at least in comparison to what had come before). From 2016 to 2019, Belarus received a total of $545 million in FDI from China—more than all it had received in Chinese FDI from 2007 to 2015.

Part 7 of the causal mechanism illustrates the culmination of initial efforts to strengthen ties with China. This is the juncture where China's financial and political involvement with Belarus reaches a level where China acting as lifeline for Belarus's economy and authoritarian regime seem plausible. Indeed, greater Chinese involvement might lessen the chances of a Russian invasion. If China has more interests in Belarus, the logic goes, it may be less likely that Russia would cause instability in there and threaten the existing investments of its Chinese ally. The GSIP raised the level of partnership relations between Belarus and China (Braga & Sangar, 2020). The GSIP and Belarus had become a central element of BRI trade into both Europe and the CIS (which includes Russia). The more Chinese commitments in Belarus, the greater the potential upset for China if the Kremlin chose to invade or disrupt the arrangements built by the Lukashenka regime.

A key element of omnibalancing is the balancing of internal threats. The heightened relations with China made the GSIP's ambitious plans seem more plausible. These plans sought to re-establish the incremental gains in living

standards-style social contract. The GSIP feeds into the Belarusian Soviet-nostalgic identity of being a manufacturing powerhouse. Although structures were built by Chinese labourers, the GSIP intended to provide 120,000 Belarusian jobs (in such fields as pharmaceuticals, mechanical engineering, and electronics, among other fields) (Maltsev, 2014; Shraibman, 2014a). This would have a substantial impact upon a country of 10 million people. This would provide livelihoods and opportunities for a substantial portion of Belarus's working population—legitimising the regime and potentially re-establishing the economic social contract. And of course, the regime's ability to reward loyal elites would also increase—a repeat of what was demonstrated in part 5 of the causal mechanism.

Thus, Part 7 represents a critical phase where, on the surface, Belarus's relationship with China had reached an empirical stage where its long-term omnibalancing strategy seemed possible. It had the potential to reward regime elites, reduce dependence on Russia, and prop up an economic contract. However, as figure 3.2 (above) shows, the demands for this ambitious strategy creates a feedback loop—Belarus continues to struggle to meet the conditionality in Chinese financial agreements, which hampers its ability to fully benefit. These challenges persist into 2016 and beyond, suggesting that while omnibalancing in this instance was attempted, its success remained an ongoing issue for Belarus. This and the "outcome" of the process-tracing causal mechanism in figure 3.2 will be expanded on in the following discussion section.

3.4.6 Outcome Assessment

This section discusses the process-tracing causal mechanism of Belarus's attempt to omnibalance with China, as illustrated in figure 3.2, and evaluates the outcome. The Lukashenka regime's efforts to use Belarus as a manufacturing and distribution hub on the BRI were intended to sustain the regime's social contract and shield it from Russian pressure. This strategy of authoritarian persistence, as seen in

the mechanism's outcome, highlights how technocrats within the regime viewed China as a vital partner for economic diversification and political survival. The outcome in figure 3.2 (above) is "Technocrats in the Lukashenka regime see a strategy for authoritarian persistence forming, which uses Belarus as a manufacturing and distribution hub on the BRI to sustain the regime's social contract and shield it from Russian pressure." Indeed, one of the chief architects of the GSIP, Kyrill Rudyj summarises the aim of the GSIP in autocratic terms, "We are used to saying that if there is a market economy, there must be democracy, and if there is authoritarianism, there must be a command and administrative system for managing the economy. China is an example where there is no such connection… there can be a monopoly in politics, and competition in the economy" (TUT.BY, 2020). The GSIP is a strategy for the Lukashenka regime to maintain political power, but also modernise its economy. This is a form of authoritarian persistence because it is improving state legitimacy through its ties with China to improve the economy while leaving its political dominance unchanged. What makes the GSIP and ties with China a long term omnibalancing strategy is the way it is designed to reshape the Belarusian regime's social contract. It is designed to provide jobs and development in a similar scale to the energy transition position the Lukashenka regime once profited from. Instead now, the regime seeks to profit off flows of Chinese goods into Europe and Eurasia. Once becoming a part of China's "growing arch of influence," which bypasses Russia via Central Asia on the BRI, there may be reduced need for Belarus to follow Russian demands over trade (Melinkova, 2016). If the regime can ensure Belarus as a key Chinese partner for trade into Europe, there may be no need to adhere to EAEU regulations, either. There is also the potential for China to become an alternative to EU democratisation efforts. But as Yakouchyk (2016) has argued, China's growing presence in the Russia-Ukraine-Belarus region may manifest itself as a bulwark against the Eastern Neighbourhood policy and efforts similar to it. By 2016, this strategy has finally gained some plausibility. First, the structure of bilateral cooperation favours FDI and not tied Chinese loans. Second,

Belarus has been given a unique position along Xi Jinping's flagship foreign policy collective action project, the BRI. By 2016, Belarus's partnership with China had reached the level of a "comprehensive strategic partnership" (Braga & Sangar, 2020), signalling that the key elements of its China strategy had materialised.

But this long-term omnibalancing plan in practice forced Lukashenka to perform a balancing act that was highly unstable. The Belarusian strongman did not have a multivector foreign policy; this approach did not seek to extract the best deal among competing partners (see Vanderhill et al., 2020, p. 976). Instead, it was a please-everyone foreign policy. In order for the GSIP to be BRI distribution into Europe and into the EAEU and CIS, Lukashenka needed to maintain relations with three very different partners: (1) the Kremlin, which provided predatory support; (2) the Chinese, who acted cordially but ruthlessly sought profitability; (3) the EU, who were critical and had built a habit of sanctioning the regime. For Lukashenka, the metaphor might be like a Chinese plate spinner, spinning multiple plates, while trying to look tough.

The Lukashenka regime's efforts to align with China—most visibly via the GSIP and China's BRI—is textbook balancing behaviour. At first it may appear the regime is seeking to bandwagon with China's rise, taking advantage of Chinese financial assistance (such as tied loans without political conditionality) and increasing trade with China. But as this process-tracing exercise has shown, a consistent driver of deeper alignment with China is to reduce dangerous levels on dependence on Russia. To be sure, the spectre of economic crisis and mass protest is never far. But the threats of Russian pressure and internal instability are linked. To be sure, Belarus's closest formal ally during the 2006–2016 period is still Russia. But the Lukashenka regime "was manoeuvring to preserve its freedom of manoeuvre… [and] effective sovereignty" (A. Wilson, 2021, p. 268). And this where the three wings of Belarus's so-called multivector foreign policy originated from. The first wing is to Russia. The second wing extends to the EU. And by 2015 (a year after the GSIP had

finally begun to develop in earnest, and trade levels with China were growing, Belarus was re-establishing relations with the EU), the third wing began to develop towards China.

But the Lukashenka regime struggled to develop its third wing. the regime consistently did not meet a single one of its commitments relating to the project (Ezhednevnik, 2016; Sivitskii, 2021; Tsarik et al., 2020, pp. 18–19). As it has been shown, the regime exerted a huge amount of effort across the decade to make a success of Belarus-China relations. But the regime struggled to fulfil many tied conditions to unlock further Chinese investment, such as the number of non-Chinese foreign investors, as it attempted to reform but also maintain control over the Belarusian economy and society. This created the feedback loop in the process-tracing wireframe in figure 3.2 (above). While these part did not repeat in the same order as 4, 5, 6, and 7, these four same parts would repeat from 2017–2020. In late 2018, Russia would again apply energy pressure in the form of a threatened oil import duty on Belarus (Sivitskii, 2019, p. 12). Lukashenka would push back and seek to improve ties with the West and especially with China (ibid, 2019, p. 15 fn. 43). Chinese (and Belarusian) officials would reassure Lukashenka that their “iron brotherhood” and joint projects were on track (Sivitskii, 2020, para. 37). But Belarusian officials would struggle to meet the high targets demanded by their plan—clearly evident in the GSIP (Tsarik et al., 2020). Specifically, the Chinese need for good EU relations to facilitate westward BRI-trade via Belarus were dashed when the regime mishandled the (rigged) 9 August 2020 presidential elections and the subsequent brutal crackdown on mass protests (BBC, 2020; Zakharov, 2020). The regime was clearly blindsided by the popular uprising against the regime (Ioffe, 2021). From this point forward, the second EU and third China wings of Belarusian foreign policy became problematic for the regime’s continued grip on power. These wings required stability for Chinese business and human rights for EU access to markets. But the Lukashenka regime had grown complacent and the discontent

against him had boiled over (S. Hall, 2023b). Referring back to the seven enabling conditions discussed earlier (above), in 2020 two enabling conditions had changed from the 2010–2011 crisis: low legitimacy had moved from ambiguous to present and elite fragmentation had shifted from absent to present. The enabling conditions for the Lukashenka regime were more conducive for omnibalancing than in 2010–2011. But the GSIP and relations with China still needed more time and development to omnibalance immediate threats such as this. Instead, the Lukashenka regime had to call on Russia to omnibalance the mass protests (Braga, 2021b). The Lukashenka regime sacrificed its sovereignty in return for support for its crackdown (ibid.). In the process, the regime dashed its attempted long-term omnibalancing authoritarian persistence strategy with China.

Thus, the GSIP occupies a curious position in Belarus-China relations. Its role evolves over time. It is both a symbol of success (initial investments) and a point of failure (struggles to meet loan conditions and attract investors). Its aims seem too ambitious and time horizons too long for the Lukashenka regime to manage effectively into a functioning omnibalancing strategy. But as Wilson (2021, p. 276) notes, Lukashenka's "juggling strategy could have continued if Lukashenka had been able to organise a quieter election in 2020." A chief architect of the GSIP still believes the park is viable for Chinese trade into the CIS (Rudyj, 2021). However, it cannot hold the same potential without being linked to Europe.

In the end, the GSIP represents both the potential and the limitations of Belarus's authoritarian presistence omnibalancing strategy with China. While it offered the promise of economic diversification and reduced reliance on Russia, the complexities of managing foreign relations with China, the EU, and Russia simultaneously proved too challenging. The Lukashenka regime's failure to fully meet its commitments and navigate the delicate balancing act led to the ultimate collapse of its strategy with China. What began as a promising venture ultimately exposed the inherent instability in Belarus's long-term omnibalancing attempt.

3.5 Case Conclusion

This chapter has argued that Minsk responded to the progressive unravelling of its Russian-financed energy-social contract by attempting a China-centred omnibalancing strategy whose core was the Belarus-China Great Stone Industrial Park. Four of the seven omnibalancing enabling conditions were clearly present, including acute internal threats, high personal stakes for the ruler, degraded checks, and a vulnerable geopolitical position. The leadership sought to use Chinese credit and symbolism to distribute new rents, re-brand economic modernisation, and signal an alternative path for foreign support. Yet, the process tracing method showed that the strategy was internally inconsistent. Chinese loans were tied, conditionality was repeatedly missed, and recurrent Russian coercion obliged Lukashenka to oscillate between Beijing, Moscow, and Brussels. The outcome, therefore, was an omnibalancing attempt that generated short-term redistribution and "self-bolstering" publicity, but did not remove the structural dependency on Russia.

The sentiment analysis contributed by supplying a longitudinal, replicable map of elite sentiment on China. It identified a statistically discernible, eleven-year rise in positive language towards China, punctuated by spikes that coincided with presidential visits, loan announcements and external shocks. These inflection points guided the selection of episodes for close investigation—both for authoritarian learning and process tracing—and demonstrated that Minsk's rhetorical warmth was deliberate rather than routine. The sentiment analysis tracked specific moments when Chinese credit or high-level engagement promised a pathway to relieve external and domestic pressures. At the same time, the general absence of any symmetrical increase in negative sentiment confirmed that the regime presented China to domestic and international audiences as an unequivocally benign partner, underlining the "branding" function of the relationship.

The rhetorical markers of the sentiment analysis complemented the explaining-outcome process tracing that followed. Constructing a seven-step causal

mechanism, the process tracing demonstrated how enabling conditions interacted with external events and clarified why the omnibalancing attempt stalled. Key features of the process tracing mechanism were the Russian price pragmatisation trigger, the 2006 policy pivot, successive credit lines, renewed Kremlin coercion, difficulties meeting conditions, a parallel tilt to the West, and Xi Jinping's 2015 endorsement. This research demonstrates both the explanatory usefulness of the revised omnibalancing framework and the limits omnibalancing as an authoritarian persistence strategy. Omnibalancing can account for the decision to seek Chinese support, but it also reveals the fragility of such strategies for small, resource-dependent autocracies.

The Belarus case study supports the argument that China can supply material resources and reputational capital, which autocrats may mobilise for authoritarian persistence. But the case study also suggests that symbolic "authoritarian branding" and omnibalancing cannot substitute for the combination of eroding economic foundations and a predatory patron. The findings therefore qualify the broader claim that Chinese engagement can be used by autocratic regimes to reinforce authoritarian persistence, but there are risks, caveats, and limits involved. This case study provides a baseline against which the subsequent Russian and Ukrainian case studies will be compared.

Chapter 4. Russia

> The accomplishments of China's Communist Party in developing its government deserve the highest marks... The practical experience they have should be intensely studied.
>
> — Aleksandr Zhukov, Russian State Duma first deputy chairman[15]

4.1 Case Study Introduction

This chapter argues that the Kremlin's tightening partnership with Beijing between 2006 and 2016 was driven by long-term pragmatism and selected policy borrowing rather than to balance against internal and external threats. Russia therefore constitutes a negative case of omnibalancing (for a definition of omnibalancing, see Chapter 2, section 2.3). The 2011–2012 Bolotnaya protests, although the most plausible domestic shock for the regime in this study's timeframe, never reached an existential threshold. Most omnibalancing enabling conditions that normally propel rulers towards external alignments to address internal threats were weak or absent. What did occur was a gradual, top-down cultivation of strategic partnership, rising positive sentiment among Russian policymakers towards China accompanied by the selective adoption of Chinese internet-sovereignty concepts, and the occasional use of Chinese finance for energy projects. These initiatives widened Russia's room for manoeuvre vis-à-vis the West, but they did not constitute an omnibalancing response.

The analysis proceeds in four steps. Section 4.2 reconstructs the domestic, regional, and international context for Russia. The consolidation of the super-presidential system, the entrenchment of *Sistema* (defined below), and Russia's great-power self-image impacted range of foreign policy options open to the Kremlin. Section 4.3 presents the sentiment analysis results for top Russian policymakers,

[15]. See Levy (2009).

tracing the rise of favourable rhetoric towards China. Positive sentiment surges towards China were absent during the Bolotnaya protests. Section 4.4 subjects the Bolotnaya protests to omnibalancing enabling conditions. This systematic anlaysis finds the protest wave fell short of an existential crisis; The seven revised enabling conditions for omnibalancing were largely unmet. The improvement in Sino-Russian ties was, therefore, not a crisis-mitigation strategy. Section 4.5 summarises the findings and specifies the comparative leverage the Russian negative case provides for the dissertation's later cross-case analysis.

Aleksandr Zhukov's remark, placed at the head of the chapter, captures the performative admiration that senior Russian elites increasingly voiced for the Chinese Communist Party. It foreshadows the chapter's core puzzle: why did a leadership that publicly extolled China's "practical experience" stop short of mobilising that relationship when confronted with its most serious domestic protest? The pages that follow unpack this disjunction between rhetoric and strategic behaviour, using it to clarify both the scope and the limits of omnibalancing in the contemporary post-Soviet space.

4.2 Context

This section establishes the context for the case study analysis. It traces the political, institutional, and strategic settings in which Russian foreign and domestic policy operated during 2006–2016. It argues, first, the consolidation of the super-presidential system under Putin and the entrenchment of "*Sistema*" produced a highly centralised, personalised decision-making process that merged formal structures with informal networks. Second, it describes the principal domestic and external trends that shaped elite perceptions of opportunity and threat. These trends include economic performance, identity politics, regional hegemonic ambitions, and mounting confrontation with the West. Third, it identifies how those trends interacted with the regime's three pillars of survival (elite management, repression, and

legitimation) to create, or foreclose, incentives to seek external support. By mapping these dynamics, the section lays the foundations to assess (1) whether the enabling conditions for omnibalancing were present, and (2) why Russia's alignment with China, although increasingly co-operative, did not constitute a crisis-driven attempt to neutralise existential internal threats. In short, the Context section argues that Russia's domestic architecture and geopolitical environment help to explain both the scope and the limits of Sino-Russian collaboration during the period under review.

4.2.1 Overview of Policy Generation and Policy Trends in Putin's Russia

Understanding the policy generation process in Putin's Russia is key to any analysis of omnibalancing. It reveals how the regime perceives and responds to both internal and external threats. The following account of Russia's centralised, top-down governance approach, which is guided by informal networks and Putin's inner circle, explains behaviour at the regional and international levels. The section also contextualises how foreign alignment and interventions are not just reactions to external pressures but are linked with internal regime survival strategies. Without this insight into the workings of the Russian state, the reader would miss how the domestic political environment shapes Russia's foreign policy decisions, especially under the framework of omnibalancing. This preparatory knowledge ensures that the subsequent analysis of Russia's foreign relations is not viewed in isolation but as part of a broader, regime-centric strategy for maintaining power and stability.

Policy generation in Russia is a highly centralised, top-down process. Alena Ledeneva (2013) concept of "*Sistema*" is used to describe Russia's approach to policy making. *Sistema* combines formal constitutional legitimacy and institutional norms with unofficial networks and practices. The key actors in this process are President Vladimir Putin, his inner circle, and "curators... [who are] semiofficial figures through whom state governance flows" (Pavlovsky, 2016, p. 13). Putin's winning coalition, essential for regime survival, is made up of these actors.

The contemporary form of *Sistema* has its roots in the years immediately after communist collapse. Two years of confrontation between the new Russian Parliament and Yeltsin's Presidency followed the August 1991. Publicly, this resulted in the tragic events of 4 October 1993, where the army violently cleared protesters from the Russian White House and other facilities in the capital. Systemically, the years of confrontation encouraged the use of certain nondemocratic and informal practices of the communist state, for example telephoning in orders or using bureaucratic corruption rather than relying on official procedures (Kryshtanovskaya & White, 2011, pp. 19–24; Ledeneva, 2013; Rosefielde & Hedlund, 2009, pp. 95–100; Sakwa, 2008, pp. 40–63). This resulted in Yeltsin's 1993 revised constitution, which made Russia's government a "super-presidential system." Yeltsin's revisions essentially removed the ability of Parliament to check the power of the president (Sakwa, 2008, pp. 68–69).

Vladimir Putin was elected president shortly after Russian forces took control of Grozny, the capital of Chechnya, in February 2000. The two objectives his regime has pursued are consolidation of the autocratic power and refining of the top-down formal and informal networks of command inherited from Yeltsin (Kryshtanovskaya & White, 2011, pp. 24–37).

The amalgam of Soviet party-state practices and super-presidential power, which (re)materialised under Yeltsin and was consolidated under Putin, has been described variously, such as the "network state", "dual state", and "*Sistema*" (Kononenko & Moshes, 2011; Ledeneva, 2013; Sakwa, 2011b). These theories emphasize that for the Russian political system to operate, informal networks merge with, exploit and divert official hierarchies.

In *sistema*, a small group political actors hold great influence. The first version of Putin's *sistema* was called "managed democracy" (Colton & McFaul, 2003). It lasted from Putin's election in 2000 until 2012, the final year of Medvedev's

Presidency. During Medvedev's four-year spell as president, Putin retained a great deal of power and managed democracy was maintained. The second version began in Putin's third term as president in 2012. The primary change is more major decisions are taken by Putin himself; the difference is there are fewer competing views and less consensus building (Hill & Gaddy, 2015, pp. 218–224 and 239–240; Pavlovsky, 2016).

Key actors in the current version of *sistema* include Putin, his winning coalition (which includes members of his inner circle) and curators. "A curator is a political bureaucrat, a project manager authorised by the Kremlin to operate through personal agents" (Pavlovsky, 2016, p. 13). Putin's winning coalition includes essential political supporters, such as Gennady Zyuganov, quasi-opposition party figure and loyal supporter, or Vyacheslav Volodin, the architect of Putin's election campaigns (Zygar, 2016). Curators include figures such as Ramzan Kadyrov, Chechnya's strong man ruler who is fiercely loyal to Putin, or Anatoly Serdyukov, Russia's defence minister from 2007 to 2012 who took on the task of modernising Russia's military (Pavlovsky, 2016).

Putin and key members of his regime manage domestic elites via the United Russia party. The United Russia Party is a "party of power", an entity that serves the Kremlin's power (here Kremlin refers to powerful, decision-making members of Putin's regime) (Laverty, 2015). The party is used by the regime to manage domestic elites and other political parties. It should be noted that foreign policy decisions are exclusively decided by Putin and a small group of confidants (Gel'man, 2015; Pavlovsky, 2016). While the Russian parliament might appear as a so-called rubber stamp, there is much informal, sometimes bitter behind-closed-doors wrangling over domestic policy (Noble, 2018). However, if he deems necessary, Putin can intervene to settle a dispute (ibid., p. 14). Russia analyst Mark Galeotti (2019, Chapter 1) argues this behaviour contributes to Russian politics under Putin resembling a "royal court": only the Tsar may have the final say. This is especially the case in foreign

policy. It is widely said that over time, Putin has relied on fewer and fewer experts and personal to make major foreign policy decisions (Chotiner, 2022; Kirby, 2022). key members of the Kremlin, such as Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov for example, were not consulted about the 2014 annexation of Crimea (Pavlovsky, 2016; Zygar, 2023, Chapter 14). Thus, through the timeframe of this study, the institutional checks against a particular foreign policy (already weakened thanks to the super presidential system established under the Yeltsin constitution) such as the choice to omnibalance a threat, essentially became non-existent around and after 2014.

From 2006 to 2016, policy making in Russia was characterised by a highly centralised, top-down process, encapsulated by Alena Ledeneva's *sistema*. This system blends formal constitutional legitimacy with informal networks and practices, with President Vladimir Putin and his inner circle playing pivotal roles. The roots of this governance style trace back to the post-Soviet period, particularly Yeltsin's 1993 constitution, which established a super-presidential system that diminished parliamentary checks on presidential power. Putin's regime has focused on consolidating autocratic control and refining these informal networks. Key actors in this system include curators, semi-official figures who manage state governance, and Putin's winning coalition of loyal supporters. Domestic policy can involve behind-the-scenes, inter-elite bargaining, but Putin retains the final say. This is especially the case in foreign policy, where decision-making has become increasingly centralised and isolated. By 2014, institutional checks on foreign policy had effectively disappeared, with Putin relying on a shrinking circle of confidants for major decisions, such as the annexation of Crimea.

4.2.1.1 Domestic Policy Trends

Since Putin came to power, the primary drivers of domestic policy have been economic prosperity and, after 2011, national identity. These have been used to generate loyalty among the population for Putin's regime. The dominance of Putin's regime has meant the origin of domestic threats has not come from among the elite

(laterally). When threats have manifested themselves, they have taken the form public criticism and mass protests. Countering domestic threats has taken the form of maintaining regime legitimacy in guiding the economy, emphasizing Russia's uniqueness from the West, and the repression of criticism.

The consolidation of the incumbent regime's legitimacy began with the economy. After 1999, the recentralisation of power, nationalisation of oil and gas industries, progressive economic reforms and deregulation of small and medium businesses combined with rising commodity prices (particularly oil and gas) helped restore the government's institutional capacity and buy the loyalty of the population (Aleprete, 2013b, pp. 11–13; Åslund, 2009; Bacon, 2014, p. 146). To be clear, policies took advantage of improved global economic conditions, rather than creating them. Public goods were re-established (such as pensions) and reserve funds were created to act as cushions for crises (Guriev & Tsyvinski, 2010, pp. 12–13). Throughout the 2000s, even despite the 2009 economic downturn, the majority of Russian citizens sincerely supported Putin's regime. Russians had never lived so well (Gel'man, 2015; Treisman, 2011).

Putin's regime used its strong position to neutralise elite level, lateral threats. The regime worked to silence critics of government policy. It increased state control over the country's TV channels, curtailed the power of regional governors, and sent a warning to Russia's oligarchs to remain out of politics by arresting Mikhail Khodorkovsky and nationalising his assets in 2003 (Belin, 2002; Lipman, 2016; Sakwa, 2008). The United Russia party has dominated politics. Established in 1999 to mobilise support for Vladimir Putin, decisive actions in Chechnya and the improving economy quickly made United Russia the most popular regional and national party. It has been the largest party in the State Duma (lower legislative house) since 2003. In 2016, it won 76 percent of seats (Baunov, 2016). These measures have given extra protection for the status quo in Russian politics.

By 2011, however, economic slowdown and civic unrest signalled that adjustments needed to be made to domestic policy. The regime's legitimacy was being challenged. After the 2009 downturn, capital flight continued. Investors were unimpressed by Russia's continually poor judicial system and property rights protections (Guriev, 2016, p. 19). The increased prosperity of the 2000s and a liberal government attitude to the flow of information resulted in greater civic participation. People also took to social media to expose government hypocrisy (White & McAllister, 2014). In 2011, voter fraud in parliamentary elections sparked protests and mass rallies. The announcement of Putin's return to the presidency increased feelings of frustration over Putin's dominance of Russian politics (Lipman, 2016). From 2014 to 2016, the economy suffered a double shock of a collapse in commodity prices and Western sanctions in reaction to the Russian invasion of Crimea.

The regime responded by justifying policy with nationalism. During his 2012 re-election campaign, Putin published an article in Nezavisimaia Gazeta that called for a new form of Russian ethnonationalism. It emphasized the historic "mission" of ethnic Russians. "The Russian experience of state development is unique: we are a multinational society but we are one people" (Putin, 2012). After Ukraine rose up against the Russian-backed Yanukovych regime, Russian state media ratcheted up anti-Western rhetoric and increased the use of nationalist themes. In particular, it further developed the idea that Russia was an anti-liberal, European civilisation that is apart from Western values (Laruelle, 2016, pp. 282–290). The regime is attempting to use this idea to perform two functions. First, to shift legitimacy away from economic performance to the regime as the defender of Russia's historic mission and values. Second, to externalise Russia's domestic problems by placing blame on Western interference. From 2013 to 2014, popular support for Putin's presidency increased from 40 percent to 68.2 percent (Alexseev & Hale, 2016, pp. 198–200).

4.2.1.2 Regional Policy Trends

Russian policy in the Russia-Ukraine-Belarus region has aimed to maintain Russian hegemony (political and economic dominance) and preserve the region as a Western buffer against the EU and NATO (Nalbandov, 2016, p. 211). In practice, this has meant preventing destabilising democratisation movements, such as the Colour Revolutions, to criticise and halt perceived NATO expansion, and to counteract EU integration efforts. Therefore, a combination of soft and hard threats occupy the regional level. Democratisation is a soft external threat that can manifest domestic mass protests. While NATO expansion is a potential military threat, the EU has used its Eastern Neighbourhood policy to project its economic and political preferences to the region. NATO and the EU challenge Russia's great power image as the regional, pan-Slavic hegemon.

Russia's regional and international policy under Putin began as the Primakov Doctrine (Lo, 2015, pp. 42–45). The Primakov Doctrine is based upon building consensus among multiple poles (centres) of power to balance against the United States, and its partner, the EU. While the doctrine is revisionist in part, its central aim is to preserve and stabilise. From 2009 to 2016, however, the Primakov Doctrine gained ideological and civilisational elements. The ideological element has come to be called Russian World concept (Suslov, 2018, pp. 341–346). The "Russian World" (Russkii mir) concept is a post-Soviet geopolitical ideology that suggests Russia's influence extends beyond the Russian Federation's borders, closely tied to its cultural connections with Russian-speaking populations abroad. It has evolved through different ideological stages, often involving elements of neo-imperialism and spheres of influence in regions where Russian speakers and Russian cultural traditions remain strong. Over time, the concept has been used to justify Russia's geopolitical interests, soft-power strategies, and even territorial expansion, such as the annexation of Crimea. The civilisational (identity) element embodies a kind of Eurasian exceptionalism of being European-Christian-Orthodox but non-Western (K.

K. Oskanian, 2018, pp. 42–43). The goal is to counteract the United States' global dominance in political and economic affairs—its unipolarity—and create sources of Russian stability at home and abroad. In Russia's view, unipolarity limits freedom of action and compromises its image as one of the world's great powers (Makarychev & Morozov, 2011, pp. 355–358). The US and the EU are considered co-conspirators. The EU's influence in the region, what it calls the eastern neighbourhood, is viewed as a part of a Western integration project (White et al., 2010, p. 347). In essence, the EU and NATO represent the soft (politics and values) and hard (military) extension of US unipolarity into Russia's near abroad.

The Russian world concept and Eurasian exceptionalism has emerged to counteract Western, destabilising influences. The EU's neighbourhood policy provides incentives and assistance for democratisation. Therefore, the EU's regional policy is a soft, external threat, which can have a domestic impact. The EU "is keen to promote democracy and the rule of law. Democracy promotion is built into the [EU's European Neighbourhood policy]" (Popescu & Wilson, 2009, pp. 35–37). Russia sees the pro-democracy Colour Revolutions that toppled regimes in Europe, the Middle East and Central Asia from 1999 to 2005 as examples of Western democracy promotion. Preventing democracy promotion in Belarus and Ukraine is part of stopping an anti-regime movement gaining traction in Russia (Ambrosio, 2009; J. L. Wilson, 2009). What Russia offers to the region in return is "sovereign democracy." Sovereign democracy is "a political model that emphasises the need for states to follow 'national paths' to democracy, free from foreign intervention" (Popescu & Wilson, 2009, p. 35). Russia uses shared identity among the three Slavic nations (Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians), post-Soviet past and ties to the Russian Orthodox Church act as a vehicle for policy in the region (Popescu & Wilson, 2009, p. 29). The regime's recent policy shift to ethnonatinoalism has interlocked its image as a defender of pan-Slavic values together with efforts to fend off Western influence. For example, protecting the rights of ethnic Russian speakers,

was used to justify Russia's annexation of Crimea and support of separatism in Ukraine's Donbass region (Sakwa, 2015b; A. Wilson, 2014).

To summarise, regional policy primarily adheres to the principles of the Primakov Doctrine, but over time the doctrine has gained anti-Western civilisational and Russian World ideological elements to bolster its goals. It aims to preserve the region's political status quo and—working against Western unipolarity in the form of democracy promotion, and EU and NATO expansion.

4.2.1.3 International Policy Trends

Russia's international and regional level are alike in policy and threats. Policy is framed by the Primakov Doctrine, is reactive, and set in contrast to the West. Threats are a combination of persuasive and coercive Western policies. One exception is the War on Terror. It suits Russia's own aims of suppressing separatism in the Russian republics. More recently, fighting the spread of radical Islam has been used as a pretext for Russian involvement in Syria. Otherwise, the West is viewed as pursuing an anti-Russian agenda. The West's military interventions (in Iraq, Bosnia, Serbia and Libya) and its support for democracy promotion have reinforced the Russian ideals of preserving the status quo and counteracting unipolarity with consensus building. This underpins Russia's establishment of organisations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the 2012 pivot to Asia.

The Primakov Doctrine sets international policy in two ways (Lo, 2015, pp. 42–45). The first is preserving the status quo. No single power should be able to threaten the relations of other states. Security should serve to protect multiple poles of power. The second aspect is civilisational. It relates to the concept of sovereign democracy (discussed above). Just as there needs to multiple poles of power, the doctrine argues there must also be multiple civilisational poles (Huntington, 1993). The spread of Western liberal democracy is the threat to the diversity of other civilisational values and paths of development. For example, Russia's 2016 Foreign

Security Concept acknowledges the “[c]ultural and civilisational diversity of... multiple development models” (MFA of Russia, 2016). It goes on to state “attempts to impose values on others... [lead] ultimately to chaos” (ibid.).

This has resulted in what Sakwa (2015a, p. 70) refers to as “bicontinentalism.” As discussed above, Russia identifies as European, but is substantively anti-liberal in its civilisational values. To balance against the West and combat the damaging spread of liberal values, Russia must develop ties in the East. Russia, therefore, has a dualist orientation—at once with European roots, but also with a duty to champion anti-Western development. This is most clearly embodied in the SCO, whose members include Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, China, Kazakhstan and Russia. Members cooperate to promote “stability” and the regional norm is not democracy, but “diversity” (Ambrosio, 2009, pp. 159–163). In 2012, Vladimir Putin announced the development of more Eastern focused policy with a pivot to Asia, mirroring Obama’s 2009 pivot (Gabuev, 2015; Green, 2016). However, Russian analysts fear that Russia is becoming too dependent on a “friendly China” (Karaganov, 2016).

At the same time, China also represents a more conventional threat to Russia than simply trade dependence. Mutual suspicion between Russia and China dates to the 19th Century (Kissinger, 2012). Of all the colonial powers, Russia annexed the most territory from China. The Chinese remember and resent this. Since Soviet times, planners in the Kremlin have worried of a Chinese invasion of Russia’s Far East (Gordon et al., 2016). More recently, Russian nationalists have warned that Russia leasing land to Chinese farmers is “the beginning of ‘the Chinese conquest’ of Siberia” (Rousseau, 2012). Some suspect a Russian campaign started in 2015 to give Russian nationals a free hectare of land in the Arkharinsky district, which borders China, to farm or start a business is an effort to prevent Chinese from populating the region. Russian law prevents foreigners from buying land that is zoned for agricultural use (Parfitt, 2016). However, Russian officials continue to lease land to Chinese firms, because as a former Kremlin chief of staff says, “[w]e do

not have enough population... If a Chinese investor wants to cultivate virgin land 200km from the border and grow vegetables there—so do it, for God's sake" (Hille, 2015).

The centralised, top-down process of policy generation in Putin's Russia is deeply intertwined with informal networks, a legacy of the post-Soviet political landscape. Ledeneva's *sistema* and Sakwa's dual state concepts encapsulate how formal governance structures are complemented—and often overshadowed—by unofficial practices, with President Putin and his close inner circle exercising considerable control over decision-making. This governance approach not only impacts domestic politics but also informs Russia's foreign policy, where strategic alignments are often framed as part of a broader effort to maintain regime stability amidst internal and external threats. Understanding these mechanisms is crucial for analysing Russia's omnibalancing tendencies, as foreign policy decisions are inseparable from the domestic priorities of regime preservation and elite consolidation. By 2014, institutional checks on such decisions had all but vanished, reinforcing the highly personalised nature of Putin's rule and its consequences on both regional and international policy trends.

Within this policymaking context, the crisis selected for omnibalancing analysis in Section 4.4 is the 2011–2012 Bolotnaya protests, the largest episode of popular mobilisation that Putin's Russia confronted during the 2006–2016 period. It has been chosen because, among the candidate disturbances reviewed (such as the 2009 financial crisis or the 2014 oil-price collapse) the Bolotnaya protests most nearly approximated a domestic challenge of sufficient magnitude to test the revised omnibalancing framework. The protests coincided with Putin's decision to return to the presidency after a stint as Prime Minister. They generated sustained media coverage, and triggered a discernible tightening of repression, thereby satisfying the minimum criteria of an acute, regime-centred threat. At the same time, contemporaneous sentiment analysis shows no surge in China-oriented rhetoric,

while process-tracing reveals no recourse to Chinese economic or security assistance. By selecting this episode, which is arguably the strongest available stress-test, the chapter can use Russia as a negative case of omnibalancing: why Russia's alignment with China did not constitute an omnibalancing response, thus reinforcing the comparative leverage of the dissertation's later cross-case comparison.

4.3 Sentiment Analysis Results

This section presents and interprets the sentiment analysis results of three top Russian policymakers between 2006 and 2016. The section advances three main arguments. First, Russian top policymakers spoke about China with growing frequency and, on balance, with an increasingly favourable sentiment. Second, sentiment peaks follow two distinct logics: (1) large, predictable surges coincide with Russian presidential visits to China or (2) with the announcement of major credit and energy deals. Three unexplained Q4 spikes (2011–2013) suggest more spontaneous elite interest in China. These spikes appear to be linked to the move towards closer co-operation on internet governance. Third, the absence of any comparable surge during the 2011–2012 Bolotnaya protests, together with the very limited presence of negative sentiment during the Crimea crisis, underlines that top policymaker's positive sentiment towards China was not linked or driven by domestic crisis and cannot, by itself, be used as evidence to argue for omnibalancing.

The section proceeds in three parts. Section 4.3.1 details the composition of the corpus and the pre-processing protocol. Section 4.3.2 reproduces the quarterly time-series sentiment analysis results graph and annotates the main inflection points. Seasonality, visit-related jumps and genuine outliers are scrutinised and evaluated. Section 4.3.3 discusses the substantive implications of the sentiment analysis. It links the 2011–2013 sentiment analysis outliers as indicators of the subsequent diffusion of Chinese cyber-sovereignty ideas. This section also flags

instances where automated sentiment analysis requires caution. Taken together, the results provide the empirical baseline for the discussion of process-tracing in Section 4.4 the later cross-case comparison in Chapter 6.

4.3.1 Corpus

For Russia, 14,165 texts were collected for Vladimir Putin, Dmitry Medvedev, and Sergei Lavrov.[16] Sources for Russian policymakers include the President of Russia website (Kremlin, 2020), two Government of Russia websites for Prime Ministerial texts (Government of Russia, 2020; Office of the Prime Minister, 2012), and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs website (MFA of Russia, 2020). A description of the corpus data collection, preprocessing, categorisation, and exploratory data analysis (EDA) details can be found in Chapter 2, section 2.5.4..

4.3.2 Graphical presentation of quarterly scores

The following features are common to all the sentiment analysis graphs in case study chapters and appear on Figure 4.1 below. The x-axis, labelled “Quarters 2006–2016,” presents the gathered data (from 2006 to 2016) in quarters. A four-character tag indicates the year and first quarter. The characters “06Q1,” for example, denotes the first quarter (January, February, March) of 2006. The y-axis, labelled “Sentiment-Bearing Sentences,” tallies the number of sentences categorised by the lexicon-based SA program. Four line colours and patterns track the differing language-bearing sentiments: a green, solid line for positive sentiment; a red, dashed line for negative sentiment; a blue, dotted line for neutral (non-sentiment bearing) language; and an orange, dot-dash line for ambiguous sentiment. A solid, purple trendline rises or descends across the graph. The trendline shows the average change (trend) for the single, most prevalent sentiment—either positive or negative. In Figure 4.1, this is positive sentiment. Atop the trendline is a marker, “x,” indicating the trendline slope

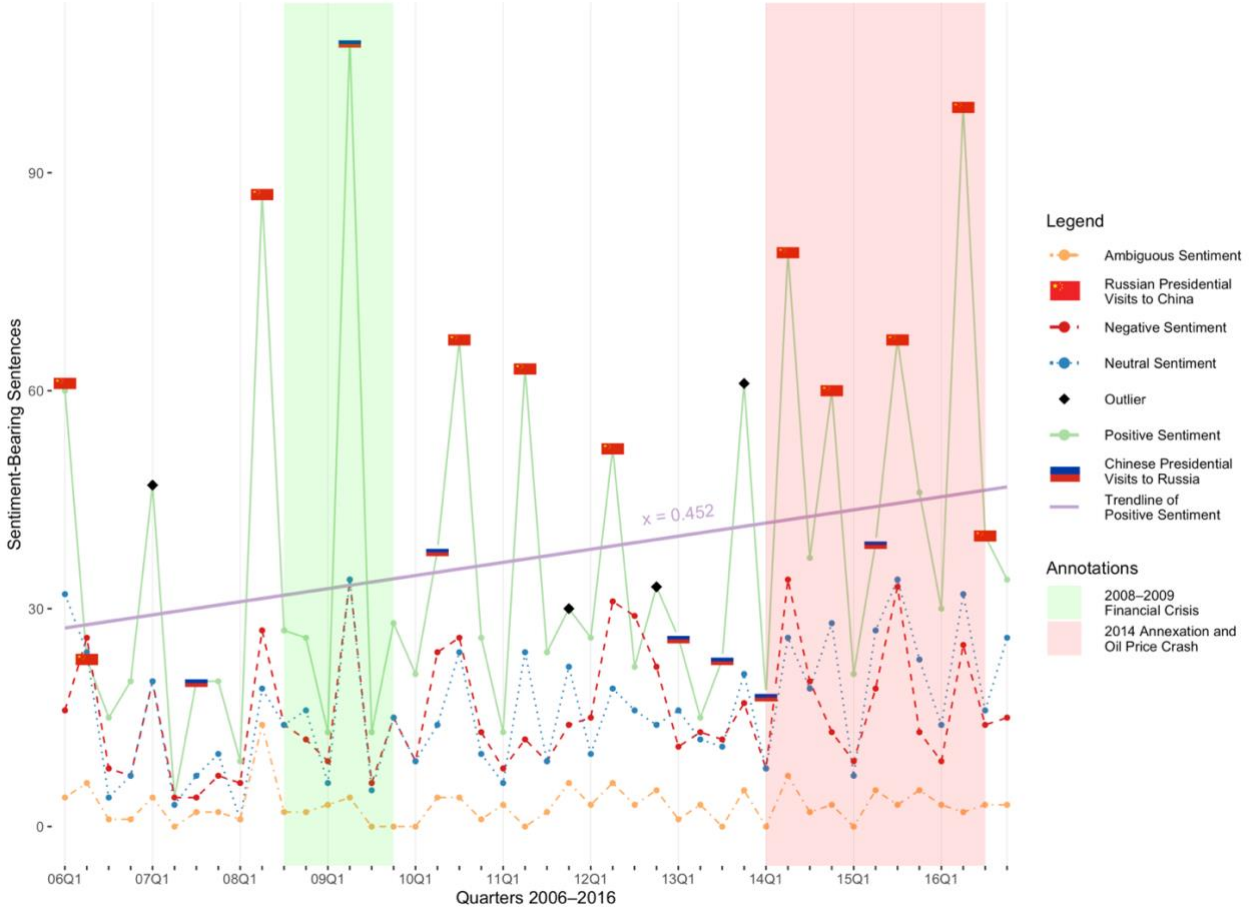
[16]. To download the collected texts by country, visit https://pjbraga.github.io/rub_corpus_and_code/corpus/.

to three decimal places. After comparing 22 different bilateral relationships against the target countries, it appears any trendline slope value $x \geq 0.1$ or $x \leq -0.1$ indicates a change in bilateral ties—either improving or deteriorating relations. Any other values for x tended to coincide with static, unchanging relations—poor relations remain negative, and good remain positive, and the proportion of positive to negative sentiment stay relatively unchanged. The list titled “Sentiment” to the right of the line-plot provides a legend of the sentiments and trendline. “Annotations” is a secondary legend highlighting political-economic events that continue for a sustained period. The green shading indicates the interval of Russia’s “2008–2009 Financial Crisis,” which was a period of economic hardship and uncertainty for the country. The red shading, tagged as “2014 Annexation and Oil Price Crash,” points to two successive destabilising events. First, in Q1 2014, Russian special forces annexed Crimea and established break-away states in Ukraine’s Donbas region. Second, around Q3 2014, a global oil supply glut caused a world-wide price crash. Recovery only began Q3 2016—hence the red shading ending at this time. The Minsk I and II talks brought some mediation to the issue by Q1 2015, which is why the red shading does not continue indefinitely. These events are indicated on the visualisations, because policymaker behaviour may be different during these times in reaction to the uncertainty caused by events.

Figure 4.1 (below) depicts Russian policymakers’ sentiment towards China from 2006–2016. A Chinese flag indicates a Russian presidential trip to China. Russian Presidents make 11 official trips to China, which are shown by a Chinese flag being placed on the peak of the jumps in positive sentiment related to them. A Russian flag indicates a Chinese presidential trip to Russia. There are seven official Chinese presidential trips to Russia, which are also indicated by Russian flags. A black diamond represents an outlier in positive or negative sentiment. An outlier is a spike (a sharp increase followed by a rapid decrease in the dependent variable) or trough in positive or negative sentiment that is unexplained by relevant events (such

as a presidential visit) or seasonal and cyclical phenomena (such as annual meetings). There are four outlier diamonds in Figure 4.1. There is a positive sentiment outlier spike at Q1 2007. There are positive sentiment outlier spikes at Q4 2011, Q4 2012, and Q4 2013. These are seasonally unique—each spike is higher than sentiment at Q4 in previous years—and they occur without any associated presidential visits, announcements of Chinese financial aid or assistance, or major political or economic events between Russia and China.

Figure 4.1 Russian Top Policymakers' Sentiment Towards China and Sentiment-Influencing Events, 2006–2016



Source: Official press releases, and speech and interview transcripts for Russian President/Prime Minister Vladimir Putin (Government of Russia, 2008; The Kremlin, 2006), Russian President/Prime Minister Dmitrii Medvedev (Government of Russia, 2012; The Kremlin, 2008), and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (MID Russia, 2006). Dates on the x-axis are read "06Q1" as 2006, first quarter, "07Q1" as 2007, first quarter, and so on.

There are several notable features about Figure 4.1. The purple (solid) trendline of positive sentiment has a slope x = 0.452. The slope being greater than 0.1 means positive sentiment is increasing over the 2006–2016 timeframe. In practical terms, this means Russian top policymakers mention China more often over time, and when they do mention China, the sentiment of what is said is positive. Perhaps the most notable aspect of the graph are presidential visits (depicted by the Russian and Chinese flag icons). When Russian presidents Putin or Medvedev visit China (indicated by Chinese flags), there are massive spikes in positive sentiment-bearing language mentioning China. By contrast, Chinese presidential visits appear to be subdued affairs. Only two visits by a Chinese president to Russia (indicated by Russian flag icons)—one during the 2008–2009 Russian Financial Crisis (highlighted by green shading) and the other shortly after in Q2 2010—are above the average positive sentiment trendline. There is far less official dialogue from Putin, Medvedev, or Lavrov when Chinese presidents visit Russia. Next, except for a negative jump in Q3 2012, there are no notable spikes in other sentiments. From 2011 through 2014, positive sentiment spikes have seasonality: noticeable spikes repeatedly occur in Q4. Three of these Q4, seasonal spikes are outliers. Altogether, there are four outlier spikes in positive sentiment, which are marked on the graph by black diamond shapes (Q1 2007, Q4 2011, Q4 2012, and Q4 2013). At the time of these outlier spikes, there were no presidential visits, no financial aid or assistance was announced or disbursed on behalf of China, and no major political or economic events took place.

Inspecting data behind the outlier spikes reveals they are produced by either one-off cultural exchange events with China, or annual meetings where China happens to be mentioned repeatedly. The outlier spike in Q1 2007 is in response to a cultural exchange event taking place that year. 2007 was the “Year of China in Russia.” It followed a Russia-themed year in China the year before (Kremlin, 2007b). The event featured multiple, buoyant speeches by top policymakers about China-

Russia ties (Kremlin, 2007a, 2007c). This outlier is not relevant, because policymakers are compelled to speak positively towards China. The remaining outlier spikes in Q4 2011, Q4 2012, and Q4 2013 relate to an assortment of annual events, which happen to take place in the fourth quarter. These include the “Russia Calling! Summit” (Government of Russia, 2011a; Kremlin, 2012b), APEC Summits (Kremlin, 2011, 2013a, 2013b), Putin’s Valdai Club Address (Kremlin, 2012c), Putin’s “Big Annual News Conference” for journalists (Kremlin, 2012d, 2013c), and interviews Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev gave to the Xinhua News Agency during the 2011 and 2013 “Regular Meeting” with China (Government of Russia, 2011b, 2013). The importance with these spikes (but maybe not the Regular Meeting interviews) is the policymakers appear to speak positively about China by choice. The true outliers, then, take place in Q4 2011, Q4 2012, and Q4 2013.

The negative spike in Q3 2012 is a mistake of sentence-level SA. In sentences with multiple subjects and objects, an algorithm can confuse or fail to detect the target of a given sentiment. In Q3 2012, Russia and China both received criticism for their support of Bashar al-Assad’s regime. The spike in negative sentiment are largely policymakers’ reactions to this international criticism, which the SA program has confused as negative language towards China. For example, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov comment to reporters, “Russia and China have said [enacting UN Security Council Chapter VII] is unacceptable” in response to the actions of the Bashar al-Assad regime (MFA of Russia, 2012). This sentence was coded negative, because the algorithm associated “China” and “unacceptable” together. In fact, only two sentences in Q3 2012 are correctly coded negative. Both are when Russian President Putin laments Chinese steel tariffs and tough Chinese industrial competition (Kremlin, 2012a). The Q3 2012 negative spike, therefore, is not negative of China, but an error in automated coding.

EDA has given a certain predictability to what Russian policymakers say about China. Positive sentiment spikes predictably happen, for example, when a large, joint

project is announced (such as the Power of Siberia natural gas pipeline announced Q2 2014—see VOA, 2016), or when credit for a Russian project is provided (like for the Yamal Liquified Natural Gas Project in Q2 2016—see Astakhova, 2016), or when Russian presidents visit China (see the multiple Chinese flags icons in Figure 4.1 above). Moreover, periods of heightened positivity are unsurprising. The first period is during the 2008–9 financial crisis. The second period of sustained positivity is when Russia successfully alienates all of Europe with its Ukrainian adventurism in Q1 2014. In the former, the Kremlin needed credit. In the latter, Kremlin needed friends. But some of SA results are unexpected, too. Why, for example, are Russian politicians so less vocal when Chinese presidents visit Russia? This will be answered in the “Interpretation of Results” step below. Using increasing positivity and the outliers as a guide, a period to test for copying emerges between the two crisis periods: from approximately Q1 2011 to Q4 2013. In this period, Russian top policymakers speak about China more often (in Figure 4.1 positive sentiment is generally higher than in previous years) and this is when the true outliers take place.

4.3.3 Interpretation

The following section argues the regime in Russia does appear to copy or emulate policies from (that is, engage in peer-to-peer, positive authoritarian learning with) China. A number of Russian internet control policies, including early astroturfing efforts and diplomatic moves through the SCO, predate the 2011–2013 discourse spike. However, the spike itself signals growing elite attentiveness to China and offers an empirical prompt for closer inspection of diffusion processes already underway. Rather than marking the initial moment of diffusion, the 2011–2013 sentiment outliers serve as observable signals of elite-level attention to China. They align with a broader, ongoing pattern of engagement with Chinese concepts of internet sovereignty that began earlier. While several Russian initiatives emerge by 2009–2011, such as participation in SCO cybersecurity agreements and some early astroturfing efforts, the period 2011–2013 reflects a visible increase in positive

sentiment about China. The greater positive sentiment suggest that Chinese policies may have been viewed with increasing positivity among Russian policymakers. Advancing into 2016, internet regulation efforts appear to parallel one another. Developments appear to be influenced by China's own interpretation of "internet sovereignty" (the idea of national control of all internet resources, from data flows to physical hardware, which lie within a state's physical borders). The Russian regime's aim is to gain additional tactics from China to improve strategic repression and legitimacy. China's successes appear to show Kremlin authorities what is possible.

Over this study's timeframe, it is clear Russian policymakers mention China with gaining frequency and positivity (see Figure 4.1 above). There is a period from approximately 2011 through 2013 where policymakers appear to speak of China spontaneously at important annual events (see the black diamond, outlier icons on Figure 4.1). Using this period as a guide of where to begin looking, the clearest example of China-to-Russia policy transfer for means of authoritarian persistence relates to state control of the internet. To improve legitimacy, the regime appears to have copied the Chinese state's internet propaganda tactics, which aims to attack anti-regime ideas and promote a pro-regime discourse.

The tactic copied by the Russian regime is online, state-guided astroturfing. Astroturfing is a PR technique where actors are paid to exhibit unsolicited, grassroots support for a particular policy, product, or event (Han, 2015, p. 109). In the mid-2000s, the Chinese state developed a system of recruiting anonymous online commentators to carry out astroturfing and manipulate online opinion (Han, 2015, pp. 112–118). The commentators tended to be either professionals (from Xinhua News Agency, for example), public servants (often already within the security or propaganda apparatus), or individuals specifically recruited for the task. The commentators would take on the astroturfing work on the side, in addition to their regular job. One of the earliest and most famous mentions of this practice was a municipal Chinese Communist Party report (Zhonggong Hefei Shiwei Xuanchuanbu,

2006).[17] The report mentions in 2004 the commentators were paid a basic monthly salary of 600 CNY (approximately $88USD), plus 50 cents (CNY) for each online post they made. This gave rise to the nickname “fifty-cent army” (directly translated as the “fifty-cent [communist] party,” 五毛党, Wǔmáo dǎng). By the late 2000s, the fifty-cent army was receiving mainstream media coverage (Bristow, 2008).

By 2011, it became clear pro-Kremlin agencies had developed their own version of China’s “Fifty Cent Army.” A blogger working for the NGO Global Voices collected a series of reports from prominent bloggers (such as Alexei Navalny) about “human bots,” who unlike the clumsy, clearly programmed, spam-bot type would leave more sophisticated pro-Kremlin and critical comments (Davidov, 2011). Other bloggers found job postings advertising “12,000 roubles a month… create the maximum believable wave of comments to degrade the rating of the journal's author and to form a negative attitude toward him” (Man With Dogs, 2011). The job required the commentator to “leave 70 comments a day from 50 different accounts (the accounts need to be live).” Presumably calculating the worth of each post, a journalist suggested the Kremlin had copied China’s example and made its own “30 Rouble Army” (Allnutt, 2011). Other reports emerged about a training centre for pro-regime online commentators existing a year-or-two before (Soldatov, 2011). Perhaps, these were the results.

Pro-regime astroturfing is not exclusive to China. Governments all over the world can and do engage in the practice (Morozov, 2009). Instead, the astroturfing tactic that Russia appears to be copying from China is, in fact, part of a wider phenomenon of parallel development of internet surveillance and security measures with China. The aim of this emulation of Chinese policy is mainly for strategic repression. It makes it easier for Kremlin agents to track and block threats to the

[17] The original report has been taken down from the CCP Hefei Municipal Committee website. The citation here links to a screen shot of part of the original report.

regime on the internet. Russia's application of internet sovereignty, also referred to as digital sovereignty, increasing came to resemble the China's approach. Russian diplomats revitalised the issue of cybersecurity in 2009, which onward into 2016 and beyond merged into a consensus with China in multiple areas on internet security.

Beginning 2009, Russian diplomats worked with China (and other SCO member states) to build a consensus internet-based threats to stability. Russian diplomats made cybersecurity issues a top priority (MID Russia, 2009). This concern was next transferred to building a consensus of likeminded states (Giles, 2012, pp. 64–66; McKune & Ahmed, 2018, p. 3841). In June 2009, SCO member states (China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) agreed to guidelines on "Cooperation in Ensuring International Information Security," which highlighted "the significant progress in the development and introduction of new information and communication technologies… for the purposes inconsistent with the objectives of maintaining international security and stability" (Shanghai Cooperation Organization, 2009).

From this point forward, at various international fora, as Russia outlined security concerns, China advanced its concept of internet sovereignty (McKune & Ahmed, 2018, pp. 3837–3841). Russian policymakers appear to have been influenced by China's promotion of internet sovereignty. To be clear, internet sovereignty is not new idea. A 2010 white paper "The Internet in China" retro-fitted the concept with Chinese characteristics (Liang, 2010). The core theory remains unoriginal and "is a statement of private international law as typically practiced… [The difference is] China is unique in its lack of respect for the idea of an open Internet" (Osnos, 2010). The result of China's promotion of internet sovereignty is "incentivizing other countries to internalize and adopt a model of Internet governance," which "re-align[s] control of communications with the jurisdictional boundaries of national states" (McKune & Ahmed, 2018, p. 3839; Mueller, 2017, pp. 18–19). This is, in essence, is the experience of Russian policymakers. In 2011, at a

meeting of security officials in Yekaterinburg, Russia, a new “Draft Convention on International Information Security” was proposed and soon written into law, which included Russia’s own definition of internet sovereignty (Giles, 2012, pp. 64–65).

Table 4.1 Parallel Developments in Digital Authoritarianism, 2006–2016

Event or Practice	China	Russia
Revitalisation of Sovereign Internet Concept	2010 “The Internet in China” white paper (Liang, 2010)	2011 “Draft Convention on International Information Security” (MID Russia, 2011)
State-Guided Astroturfing	2004 test-run of “50 Cent Army” tactics (Zhonggong Hefei Shiwei Xuanchuanbu, 2006)	2009 rumours of internet commentator training school; 2011 job advertisements for use of “30 Rouble Army” tactics (Allnutt, 2011; Soldatov, 2011)
Strategic censorship of content deemed threatening to regime	Great Firewall (ongoing development since arrival of Internet in China)	2012 Internet Restriction bill. Internet blacklisting coordinated through Roskomnadzor [Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media] (Federal Law No. 139-FZ, 2012)
Data Localisation	2014, CCP holds private negotiations with tech firms to store Chinese users’ data on Chinese soil (Reuters, 2014)	2014 and 2015 amendments to laws on personal data (Federal Law No. 242-FZ, 2014; Federal Law No. 526-FZ, 2015)
CCP-linked internet experts articulate global approach to internet regulation	June 2014, five experts, including Great Firewall architect Fang Binxing (方滨兴), publish article in People’s Daily (Fang et al., 2014).	April 2016, Chinese delegation of internet experts, including Fang Binxing (方滨兴), meet with Russian security officials in Moscow (Seddon, 2016)
Restrictions on encryption	January 2016, Article 18 of Counter-Terrorism Law (requiring telecoms and ISPs provide decryption services to assist public and state security in investigating suspected terrorist activities) (Anti-Terrorism Law, 2016)	July 2016, Amendments to Anti-Terrorism Law (Federal Law No. 374-FZ, 2016)

Source: See citations above, including modifications from McKune and Ahmed (2018, p. 3844).

The regime in Russia, whose main aim is survival through stability and control, has developed much the same legal and functional capabilities in internet controls (but not the same architecture) as those of China. The timeframe for this policy development appears to begin with Russia’s 2009 meeting of likeminded regimes via

the SCO. From this point on, China appears to lead the way in Parallel Developments in Digital Authoritarianism, which is highlighted Table 4.1 above.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to describe every event in Table 4.1 above. What is vital, though, is to recognise how policies and events tend to originate in China, and flow west to Russia. After 2009, China in 2010 and then Russia in 2011 articulate their own interpretations of “internet sovereignty.” In this 2009–2011 development period, Russia appears to test its own interpretation of China’s “50 Cent Army,” which originated in the early 2000s. After the Bolotnaya Protests, Kremlin authorities institute 2012 Internet Restriction bill, which although its architecture very different from China’s Great Firewall, its blocking and blacklisting function is similar. Around this time, Andreĭ Soldatov and Borogan (2017) describe how pro-regime law makers are motivated by Chinese officials’ ability to force large tech companies to store Chinese internet users’ data on Chinese soil. Shortly after, adjustments in law are made to initiate the same process. In 2014, Key Chinese computer engineers and legal theorists, including chief architect of China’s “Great Firewall” system *Fang Binxing* (方滨兴), argue countries should accommodate China’s approach to internet sovereignty. Approximately a year-and-a-half later, many of these engineers and theorists meet with security officials in Moscow. Soon after in 2016, the Russia amends its terrorism laws to reflect encryption of internet data, something which Chinese officials had done only months before. The similarities continue into 2017 even further (for a detailed discussion see McKune & Ahmed, 2018, pp. 3841–3846). The policies and approaches that China advances, it appears Russia is never far behind. This suggests Russia emulates aspects of Chinese internet regulation and surveillance policy when it is suitable (and possible) to do so.

The developments listed in Table 4.1 unfold in overlapping but asynchronous trajectories. Russia’s engagement with Chinese-style internet controls begins earlier

but intensifies after 2011, as suggested by the increase in positive rhetorical attention to China.

While the 2011–2013 outlier spikes may not mark the origin of copying, they coincide with growing positivity towards China and a growing alignment in policy. These spikes identify a window to trace China's growing relevance to Russian policymaking. This is certainly not a smoking gun. Instead, it is a phenomenon that encourages the researcher to look for evidence during this period. Indeed, with the parallel development of internet sovereignty in both China and Russia as a backdrop, the Kremlin's "30 Rouble Army" seems less of a coincidence. China and Russia's interactions over cybersecurity clearly intensified through the 2010s and beyond. This timeline makes the idea of Russian agents copying and modifying tactics they observed from their Chinese comrades believable, if not likely.

What the outlier spikes do show is China has gained a new relevance for Russian policymakers. It seems China serves a positive example of what is possible. This is touched on in a tangent that Russian President Vladimir Putin produced in response to a question originally about the adoption of Russian orphans by United States citizens at the 2012 annual "Big News Conference" (Kremlin, 2012d):

> Regardless of how people may criticise the political system in China, money is flowing into that nation, first and foremost because it is stable, because investors know they can expect that their money will not disappear in five, ten or fifteen years as a result of some kind of political shock… This does not mean that we must create the same system that China has, but we must ensure stability as a necessary condition for development, as I have already said many times.

The message of this quote is: China and Russia may use different methods, but they share remarkably similar aims. Putin's answer is highly ironic, because Russia would soon be the cause of major regional instability—causing great turmoil for Russia's economy and investors worldwide—with Putin's 2014 rash gamble to annex

Crimea (Treisman, 2016). The heightened positive sentiment-bearing language of Russian top policymakers towards China from 2011–2013 was increased even higher after the Kremlin chose hostilities with Ukraine (see the red shading in Figure 4.1). China appeared ever-more the natural ally. This pattern of outlier positivity and then a sharp increase in more predictable positivity depicts deepening bilateral ties (this will be qualified in section 5.4 below). With top policymakers appearing to spontaneously mention China more, and also appearing to interact more with Chinese officials, such an environment seems propitious for useful ideas and tactics to diffuse and spread to Russia.

However, the above interpretative discussion should be placed with a broader perspective. The 2011–2013 sentiment outliers coincide with a moment at which many authoritarian governments, not only China, reassessed the strategic value of digital control in light of the Arab Spring uprisings. The cascade of protests from Tunis to Cairo prompted a wider autocratic recalibration: rulers inferred that open social-media ecosystems could erode information monopolies, accelerate collective action, and invite trans-national solidarity (Vanderhill, 2020, pp. 23–32). Taken the context of Sino-Russian authoritarian learning and internet control, the Kremlin's intensifying attention to cyber-sovereignty after 2011 should not be viewed solely as the emulation of Chinese policy. It also reflects a shared shock that underscored the political costs of unfiltered online spaces. Russia's rapid move to institutionalise SORM-2 upgrades, the creation of the Unified Register of Prohibited Information (Vanderhill, 2020, p. 92), and the first large-scale deployment of pro-government troll farms (A. Wilson, 2023) align with a shift from defensive censorship towards proactive, coercive, and legitimising digital strategies (Vanderhill, 2020, pp. 88 and 101). The timing therefore supports the proposition that Moscow and Beijing were parallel learners, each responding to the Arab Spring rather than one strictly copying the other.

Even so, the evidence in this chapter suggests that China was still a source of learning. Russian officials invited Fang Binxing to Moscow in 2016 and incorporated Chinese data-localisation concepts into the 2014–2015 personal-data amendments. Taking a broader perspective, the timing for tighter internet control has multiple drivers. The Arab uprisings furnished the precipitating lesson about the strategic importance information communication technologies (Vanderhill, 2020, p. 2). At the same time, Chinese experience contributed concrete policy instruments that Russian elites judged compatible with their pre-existing surveillance architecture. Recognising this dual pathway refines the dissertation's diffusion argument: Russia's digital turn was catalysed by an international perspective and subsequently channelled through Sino-Russian exchange, rather than being a simple act of imitation.

4.4 Process-tracing the Omnibalancing

This section argues that Russia constitutes a negative case of omnibalancing during 2006–2016. By subjecting the Russian regime to the dissertation's revised omnibalancing framework, the following findings emerge. First, the most plausible domestic shock—the 2011–2012 Bolotnaya mobilisation—fell short of an existential threat. Second, the majority of enabling conditions that normally propel rulers towards omnibalancing were absent or only weakly present. Third, the deepening yet selective improvement in relations with China therefore reflected long-term geostrategic and economic calculations rather than a crisis-driven search for regime-saving resources. In short, Russia's alignment with Beijing helps to specify the limits of omnibalancing and highlights the risk of "quotidian" over-application identified in Chapter 2.

Section 4.4 proceeds in four steps. 4.4.1 justifies the choice of the Bolotnaya protests as the most credible trigger and clarifies why alternative disturbances, such as the 2009 financial crisis or the 2014 oil-price collapse, do not meet the threshold for an existential crisis. 4.4.2 reconstructs Russia's internal-threat profile, assessing

each of the seven enabling conditions. It shows that only the degradation of institutional checks is unequivocally present, while other conditions (elite cohesion, legitimacy, and geopolitical vulnerability) are static or ambiguous. 4.4.3 converts these findings into a truth table. Finally, sub-Section 4.4.4 synthesises the causal narrative and explains why the evidence contradicts recent claims of mutual Russo-Chinese omnibalancing, thereby positioning Russia as a crucial negative benchmark for the dissertation's comparative argument.

4.4.1 Trigger Event

This study originally hypothesised that Russia would use its relations with China to omnibalance threats to regime survival. This was based on Russia's relative declining power (despite Russian reassertiveness in the post-Soviet space) and the influence of China's gaining economic and political strength. China had demonstrated support for Russia. China provided Russia with loans in exchange for oil and various other trade deals during the 2009 Russian financial crisis and agreed to the Power of Siberia pipeline project shortly after the annexation of Crimea (CNN, 2009; Gazprom, 2017). Russia through economic deals, such as the Power of Siberia pipeline and loans during the 2009 financial crisis, the study finds no exclusive reliance on China for regime stability.

Might Russia have might used deeper alignment with China not just to balance the against the West, but to address internal threats, too? This might take the form of Putin regime elites being linked with lucrative Chinese projects. Or it might be the provision of surveillance software. However, the study found that that this was not exclusive to China—many governments provide this type of support to Russia (Soldatov & Borogan, 2017). And while the regime my seek to learn from Chinese experts, there is already an existing repression and surveillance system in Russia that is vastly different in function (but similar in aims) to Chinese systems.

The next issue is the study found is that there were no suitable crises to study within the 2006–2016 timeframe. At first, the 2011–2012 protests against voting fraud seemed appropriate. However, these protests were never existential threats to regime survival. As Andrew Wilson (2023, p. 71) notes, “[d]espite the slogan of a ‘Russian Maidan’ (the Maidan in Kyiv was the site of the pro-democratic Orange revolution), there was no real desire to occupy public space. The protestors were catcalling the stage, not storming it.” Indeed, Russia’s constitutional court overturned some of the convictions of protesters, because the protests had not “ceased to be peaceful or constituted a major threat to health or property” (Pomeranz, 2023, p. 210). While the impact of these protests were influential, in terms of immediate threats to the regime’s survival, they were considered “less than crucial” (Gel’man, 2015, p. 124).

One potential crisis might have been the 2014 oil price shock. “Between mid-2014 and early 2016, the global economy faced one of the largest oil price declines in modern history. The 70 percent price drop during that period was one of the three biggest declines since World War II, and the longest lasting since the supply-driven collapse of 1986” (Stocker et al., 2018, para. 3). While some analysts thought the oil price collapse was a concern, any threat to the regime was in the medium to long-term (Gel’man, 2015, p. 127). More importantly, the Putin regime was still sailing high on the rally around the flag effect caused by the 2014 annexation of Crimea, the so-called Crimea consensus. The “Crimea consensus” refers to a period of Russian public opinion stability that emerged after Russia’s 2014 annexation (Nikolskaya & Dmitriev, 2020, p. 355). During this time, Russian public sentiment was characterized by an upsurge in patriotic feelings and solidified support for President Putin’s leadership, especially regarding domestic and foreign policy. This “consensus” encompassed a renewed sense of Russia as a great power and was resilient to external shocks such as economic downturns, sanctions, and declining incomes, leading to a static state of public opinion that prioritized material needs over

democratic freedoms and rule of law. The Levada Center, which conducts weekly Russia-wide polls of urban and rural populations based on a representative sample of 1,600 people from 137 settlements in Russia's 50 regions, tracked the Crimea Consensus in its polling data (Levada Center, 2024a). Political scientists have subjected the Levada Center's findings to their own tests and found them to be reliable (Frye et al., 2017). What might have been a crisis for the regime wasn't, thanks in a large part to the boost of patriotic popularity after Putin's invasion of Ukraine.

Therefore, without a clear crisis event to examine, this study argues there is simply not enough compelling evidence to argue for omnibalancing with China for authoritarian persistence for the 2006–2016 period. Instead, Russia can act as a negative omnibalancing case to compare with Belarus and Ukraine.

Another use of this lack of an omnibalancing crisis is to criticise a recent study that also did not use a particular crisis event to structure its study. In the following example, the researcher uses the threat of a colour revolution in Russia or China serving as the driver for omnibalancing. Düben (2023) demonstrates the how not focusing on a specific crisis to demonstrate omnibalancing can be problematic. The aim of this evaluation of Düben's claims of mutual omnibalancing between Russia and China is to demonstrate the appropriateness of this study's approach. Düben's argument suffers from the "Sword of Damocles problem" discussed in the theory section (above). The sword of Damocles refers to the persistent and ever-present threat faced by a regime or leader. In the context of omnibalancing, this Sword of Damocles problem is the looming threat that internal and external pressures could lead to regime collapse or a loss of power, making it difficult to discern when foreign policy alignments are a routine decision or a response to these pressures. The problem suggests that such threats are always present, causing ambiguity in analysing whether a regime is omnibalancing or not. The Sword of Damocles problem can lead to quotidian omnibalancing, where the research over-applies

omnibalancing to routine activities. The researcher perceives a regime as constantly aligning its foreign policy to address internal threats and reinforce its pillars of survival—legitimation, repression, and elite co-optation. The danger of quotidian omnibalancing is that almost any foreign policy alignment might be interpreted as a form of omnibalancing, leading to over-application of the theory in explaining regime actions, even when they may simply be routine diplomatic interactions or largely inconsequential. The researcher begins to see evidence of Omnibalancing when either the bilateral exchanges are not unique (many other relationships provide the same or a similar function) or their effectiveness cannot be demonstrated. This is why the explaining-outcome process tracing that this study uses is so important in the study of Omnibalancing. Without careful examination of the evidence and context, there can be a tendency to over-apply omnibalancing, which is what Düben's (2023) argument about mutual omnibalancing. Düben (2023, p. 462) argues that China-Russia bilateral cooperation has been driven by both governments' shared concern for regime survival/legitimacy. Their concrete policy cooperation in recent years is, in fact, an example of mutual omnibalancing—both regimes helping each other to shore up regime security against domestic challenges to authoritarian rule.

Düben's (2023) evidence of mutual Omnibalancing between Russia and China is the following:

6) sharing of experience over preventing colour revolutions, which are perceived as an internal threat (p. 474);
7) rhetorical support (pp. 475–478);
8) military exercises (pp. 478–479;
9) joint training of domestic security forces (pp. 478–479);
10) greater intelligence cooperation (p. 479);
11) surveillance knowledge and technology (p. 480);
12) direct funds to key regime supporters (p. 480).

Düben's argument proceeds by weight of evidence rather than any kind of smoking gun. Both states do appear to be cooperating to maintain regime survival, enhancing or bolstering tools of soft and hard repression. However, the evidence supplied often just implies the countering of internal threats. Bilateral cooperation can take many forms. In 2015, for example, the UK coalition government approved the sale of £16 million in crowd control equipment (including tear gas and rubber bullets) to Russia (The Independent, 2015). This same logic is omnibalancing. While the rhetorical support is often related to internal issues (for example, China justifying the imprisonment of Navalny), there is no indication if this rhetorical support balances against internal threats. Any nation respecting the one China principle is omnibalancing under this logic. There is no discussion of whether this rhetorical support is simply a shield against external criticism. No link is made between the rhetorical shielding and the internal balancing. The trading of surveillance knowledge and technology is tenuous at best. Russia may have similar aims to China in its surveillance, but it has very different means. Aside from consultations with experts, China does not offer anything unique to Russia in terms of surveillance technology—China and Russia can buy similar systems from the West for example (until the 2022 invasion). Indeed, Düben's argument mostly implies that Russia and China are using alignment to balance against internal threats. It can only be assumed the experience being exchanged is helping either regime protect against internal threats. Every meeting that can somehow be linked to repression—surveillance tech or military exercises—is somehow linked to regime survival. The only empirical evidence that fits omnibalancing is direct funds to regime insiders and the joint training of domestic security forces. The former is a practice performed by many states around the world and is not unique to China. The latter does fit the theory of omnibalancing well. However, how much this actually increased Russia's regime survival prospects seems minimal.

China’s copying of Russia’s foreign agents law might seem like omnibalancing, but it is not. This is authoritarian learning or policy emulation—an active learning or type of diffusion (Hall, 2023). China did not need alignment with Russia to adopt this policy.

Indeed, a good crisis to examine would be Russia’s 2022 expanded invasion of Ukraine. How has Russia’s and China’s apparent deepening alignment helped to counter internal threats to regime survival.

Overall, Düben does provide evidence that would fit omnibalancing, but this evidence is not well demonstrated to have affected regime survival. Indeed, the large focus on rhetorical support is likely of little relevance to protesters angry with the Russian government—this is poor evidence for omnibalancing. Moreover, while the joint training of internal security forces is theoretically precise for omnibalancing (an external power is helping to train another state’s security forces that will be used to counter internal threats to that state’s regime), it is not clear how much this training is performative for demonstrating deeper bilateral ties rather substantive in terms providing real regime survival capabilities. Thus, this chapter argues Düben’s argument has potential but is not convincing. What is needed is a crisis event—perhaps the Russia’s expanded war in Ukraine—to escape the pitfalls of quotidian omnibalancing.

This section further critiques a recent study by Düben (2023), which argues for mutual omnibalancing between Russia and China without focusing on a specific crisis. Düben suggests that bilateral cooperation, including military exercises, intelligence sharing, and rhetorical support, is indicative of mutual omnibalancing of internal and external threats to regime survival. However, this evidence is found to be speculative. It is argued the considerable evidence provided is insufficiently demonstrated to affect regime stability. The critique points out that bilateral

cooperation alone does not necessarily equate to omnibalancing, as routine diplomatic actions can be mistaken for efforts to counter existential threats.

A significant crisis, such as Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, would offer a clearer case to study the effectiveness of Russia-China alignment in addressing internal threats to authoritarian persistence. Without such a crisis, the evidence of omnibalancing remains unconvincing, and the chapter critiques the tendency to over-apply omnibalancing theory in cases where regime survival is not clearly at stake.

4.4.2 Internal-Threat Profile: Russia's Enabling Conditions

The following section will explore the omnibalancing enabling conditions in the context of Putin's Russia. Russia presents its own unique configuration of eneabling conditions, with key differences to Belarus and Ukraine in the nature of internal threats, stakes for leadership, and institutional checks. In particular, Russia's geopolitical and internal political environment from 2006 to 2016 reveals a more stable yet complex relationship between regime survival and foreign policy decisions. Each condition will be discussed in terms of its presence, absence, or ambiguity, illustrating the specific factors that shaped Russia's strategic considerations during this period.

4.4.2.1 Presence of Internal Threats: Absent

All political regimes face internal threats to some degree. But over the timeframe of this study, there are no internal threats severe enough to endanger regime survival in Putin's Russia. Discussed above, Russia experienced various protests, such as the Bolotnaya protests of 2011–2012. But these demonstrations did not pose an existential threat to Putin's regime. The protests were lacked political cohesion and were relatively peaceful. Despite public dissatisfaction with electoral fraud and the handling of the economy in certain periods, the regime's stability remained secure. Moreover, Putin's regime maintained sufficiently high popular support (in the high 80 percent range), particularly following the 2014 Crimea

annexation, which triggered the Crimea Consensus surge in patriotic sentiment (Levada Center, 2024b). Therefore, internal threats to Putin's survival, while present, were not critical or severe enough to risk overthrowing the regime during the period 2006–2016.

4.4.2.2 High Stakes for Leaders: Ambiguous

Yeltsin managed to retire, which set a non-violent precedent for high-powered politicians leaving office Russian politics. But the prospect of Putin leaving or losing power in the 2006 to 2016 period is less certain. President Nursultan Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan retired, but then had much of his post-presidential powers revoked and his self-aggrandisements removed (KazInform, 2022; RFE/RL, 2023). After the 2012 protests, the Kremlin increased civil society restrictions and political repression (Gel’man, 2015, pp. 124–125; Gilbert, 2023, pp. 402–404). However, the landscape of repression in Russia (like in China) has always been a patchwork: the regime seeks to gain benefits from civil society while minimising risks to the regime, which creates space for some civil society and protests either by encouraging them or simple neglect (Plantan, 2022, pp. 3–4). All the same, the size of the 2011–12 protests had not been seen since collapse of Soviet Communism, signalling that the stakes of losing power may have become higher. Considering that Putin increasingly resembled a strongman dictator after 2012, it is plausible that his removal from power would entail high personal risks—similar to high-stakes situations faced by other authoritarian post-Soviet leaders like Nazarbayev. This is speculative, however. From at least 2006 to 2012, Putin appears to have had relatively low stakes for being removed from power, considering his immense popularity, political control, and high esteem among the Russian public. His popularity began to drop upon his return to the presidency; therefore, during the 2012–2016 period, it is ambiguous whether losing power would have been high stakes for Putin, as his popularity and regime security indicators fluctuated during this time.

4.4.2.3 Institutional Checks Degraded or Absent: Present

Touched on above, Putin inherited a super-presidential constitution from Yeltsin, which provided the Russian president with a broad range of powers (Holmes, 1993; White, 1999, pp. 217–218; White & McAllister, 2010, para. 1). As Andrew Kuchins (2006, p. 194) comments, “The December 1993 constitution did more to remove checks and balances in Russian politics than any other measure taken subsequently.” What Yeltsin had established, Putin consolidated (Sakwa, 2021, p. 17). The Russian presidency has the ability to dominate all other state institutions. In routine, day-to-day policy making, Putin generally takes a light touch (Noble & Chaisty, 2023, p. 100). As noted in the overview of policy generation (above), Putin often only intervenes when necessary. But when a decision is non-routine, Putin has the ability to be decisive (Fortescue, 2023, p. 183). Indeed, the annexation of Crimea is an example of this. Both in word and deed, there a few limits on Putin’s ability to take major foreign policy decisions. Therefore, institutional checks and balances are effectively absent. This enhances Putin’s ability to make foreign policy decisions that prioritise personal and regime survival over broader state interests, aligning with omnibalancing theory.

4.4.2.4 Low State Capacity (Administrative vs Coercive): Absent

Russia during the case study timeframe, had relatively low administrative state capacity but high coercive capacity (Melville, 2023, p. 202). This means the Russian state from 2006 to 2016 was relatively inefficient at collecting taxes and providing public goods (often due to corruption), but it was rather effective at clamping down on protesters. Hybrid, electoral authoritarian political regimes tend to have this balance of state capacity (ibid.). It allows for “privileged groups [associated with the regime] to privatise and control economic and political rent extraction” (ibid.). Low administrative capacity can be a driver of discontent among the people and, therefore, of potential threats against the regime. However, this can be countered by high coercive capacity. This imbalance tends to favour coercive capacity over mass

discontent—but this is not always the case (Gerschewski, 2023). Therefore, the scope condition of low state capacity for Russia is ambiguous. It has low administrative capacity but high coercive capacity. The likelihood of this contributing to omnibalancing is hard to assess without more context.

4.4.2.5 Questionable Legitimacy: Ambiguous

From 2006 to 2016, the foundations of the Putin regime's legitimacy went from economic performance to memory politics and nationalism. The evidence for this scope condition has been discussed above. The shift started around the 2009 Russian credit crunch. It became more prominent after the 2011–12 protests. In the 2000s, economic growth, bolstered by rising oil prices, generated widespread public support. However, after the 2009 economic slowdown, capital flight, and declining living standards, economic legitimacy was increasingly questioned. The 2011–2012 protests fuelled perceptions that the regime's democratic legitimacy—obtained via questionable elections—had substantially eroded. In response, the Putin administration shifted legitimacy sources, turning toward Russian nationalism and nostalgia for a past beyond the 1990s. The fortress Russia concept of defending the country from external threats, particularly after the 2014 Crimean annexation took shape. The regime's growing reliance on externalising problems, using anti-Western rhetoric and presenting itself as a defender of Russian values, suggests some questioning of legitimacy but not a complete legitimacy crisis. Thus, legitimacy appears to have been fragile but not entirely undermined during this period, making the status of legitimacy ambiguous as an omnibalancing enabling condition.

4.4.2.6 Fragmented Elite: Absent

Throughout the 2006–2016 period, Russia's political elite remained relatively cohesive, tightly controlled by the Kremlin. So-called *Sistema* (discussed above) involves the intricate management of elites, where loyalty is rewarded with access to state resources and positions of power (Pavlovsky, 2016). Elite fragmentation was discouraged through selective repression and co-optation, as seen in the case of

Mikhail Khodorkovsky, a prominent oligarch who was jailed and stripped of his assets in 2003. The absence of significant elite defections, public dissent from within elite ranks, or visible elite turmoil suggests that the elite was largely co-opted and unified under Putin's leadership. Putin's inner circle, including figures like Volodin and Kadyrov, maintained and secured the regime's stability during this period, diminishing omnibalancing pressures because elite fragmentation was not a source of threats for the regime.

4.4.2.7 Vulnerable Geopolitical Position: Absent

While external threats existed, particularly related to NATO expansion and EU integration in Eastern Europe (Götz & Staun, 2022, pp. 486–488), these were largely rhetorical or strategic concerns rather than acute, existential threats to the regime. Russia's geopolitical position from 2006–2016 was relatively stable, with Russia exerting considerable influence over former Soviet states (Götz, 2017b), as seen in the Russia-Georgia War of 2008 and later in the annexation of Crimea in 2014. While Ukraine's drift toward the West was a concern, the Kremlin countered this with militarised actions, rather than viewing it as a vulnerable geopolitical position requiring balancing through external alignment. Thus, Russia was not geopolitically vulnerable during this period, at least not in a way that would prompt it to align foreign policy decisions directly with internal regime survival concerns. This enabling condition is not present during the 2006–2016 timeframe.

The omnibalancing enabling conditions in Russia during the 2006–2016 period are very different to cases such as Belarus (chapter 3) and Ukraine (chapter 5). Russia experienced minimal internal threats, cohesive elite structures, and a geopolitical position that did not necessitate reactive external alignment for regime preservation. However, there are ambiguities in the stakes for leadership and the regime's legitimacy, particularly following the 2011–12 protests and the annexation of Crimea. The absence of institutional checks allowed Putin to centralise power, enhancing his ability to make decisive foreign policy moves. Overall, Russia's

enabling conditions reveal a stable yet nuanced balance between internal stability and external strategic considerations, with omnibalancing pressures less pronounced compared to the other two case study regimes.

4.4.3 Truth Table

The following truth table, Table 4.2, lists the seven enabling conditions (Z1 to Z7) discussed in Section 4.4.2 (above), which are factors potentially conducive to omnibalancing, with the final outcome (Y) indicating whether omnibalancing was attempted. Each condition is assigned a binary value (Yes = 1, No = 0), with ambiguous conditions assigned a value of 0.1 to reflect uncertainty.

Table 4.2 Omnibalancing Enabling Conditions Truth Table: Russia

c Cases	Z_1 Presence of Internal Threat(s)	Z_2 High Stakes for Leaders	Z_3 Institutional Checks Degraded or Absent	Z_4 Low State Capacity (Administrative & Coercive)		Z_5 Low Legitimacy	Z_6 Fragmented Elite	Z_7 Vulnerable Geopolitical Position	Y Omnibalancing
State	No	Ambiguous	Yes	Low	High	Ambiguous	No	No	No
Value	0	0.1	1	1	0	0.1	0	0	2.2

Table source: This enabling condition truth table was created by the author. The value of 1 denotes the presence of the enabling condition. 0 indicates the enabling condition is absent. The value of 0.1 indicates ambiguity.

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Table 4.1 is a Boolean summary of the presence or absence of omnibalancing enabling conditions discussed in Section 4.4.2. Because the Bolotnaya mobilisation never rose to an existential challenge, ‘Presence of internal threats’ is scored 0. The personal risks Putin would face if removed from office are plausible yet not self-evidently severe, so ‘High stakes for leaders’ is coded 0.1 (ambiguous). The consolidation of the super-presidential political system and the marginalisation institutional checks satisfy the third condition, yielding a 1 for ‘Institutional checks degraded or absent’. Russia’s bureaucracy performs poorly while its coercive agencies remain strong. This condition has a value of 2. Therefore, the “Low” administrative state capacity receives a 1 while the “High” coercive capacity receives a 0. Public support under the Crimea consensus and approval ratings that rarely dipped below 70 per cent lead to a 0 for ‘Low legitimacy’. Sistema sustains intra-elite cohesion, so ‘Fragmented elite’ is set at 0. Finally, Russia’s ability to impose costs on neighbours means its geopolitical setting is not judged vulnerable, producing a 0 for the seventh indicator. Summing these entries gives a composite enabling-condition score of 2.2.

4.4.4 Outcome Assessment

Russia’s alignment with China does not fit the framework of omnibalancing because it lacks the necessary conditions and crises that would compel Putin to turn to China for regime survival. In omnibalancing theory, regimes seek external alignments to counteract internal threats that could jeopardize their hold on power. The study’s original hypothesis was that from 2006 to 2016, Russia sought to omnibalance by aligning with China to offset external threats to the Russian state, but most importantly checking threats to Putin’s authoritarian regime, too. However, upon further research and reflection, it has become clear that this argument does not hold. There were no serious regime-threatening crises during this time, and much of the support provided by China either duplicated what Russia could already procure elsewhere or was not significant enough to warrant categorization as omnibalancing.

The reasons for this are three-fold: first, there was no credible internal threat to Putin's regime during the period from 2006 to 2016 that necessitated external intervention or assistance. Second, key enabling conditions for omnibalancing were either absent or ambiguous, undermining the theoretical basis for Russia's incentive to engage in such behavior. Third, where China did provide assistance to Russia, such as loans or surveillance technology, the evidence suggests this support was either performative in terms of bolstering bilateral relations or redundant—not regime-saving material.

For omnibalancing to occur, a regime must face a survival-threatening internal challenge that it mobilizes external alignments to alleviate. This simply was not the case for Putin's Russia from 2006 to 2016. While there were specific crises—such as the 2009 financial crisis, the 2011–2012 Bolotnaya protests, and the oil price collapse of 2014 —none of these posed an existential threat to the regime.

The Bolotnaya protests, though significant in terms of mass mobilization and international visibility, did not escalate to a level that seriously challenged the Putin regime. The protests lacked cohesion, clear political direction, or the necessary momentum to escalate into something as destabilising as the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine or the Arab Spring protests in the Middle East (A. Wilson, 2023). The Kremlin responded with measured, selective repression, including crackdowns on opposition leaders and protesters, but also moderated some of its responses by overturning convictions related to the protests, indicative of the regime's confidence in its stability (Pomeranz, 2023).

Similarly, the 2009 financial crisis and the 2014 oil price collapse, while negatively affecting Russia's economy, did not generate mass discontent or elite fracturing severe enough to threaten Putin's hold on power. Around 2009, Putin's popularity was still high. The Russia central bank managed the 2009 credit crunch skilfully. In 2014 to 2016, there was the Crimea consensus that emerged after Russia

annexed Crimea. This created a rally-around-the-flag effect, where public support for Putin surged due to a revived nationalistic sentiment. As polling by the Levada Center (2024b) demonstrates, Putin's approval ratings hovered above 80 percent, even during periods of economic difficulty, thanks to the annexation and the resonance of anti-Western and nationalist rhetoric. The regime thus maintained high levels of domestic legitimacy, negating the need to turn to foreign partners for help in managing internal threats.

Omnibalancing is more likely when certain enabling conditions are present. These drive a regime to seek alignment with an external power, including high internal threats, significant stakes for leadership loss, weak institutional checks, and other internal vulnerabilities. In Russia's case, from 2006 to 2016, many of these conditions were either missing or ambiguous.

The most crucial factor—a serious internal threats—was notably absent, as discussed above. Specifically, for the explaining-outcome process tracing method used here, this chapter argues there is no adequate crisis event to test omnibalancing against. Other theorised enabling conditions also fail to solidly back the claim that Russia would need China for omnibalancing purposes. For example, the legitimacy of Putin's regime, which increasingly chose to shift from economic performance to rely more on nationalism and anti-Western exceptionalism, remained largely intact. Furthermore, Russia's coercive capacity to deal with domestic unrest was robust. Administrative capacity could be characterized as weak (due to corruption and inefficiency), but the regime's coercive apparatus was strong enough to suppress the fallout from internal challenges.

In 2006 to 2016, the stakes for Putin personally were ambiguous. While it's plausible that his personal stakes in maintaining power increased after 2012, as repression intensified and his popularity began a gradual decline, there was no clear indication that losing power at that time posed the kind of existential threat seen in

other autocratic regimes (like seen recently in Kazakhstan). Elite fragmentation was largely absent, due to the Kremlin's control over key political actors and Putin's patronal management network of *sistema*.

Institutional checks on Putin's power were largely absent, but this is not enough of an enabling condition by itself to prove omnibalancing. Omnibalancing assumes the removal of institutional checks allows for foreign policy decisions aimed at personal one-man rule; however, in Russia's case, while Putin had nearly unchecked power, he did not require China to leverage this for regime survival.

Lastly, where evidence does exist of Chinese support for Russia—such as the provision of surveillance technologies, financial loans, and security cooperation—it is not sufficient to warrant classification as omnibalancing. It is hard to identify this support as crucial for regime survival rather than simply performative. China does appear to interact with Russia that could technically be classified as omnibalancing. For example, there is "the Joint Working Group on Cooperation in the Field of Personnel Training between China's Ministry of Public Security and Russia's Ministry of Internal Affairs, which was created in 2008 and [meets] annually" (Düben, 2023, p. 480). This organisation trades best practices between internal security forces (MID Russian Federation 2017). Düben (2023) describes this as mutual omnibalancing, whereby both regimes are allegedly sharing practices to help bolster each other's internal repression. But it is not clear how much this training and exchange is performative for demonstrating deeper bilateral ties rather substantive in terms providing real regime survival capabilities. This might have been better tested if there was a crisis to demonstrate its impact. Another instance is the oft-cited transfer of surveillance technology from China to Russia (Freedom House, 2017; Nocetti, 2015; Seddon, 2016). However, Russia was already capable of acquiring similar surveillance technologies from other sources, including Western companies (Soldatov & Borogan, 2017). Therefore, China's surveillance technology was not singular or regime-salvaging in scope.

Similar evidence emerges regarding financial aid and loans. While China extended billions of dollars in loans to members of Putin's inner circle, this is analogous to routine bilateral relations. Billions come from all over the world for Russian resources. Rather than a targeted instrument designed to help Russia through a period of crisis, this is an example of quotidian omnibalancing, where the researcher sees evidence of omnibalancing in everyday politics. Russia had access to alternative sources of revenue—namely, oil and gas sales to Europe—rendering China's funds helpful, but not indispensable to regime survival.

Indeed, when considering Russia's broader financial adaptability, these Chinese loans do not seem crucially tied to regime preservation. Even during the oil price collapse, Russia found ways to insulate parts of its economy through reserve funds and alternative markets. Close alignment with China may have been pragmatic for Russia's long-term economic interests, but it is not demonstrable that this partnership was a regime-saving measure geared toward suppressing internal vulnerabilities. With the benefit of hindsight, Russia has also shown that it is perfectly capable of rewarding regime elites with funds from selling energy even after intensive Western sanctions; it is hard to argue that (at least before the 2022 expanded war against Ukraine) that Russia needed China to prevent economic collapse (Vakulenko, 2023a, 2023b). China for Russia then, at least in this study's timeframe, is better described as a fellow traveller and a lender of last resort, rather than a way to omnibalance internal threats to Putin's regime survival.

To summerise, Russia's relationship with China during the 2006–2016 period is better explained by mutual cooperation geared toward long-term strategic and economic goals, rather than as a necessary response to internal threats through omnibalancing. Russia did not face credible regime-threatening crises that required China's specific support to maintain Putin's hold on power. Shared projects, bilateral loans, and technology exchanges may have reinforced existing elements of regime control, but they were not irreplaceable, nor did they respond to acute internal

vulnerabilities severe enough to necessitate external omnibalancing. In this case, Russia-China relations should be viewed as a form of strategic partnership rather than omnibalancing—a routine but cautious bilateral relationship rather than a secondary strategy for authoritarian survival.

Perhaps a better timeframe to apply omnibalancing would be after 2022, when Russia's disastrous expanded invasion of Ukraine and accompanying sanctions have more severely challenged both its internal stability and capacity to generate economic rents for its elites, leading to an observable deepening of reliance on China. Indeed, a leading expert on Russia-China relations has called described the new relationship as Russia being "China's vassal". However, for the 2006–2016 period under examination, Russia's crisis management did not require omnibalancing with China, and Moscow maintained sufficient internal control without needing external intervention to buffer regime vulnerabilities.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has argued Russia's tightening partnership with China was not an omnibalancing response to an existential domestic threat. Instead, deepening ties were the outgrowth of long-term strategic, economic, and ideational calculations pursued from a position of relative regime security. The Kremlin consolidated its super-presidential system, refined informal governance networks, and despite episodic protests faced no imminent peril in the 2006–2016 timeframe. While cooperation with Beijing expanded across energy, finance, and cyber governance, the evidence indicates that these initiatives were intended to widen Russia's room for manoeuvre vis-à-vis the West and to support existing instruments of strategic repression, rather than to procure life-saving support in the face of serious internal threats. Russia therefore constitutes a negative case: the enabling conditions specified in the revised omnibalancing model were largely absent, and the alignment with China cannot be interpreted as crisis-driven omnibalancing.

On the other hand, the sentiment analysis (SA) method applied for this case study added several insights. Positive references to China that corresponded to set-piece summits and credit announcements, but not to the 2011–2012 Bolotnaya mobilisation or the 2009 financial slowdown. The absence of any surge during the protests, together with the muted negativity during the annexation of Crimea, underlined that elite rhetoric was uncoupled from acute internal pressure. This added to the rejection of an omnibalancing crisis event. In turn, the spikes furnished temporal windows for tracing the diffusion of Chinese concepts of “internet sovereignty”, thereby illustrating how SA can signal moments of ideational attentiveness without, on its own, confirming a causal link to regime survival. Therefore, the SA helped to identify instances of authoritarian learning.

The omnibalancing framework disciplined the analysis by foregrounding a systematic search for seven enabling conditions within the context of a crisis event for the regime. Only one—degraded institutional checks—was unequivocally present; elite fragmentation, and legitimacy erosion remained insufficient to trigger a survival-oriented external realignment. By applying the framework to a negative case, the chapter also exposed the perils of quotidian omnibalancing: without the checklist of conditions and the crisis criterion, any deepening partnership could be misread as omnibalancing. The Russian case instead illustrates the boundary of the theory and clarifies that learning from, or cooperating with, China need not be synonymous with omnibalancing.

Russia’s experience qualifies the dissertation’s wider argument in two ways. First, it shows that authoritarian rulers may intensify cooperation with Beijing for strategic autonomy and selective policy emulation even when domestic vulnerability is modest. Secondly, it supplies a crucial counter-point to the Belarusian and Ukrainian cases, confirming that the revised omnibalancing model discriminates between alignment undertaken for regime salvation and alignment pursued for other motives. The cross-case comparison that follows will draw on this negative

benchmark to specify more sharply the conditions under which ties to China do—or do not—translate into mechanisms of authoritarian persistence.

In a final note, the evidence presented in this chapter reinforces a dual-pathway model of diffusion. Russia's digital authoritarian turn was catalysed both by the international shock of the Arab Spring and by subsequent, selective learning from Chinese policy instruments. This dual-pathway perspective refines the dissertation's overall diffusion argument, demonstrating that Russian policy innovation in the digital sphere was neither a simple act of imitation nor solely a response to domestic pressures, but rather the product of both intersecting international events and bilateral relationships.

Chapter 5. Ukraine

> "I am convinced that active bilateral interaction with SCO and APEC members—primarily Russia, China and India—will contribute to the successful implementation of our intentions."
>
> — Victor Yanukovych, Ukrainian President from 2010 to 2014[18]

5.1 Case Study Introduction

This chapter argues that President Viktor Yanukovych's administration attempted to use deeper alignment with the People's Republic of China as an instrument for regime survival. A mixed-method investigation shows, first, that favourable references to China were almost non-existent before Yanukovych took office, then rose sharply between 2010 and 2013, and peaked in the very quarter in which elite defections, mass protest and Kremlin coercion converged to threaten regime survival. Second, process tracing demonstrates that the December-2013 state visit to Beijing, which produced large credit pledges and talk of Ukraine's future role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, formed the pivotal step in a three-part causal chain that sought—but ultimately failed—to omnibalance domestic threats to the regime. Although the leadership signalled interest in Chinese models of growth and infrastructure finance, no substantive policy transfer or authoritarian learning was realised before the government collapsed. The Ukraine case therefore confirms the dissertation's broader claim that post-Soviet leaders do look to Beijing when existential pressures mount, yet it also exposes the limits of external alignment where elite fragmentation and legitimacy deficits have already passed a tipping-point.

The chapter proceeds in four stages. Section 5.2 situates Ukraine's China policy in the wider domestic, regional and international setting, emphasising the

[18]. See Liaison Office for Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovych (2012).

semi-presidential tug-of-war, chronic state weakness and the country's exposed position between Brussels and Moscow. Section 5.3 presents the sentiment analysis results, traces the three main phases of official discourse towards China, and explains why the Q4-2013 spike constitutes the most plausible window for an omnibalancing move. Section 5.4 employs explaining-outcome process tracing to reconstruct the causal mechanism that linked widening protest and elite defection to Yanukovych's bid for Chinese credit and diplomatic cover; it weighs the evidence against the seven enabling conditions specified in Chapter 2. Section 5.5 summarises the findings and reflects on their implications for the dissertation's comparative argument.

The opening quote by former Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovych crystallises the chapter's core theme. Uttered in September 2012, the sentence reveals a president who already saw engagement with China and its security club as a means of advancing domestic and geopolitical goals. The quotation foreshadows the regime's turn from the West (primarily the EU) and signals a belief that Chinese partnership could benefit the Yanukovych regime.

5.2 Context

This section situates Ukraine's policy towards China within the wider Ukrainian domestic and external environment. It argues that any assessment of alignment, copying, or omnibalancing must be anchored in three features of the 2006–2016 period. First, policy generation was conditioned by a semi-presidential framework in which shifting constitutional rules, recurrent elite fragmentation, and oligarchic patronage produced periods of executive dominance (under Kuchma and Yanukovych) followed by shorter episodes of parliamentary constraint (under Yushchenko and, later, post-Maidan revolution governments). Second, the state's chronic administrative weakness and unreliable coercive capacity left successive administrations vulnerable to domestic protest and the west–east identity cleavage

that cut across electoral geography. Third, Ukraine's geopolitical position—caught between European conditionality and Russian coercion—generated cyclical swings in foreign orientation that created openings for tactical engagement with alternative partners, such as China. The sections in 5.2 trace how these structural and conflicting factors shaped policy trends at the domestic, regional, and international levels. This sets the backdrop against which the subsequent sentiment analysis and process-tracing analyses take place.

5.2.1 Overview of Policy Generation and Policy Trends in Ukraine

An understanding of policy generation in Ukraine around the time of the Yanukovych regime is important because it provides some understanding of the links between corruption, oligarchic influence, and the semi-presidential system that defines Ukraine's political landscape. This era, particularly 2010 to 2014, is a critical time for understanding how Ukraine vacillated between eastern and western allegiances, as well as authoritarian and democratic tendencies, which shaped domestic and foreign policy.

In contrast to the centralised and top-down policy processes in Belarus and Russia, Ukraine's semi-presidential system gave its parliament, alongside the presidency, a significant—but often unstable—role in shaping policy. This instability is thanks to Ukraine's oligarchs, who held more autonomy compared to their counterparts in Russia and Belarus, where they were either marginalised or co-opted by the state. Unevenly distributed influence and a fluctuating political environment made Ukrainian policy generation more scattered and, ultimately, less decisive. Furthermore, the constant tug-of-war between oligarchic interests and the divergent east-west national identity cleavage often created a volatile political atmosphere.

Understanding this erratic policy-making process, Yanukovych's tenure underlines how political in-fighting, external pressures from both the West and Russia, and oligarchic dominance shaped Ukraine's policy generation process. This

section lays a foundation for understanding the events leading to the 2013–2014 Euromaidan protests and showcases the stark contrasts between Ukraine's more pluralistic but unstable approach and the tighter, more centralised systems of Russia and Belarus.

Policy generation in Ukraine resembles the Russian model in certain respects. It is a combination of constitutionalism—defined as respect for the written rules that define governmental power—and corruption. This is reminiscent of Sakwa's dual state concept (discussed in the section on Russia above). Policy is a product of formal rules and informal practices. Key actors are in the policy process are the regime insiders and the Ukrainian oligarchs.

Ukraine's difference from Russia in policy making is the role of parliament. Ukraine rewrote its Soviet era constitution only in 1996, but it was created together with parliament, which ensured itself a role in politics (Plokhy, 2021, Chapter 26 para. 14). This made Ukraine semi-presidential, rather than super-presidential (A. Wilson, 1999, p. 272, 2015c, p. 102). Elites and political parties have swerved the country between authoritarian and democratic paths. Autocratic leaning regimes have been periods of greater presidential power (D'Anieri, 2012; A. Wilson, 2015c), for example from 1994 to 2005 under Leonid Kuchma and 2010 to 2014 under Victor Yanukovych. These periods have alternated with more democratic regimes, which produced a premier–presidential system, such as in 2006 to 2010 under Viktor Yushchenko and after 2014 under Petro Poroshenko.

The other difference is oligarchs dominate policy and politics in Ukraine. Ukraine mimics Russia in that corrupt privatisation of state assets in the 1990s led to the rise of a politically influential class of oligarchs (Plokhy, 2021, Chapter 26 para. 20–21). However, the wider inclusively of Ukrainian politics via its semi-presidential and parliament system have meant oligarchs have not been marginalised by the state as in Russia. Indeed, they underpin the clanish nature of Ukrainian politics (A.

Wilson, 2015a, pp. 311–321 and 330–347). Since insider privatisation was completed in 1994, Ukraine has been “run by a cabal of oligarchs and regional bosses, in which the president [has been] the chief arbiter” (A. Wilson, 2015c, p. 102).

Figureheads of the Orange Revolution, political insider Viktor Yushchenko and energy oligarch Yuliya Tymoshenko, briefly brought more balance of powers between the president and parliament from 2006 to 2010. Bitter in-fighting among the two and public blame for an economy battered by the 2008 financial crisis and Russia’s credit crunch, however, enabled Viktor Yanukovych to win the 2010 presidential election by default (A. Wilson, 2022, pp. 334–342; Yekelchyk, 2020, pp. 89–90). This reinstated the highly corrupt president-as-chief-arbiter system. The 2014 Maidan Revolution, which was in part a reaction to the rampant corruption of Ukraine’s oligarchs and their manipulation of political affairs, did not fundamentally change the situation. By 2016, the will to reform the system dissipated under political veteran and oligarch president Petro Poroshenko (Yaffa, 2016).

In general, policy making in Ukraine can be said to be scattered and indecisive. This is a result of the back and forth between autocratic and democratic-leaning political regimes and the elite hijacking state controls for self-enrichment. A demonstration of this back-and-forth in Ukrainian foreign policy is on the question of joining the Russian-led Eurasian Customs Union (renamed the Eurasian Economic Union after 2015). The question of closer ties with Russia via some multilateral framework had been repeatedly addressed by Ukrainian presidents and parliaments since 1991 (White et al., 2010, pp. 349–351). Even after Yanukovych committed Ukraine to join the EAEU on December 17, 2013, he did not rule out the possibility of leaving it in exchange for a better deal from the EU (Sakwa, 2015b, Chapter 3). This one step forward, one step back behaviour defines Ukrainian domestic and foreign policy for 2006–2016.

Key actors in the policy process are, thus, the regime and its oligarchic supporters. These key actors are part of a given regime's winning coalition—those in a country's political elite who are essential for a leader to remain in power. The 2014 Maidan protests are an example of what happens when the winning coalition does not back the regime. Corruption under Yanukovych was rife (C. Miller, 2023, Chapter 5). However, he did not share the spoils widely enough. When he called for their support during the 2014 protests, the oligarchs and members of the security forces did not provide it (A. Wilson, 2014, 2022). Yanukovych fled the country and the regime was overthrown.

Ukrainian policy formation can be summarised in saying: the more things change, the more they stay the same. 25 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, much has changed. The structural connections of policy making to presidents and to parliaments, which are supported by oligarchs, means that policy (and politics) is erratic but stagnant.

5.2.1.1 Domestic Policy Trends:

Domestic policy is driven by regional divisions of national identity and the weakness of the Ukrainian state. The result is incumbent regimes face numerous threats at the domestic level, which can be externally leveraged.

Much has been written on Ukraine's west-east national identity division (Plokhy, 2017; White et al., 2010; A. Wilson, 2022). It is a complex issue. For the purposes of this outline, D'Anieri (2012, p. 452) provides a concise summary: "Ukrainians are divided about whether their country is (or should try to be) essentially 'European' or 'Eurasian,' or whether Ukraine's identity is inherently mixed... this identity cleavage overlaps a number of related cleavages of historical experience, language, ethnicity, and region."

This west versus east identity divide enables the regime in power to find support by setting policy that appeals to either side. The result is "Ukrainian

democratic society is predominantly Ukrainian speaking and definitely Ukrainian-thinking, whereas the authoritarian regime and its electoral base speak mostly Russian and think Soviet" (Riabchuk, 2012, pp. 442–444). Not only does this make long term policy incoherent, it also enhances the impact of Western or Russian leverage (referring to foreign policies that seek to persuade and coerce) upon the Ukrainian leadership.

The weakness of the Ukrainian state is also a driver of policy. The Ukrainian state is heavily involved in the economy (A. Wilson, 2015a, pp. 259–274 and 357–358), which provides energy subsidies and a measure of social welfare. But widespread rent-seeking among the elite and public reliance on state support encourages regimes to perpetuate the exploitation of the state. The result is both ineffective policy and weak, corrupt institutions (Bullough, 2015).

Russian energy dependence affects policy making, too. Russia exploits the Ukrainian public's reliance on state subsidised energy. The Kremlin leverages this dependence for political ends. The numerous gas disputes between Ukraine and Russia are a testament to the compromised position of the Ukrainian state (Bryza, 2014; D'Anieri, 2012, pp. 448–454; A. Wilson, 2015a, p. 312). There have been efforts to diversify energy supplies to reduce dependence on Russia (Bershidsky, 2016). This creates conditions for shifting east-west facing foreign policies. The weak state together with politicians appealing to pro-EU west or Russian-sympathetic voters produces a back-and-forth that has instilled a long-term immobility in policy (Vanderhill, 2013).

This situation creates many threats to the regime at the domestic level. First, political competition among Ukrainian oligarchs exerts lateral, elite level pressure upon the incumbent regime. At the same time, rampant corruption leaves any regime open to ground-up discontent. Second, the nature of the weak state and the west-east national identity division means external leverage—EU democratisation efforts

or Russian energy cut-offs—can harm regime legitimacy. By pursuing pro-EU policy, the incumbent regime compromises its diffuse support to the regions of Ukraine that feel closer affinity to Russia. Energy and trade disagreements with Russia negatively affect the economic, specific support the regime can provide Ukrainian citizens.

5.2.1.2 Regional Policy Trends:

In general, Ukraine's regional and international policy is set in reaction to Russia's or the West's policies. It is geared to whichever side can provide it the most benefits. Relations with Belarus are friendly, but they are affected by Ukraine's ties with either the West or Russia. A reoccurring threat to Ukraine at the regional level is Russian coercion.

Until 2014, Ukraine attempted a multivector foreign policy—to occupy a middle ground between Europe, Russia, and the world, so neither Russia nor the West could pressure Ukraine too hard on any particular issue, because Ukraine had multiple options for international support. In reality, however, this policy boils down to a Russia–West seesaw. In practice, it does not represent so much a "third way," but a "muddle way" (Arel, 1998; Riabchuk, 2012). Since the 2014 annexation of Crimea, Ukraine has directed policy away from Russia—the post-Yanukovych government signing a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area agreement the EU (European Commission, 2024). From 2006–2014, Ukraine's regional policy shifted east and west. After 2014, it stayed west.

Ukraine's relations with Belarus also depend on Russia and the West. For example, when Ukraine has courted closer relations with the EU, Belarus-Ukraine ties tend to be neglected. This is because in 1996 Belarus formed the (long neglected but after the 2020 protests sovereignty-threatening) Union State with Russia, which was intended to harmonise economic cooperation between the two states, but gears Belarusian foreign policy more closely with Russia. An infamous example in the 2006–2016 timeframe is in 2011 when Ukrainian president Viktor

Yanukovych did not invite the Belarusian president Viktor Lukashenka to an international Chernobyl memorial in Kyiv. EU representatives had expressed their displeasure at Lukashenka's attendance, so he was uninvited (Plaschinsky, 2012). This scandal spoiled bilateral relations until the demise of the Yanukovych regime.

The greatest threat at the regional level is arguably Russian coercion. In the past, Ukrainian regimes were plagued by Russian energy supply cuts or price rises. But into the mid-2010s, a combination of economic stagnation (much of Ukraine's energy needs are connected to heavy industry) and efforts to reduce energy imports from Russia mean Ukraine slightly less dependent on Russian energy (Bershidsky, 2016).

At the regional level, Russian threats to the regime are economic sanctions and military intervention. Economic sanctions take the form of trade wars with both sides erecting boycotts and tariffs. Even after 2014, Ukraine was still heavily dependent on Russian imports and exports (Melkozerova, 2017). Another source of destabilisation at this time is the hot-and-cold conflict in Ukraine's Donbass region. Ukraine's 2015 National Security Strategy states Ukraine will seek the normalisation of ties with Russia under the condition it withdraws its forces and restore Ukraine's territorial integrity—that is, abandon the Donbass separatists and return Crimea (NISS, 2015). Russian backed separatists can, therefore, exert pressure on the Ukrainian regime by either maintaining a stalemate or intensifying the conflict.

After the 2014 Russian war against Ukraine began, and until the end of this study's case study, Belarus has been a neutral partner. Belarus recognized the May 2014 presidential elections and attended the June 7 presidential inauguration of Petro Poroshenko. Lukashenka called on the new government of Ukraine to "destroy the [separatist] militants, who are fighting against Ukrainians" and advocates the territorial integrity of Ukraine. Lukashenka has also stated that Belarus would never

be a bridgehead for an attack on Ukraine (Bogutsky, 2015, p. 92). Partly for these reasons, Minsk was chosen as the location for the Minsk Agreement negotiations.

5.2.1.3 International Policy Trends:

Touched on above, in general, Ukraine's international policy has fluctuated between orienting itself to Western Europe or to Russia. Ukraine's stated aim was to conduct a multivector foreign policy, occupying a middle way and bridge between the EU and Russia. Political infighting and a weak state have meant this aim was not realised. Since Russia's annexation, this multivectored policy has become an anyone-but- Russia policy, with a strong orientation towards the EU (NISS, 2015).

Paradoxically, at the international level, Ukraine's weak state can sometimes be an asset. For example, "Ukraine has frequently been unable to implement its more significant commitments to both the West and Russia, meaning that its biggest concessions are often watered down" (D'Anieri, 2012, p. 454). At the same time, Ukraine is its own worst enemy for developing international ties. Its inability to tackle corruption is reducing the foreign partners' interest in Ukrainian engagement (Dempsey, 2016; Z. Liu, 2016; Soros, 2015).

Threats to regime survival at the international level—before and after 2014—have come in the form of political conditionality (persuasive leverage). Ukraine has a history of failing to implement political and economic reforms in return for IMF or EU credit. The present EU trade and visa agreements and also IMF loans are contingent restarting and completing these same reforms (Lasocki, 2016). Conditionality can be a threat to the regime, because it can prevents elites from informally benefitting from state assets. In turn, the regime may be unable to reward elite supporters, who may change their allegiance to a regime opponent who is ready to continue corruption and defy conditionality.

Within this policymaking context, the crisis selected for omnibalancing analysis in section 5.4 is the Euromaidan revolution of 21 November 2013 to 22 February

2014, when escalating mass protests, widening elite defections, and intensifying Russian pressure converged to threaten the survival of President Yanukovych's regime. The episode satisfies three criteria that guide case selection across the dissertation. First, it represents an acute, time-bound challenge in which internal threats were existential for the regime. Second, it coincides with the most pronounced surge in pro-Chinese presidential rhetoric detected by the sentiment analysis series (Q4 2013–Q1 2014), when Yanukovych travelled to Beijing to negotiate credit lines and investment pledges. The sentiment analysis traces a measurable spike in positivity towards China coinciding with the crisis. Third, all seven enabling conditions outlined in Chapter 2 are either fully present or, in the case of state capacity, partially present, providing a fertile setting for tracing the causal mechanism specified in the revised framework. The Euromaidan crisis therefore offers a compact yet information-rich window in which to test whether, and how, an embattled Ukrainian leadership attempted to balance domestic vulnerabilities through external alignment with China.

5.3 Sentiment Analysis Results

This section presents and interprets the sentiment analysis for Ukraine's top policymakers' sentiment towards China. It argues that the longitudinal pattern of official discourse is punctuated by three distinct phases: a near-absence of engagement prior to 2010; a sharp, presidency-centred surge in positive references between mid-2010 and early-2014; and a collapse of positive sentiment after Russia's annexation of Crimea. Coinciding with President Yanukovych's visit to Beijing and the onset of the Euromaidan protests, the positive sentiment spike in Q4 2013 forms the apex of this trajectory. Considered in wider regional context, the positivity signals an instrumental turn to China at a moment of acute domestic and external pressure. Although hampered by incomplete archival coverage, the corpus is sufficiently large to trace a statistically significant, upward trend in positivity to China ($x = 0.135$). This trend aligns with the subsequent efforts by the Yanukovych

regime to secure Chinese credit. By mapping when favourable sentiment rose and fell, the sentiment analysis empirically traces the temporal window that coincides with the Yanukovych regime's tenure in which policy transfer or alignment with China is most plausible. The analysis therefore supplies both empirical support for the chapter's qualitative evidence and an independent justification for selecting the Euromaidan episode as the focal crisis for omnibalancing inquiry.

5.3.1 Corpus

For Ukraine, 51,827 texts were collected for 12 policymakers (four presidents and eight prime ministers). The sources for Ukraine's policymakers are various iterations of its "Government Portal" (Government Portal, 2017), which for a time archived the majority of political speeches and interviews from the early 2000s to the present in one, convenient location. When Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko lost re-election to Zelenski in 2018, the portal's presidential archive was abruptly taken offline.[19] Therefore, the internet-archiving site, Wayback Machine (Internet Archive, 2020), had to be used to source Ukrainian Presidential texts. The still accessible elements of the Government Portal archive were used for Prime Ministerial texts. A description of the corpus data collection, preprocessing, categorisation, and exploratory data analysis (EDA) details can be found in this dissertation's Chapter 2 (above), in section 2.5.4.

5.3.2 Graphical presentation of quarterly scores

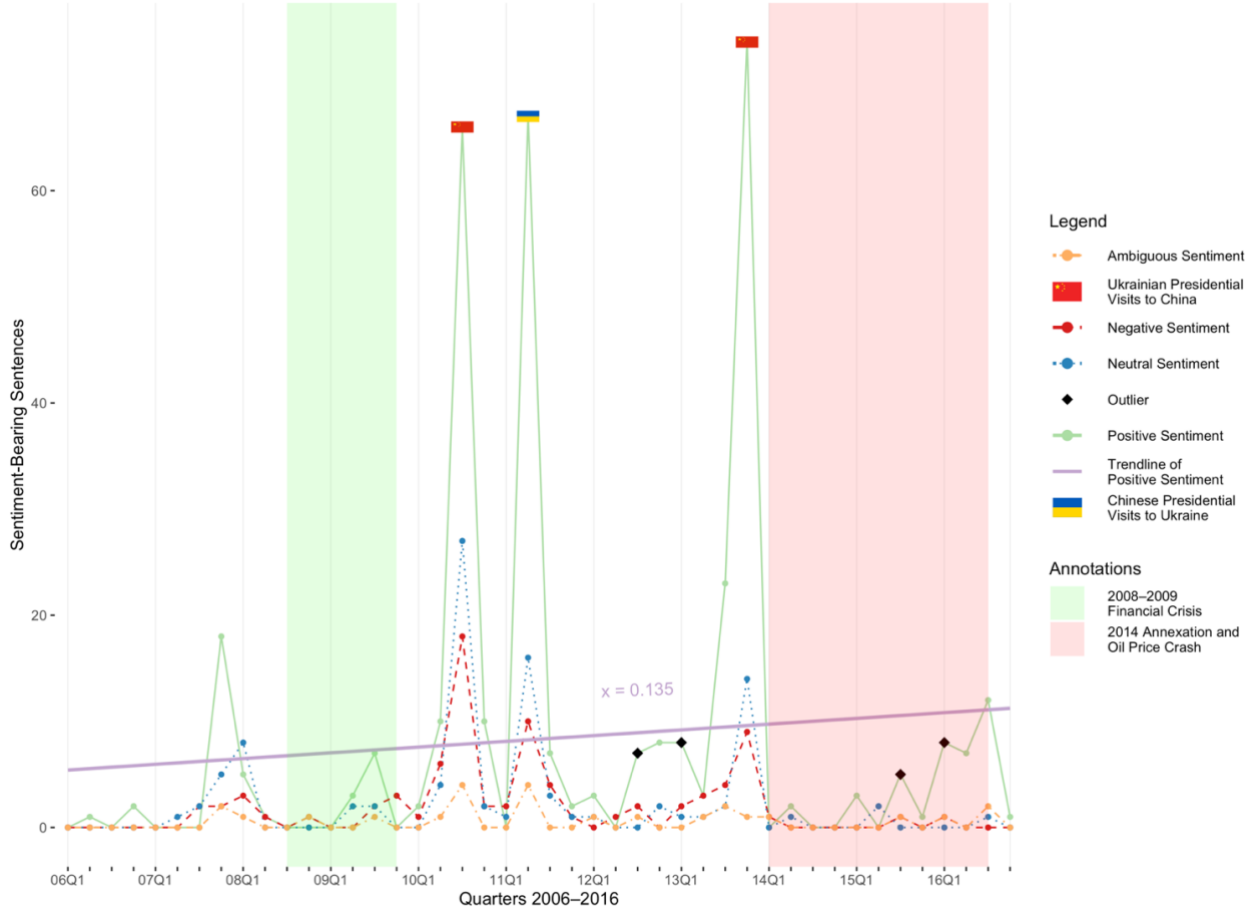
The following features are common to all the sentiment analysis graphs in the case study chapters and appear in Figure 5.1 below. The x-axis, labelled "Quarters 2006–2016," presents the gathered data (from 2006 to 2016) in quarters. A four character tag indicates the year and first quarter. The characters "06Q1," for example, denotes the first quarter (January, February, March) of 2006. The y-axis,

[19]. The oldest official record of any news, meetings, or speeches featuring the Ukrainian President available online start 20 May 2019 (President of Ukraine, 2019).

labelled “Sentiment-Bearing Sentences,” tallies the number of sentences categorised by the lexicon-based SA program. Four line colours and patterns track the differing language-bearing sentiments: a green, solid line for positive sentiment; a red, dashed line for negative sentiment; a blue, dotted line for neutral (non-sentiment bearing) language; and an orange, dot-dash line for ambiguous sentiment. A solid, purple trendline rises or descends across the graph. The trendline shows the average change (trend) for the single, most prevalent sentiment—either positive or negative. In Figure 5.1, this is positive sentiment. Atop the trendline is a marker, “x,” indicating the trendline slope to three decimal places. After comparing 22 different bilateral relationships against the target countries, it appears any trendline slope value $x \geq 0.1$ or $x \leq -0.1$ indicates a change in bilateral ties—either improving or deteriorating relations. Any other values for x tended to coincide with static, unchanging relations—poor relations remain negative, and good remain positive, and the proportion of positive to negative sentiment stay relatively unchanged. The list titled “Sentiment” to the right of the line-plot provides a legend of the sentiments and trendline. “Annotations” is a secondary legend highlighting political-economic events that continue for a sustained period. The green shading indicates the interval of Russia’s “2008–2009 Financial Crisis,” which was a period of economic hardship and uncertainty for the country. The red shading, tagged as “2014 Annexation and Oil Price Crash,” points to two successive destabilising events. First, in Q1 2014, Russian special forces annexed Crimea and established break-away states in Ukraine’s Donbas region. Second, around Q3 2014, a global oil supply glut caused a world-wide price crash. Recovery only began Q3 2016—hence the red shading ending at this time. The Minsk I and II talks brought some mediation to the issue by Q1 2015, which is why the red shading does not continue indefinitely. These events are indicated on the visualisations, because policymaker behaviour may be different during these times in reaction to the uncertainty caused by events.

Figure 5.1 (below) shows Ukrainian policymakers' sentiment towards China from 2006–2016. A Chinese flag indicates a Ukrainian presidential trip to China. A Ukrainian flag indicates China's president is visiting Ukraine. In the 2006–2016 timeframe, the two Chinese flags (Q3 2010 and Q4 2013) indicate two Ukrainian presidential trips to China. The Chinese president visits Ukraine only once in the same timeframe, denoted by the Ukrainian flag at Q2 2011. A black diamond represents an outlier in positive or negative sentiment. An outlier is a spike (a sharp increase followed by a rapid decrease in the dependent variable) or trough in positive or negative sentiment that is unexplained by relevant events (such as a presidential visit) or seasonal and cyclical phenomena (such as annual meetings). There are four outlier diamonds in figure 5.1. These outlier diamonds top the positive sentiment line plot at Q3 2012, Q1 2013, Q3 2015, and Q1 2016. Although, the spikes are modest, the positivity are not explained by season (indeed, the Ukrainian sentiment line plot exhibits no repetitive seasonality at all) or cycle. No apparent political or aid-related events relating to China take place at these times either. Could it be that Ukrainian policymakers are spontaneously mentioning China? Are they looking to deepen relations with China in the context of increasing domestic or Russian pressures? Or, perhaps, they are interested in certain policies China has to offer?

Figure 5.1 Ukrainian Top Policymakers' Sentiment Towards China and Sentiment-Influencing Events, 2006–2016



Source: Official press releases, and speech and interview transcripts from various iterations of the Ukrainian "Government Portal" (Government Portal, 2017; Internet Archive, 2020). For a downloadable archive of all sources, visit https://pjbraga.github.io/rub_corpus_and_code/corpus/. Dates on the x-axis are read "06Q1" as 2006, first quarter, "07Q1" as 2007, first quarter, and so on.

In figure 5.1 (above), the trendline of positive sentiment has a slope of x = 0.135, which is greater than 0.1. Like the other figures, this slope suggests relations with China are dynamic and growing closer for the study's timeframe, rather than remaining static. The "Annotations" legend lists the same major, region-wide political-economic events—the most significant being Russia's annexation of Crimea and Russian-backed separatist war in Ukraine that began in Q1 2014. Three sharp positive sentiment spikes mark quarters where presidential trips (Yanukovych visiting China in Q3 2010 and Q4 2013, and Xi Jinping visiting in Q2 2011) and dominate the graph. The lack of activity on either side of the three spikes accentuates them.

Figure 5.1 yields the quickest EDA of the three target countries. The reason is the sheer lack of activity before and after Viktor Yanukovych's presidency, which spanned Q2 2010 to Q1 2014. Although, as mentioned earlier, online records of the Ukrainian President's activities are patchy. Attempts to lustrate records of Yanukovych's and Poroshenko's presidencies have interfered with thorough data collection. Some relevant China-related texts where Ukrainian presidents or prime ministers discuss China might be missing. Even so, a great number of texts were collected; figure 5.1 draws from tens of thousands of speeches. So, the lulls in activity in figure 5.1 likely reflect the shifting interests, opportunities, and pressures of alternating Ukrainian presidencies, and not missing data.

The period to look for policy transfer is during Q2 2010 to Q1 2014. Particular emphasis should be placed on the two outliers in Q3 2012 and Q1 2013. The other outliers in Q3 2015 and Q1 2016 should also be considered, but Ukraine's internal instability and more pro-democratic government under President Petro Poroshenko suggest less than ideal conditions for the transfer of policies to promote authoritarian persistence. On a side note, due to the general lack of activity before Yanukovych's tenure, the author views the small rise in negative sentiment in Q4 2009 as irrelevant. There are also two quarters (Q2 2012 and Q2 2013) where negative sentiment-bearing sentences are equal or greater than positive sentiment. The

recorded number of sentences are so few, it is likely these are classification errors. Therefore, the negative sentiment spikes in figure 5.1 are ignored.

Examination of the two 2012 and 2013 outliers reveals neither fits the outlier definition. Instead, Q3 2012–Q1 2013 is an example of where the increased occurrence of positive sentiment-bearing language can suggest a propitious time to check for policy transfer. Here, the rises in positivity are not due to offers of Chinese foreign aid or assistance, or the disbursement of funds from China, or a presidential visit. Instead, Yanukovych's positive language is in reaction to meeting with Chinese dignitaries. In Q3 2012, he meets with the Deputy Chairman of China's National People's Congress (Liaison Office for Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovych, 2012a). And in Q1 2013, Yanukovych meets with China's Minister of National Defence (Liaison Office for Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovych, 2013a). Meeting a dignitary prompts positive language when mentioning China. Praise at an unconnected event would suggests a policymakers' interest in Chinese policies is more genuine—hence the importance of outliers. But this is still a good period to check for policy transfer. There are series of other meetings over this same period, in which Yanukovych and Ukrainian government representatives discuss a variety of joint projects with China (Government Portal, 2013a). In particular, Yanukovych stresses the importance of enhancing Ukraine's participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) to "realise Ukraine's [economic and development] intensions" (Liaison Office for Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovych, 2012b). The SCO has been compared to an "emerging club of authoritarian states" (Ambrosio, 2009, p. 160). Thus, after examination, figure 5.1 suggests 2012 to 2013 is a period to check for policy transfer.

The outliers in Q3 2015 and Q1 2016 do not fit the outlier definition, because of Ukraine's conflict with Russia. But otherwise, the interest in China seems unprovoked. In Q3 2015, the jump in positivity is in connection to the prospective creation of a Chinese Trade Association. Great emphasis is placed on a

“Memorandum for the joint implementation of social housing in Ukraine, whereby Ukraine will receive a loan totalling $15 billion USD at minimum interest over 15 years, with an option to extend” (Government Portal, 2015b), which was agreed earlier that year. In Q1 2016, both President Petro Poroshenko and Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk meet with regional leaders to discuss how Ukraine can take advantage of China's “Silk Road” trade, but excluding Russia (President of Ukraine, 2016). In particular, after the arrival of the experimental Ukraine-Georgia-Azerbaijan-Kazakhstan-China freight train reaches its destination, Yatsenyuk holds a meeting to discuss how the route can be more efficient (Government Portal, 2016). Although, Ukraine’s instability and China’s caution make it an unlikely time for the transfer of autocratic practices to take place.

5.3.3 Interpretation: Ukraine: Exception that Proves the Rule

Ukraine—true to form—provides a hybrid answer. An evaluation of the sentiment analysis and qualitative evidence suggests this study’s proposed hypothesis, but do not prove it. As these policymakers in the regime speak more positively about China, voicing how Ukraine can become a supplier of agricultural resources and military technology to China (Government Portal, 2012), Yanukovych floats the idea of participating in the SCO (Liaison Office for Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovych, 2012b), which has been described as a talking-shop for policies that promote political stability and prevent regime change. These are clear steps towards a relationship with China where policies could diffuse. But ironically, the regime does not remain in power long enough to implement any Chinese-inspired approaches to bolster regime survival. So, the case of Ukraine flirts with fitting the hypothesis, but the most clearly autocratic regime collapses before the hypothesis can be tested.

In the case of Ukraine, it does not appear copying Chinese policies for authoritarian persistence occurred. Although, increasing positivity (in figure 5.1

above) towards China and the actions of top policymakers suggest the regime was open to the possibility. For the most part, policymaker positivity when speaking about China appears to have been driven by using China as source investment and credit, or for political manoeuvring between Russia and the European Union. When positivity is spontaneous—unlinked to direct stimuli—this suggests policymakers are genuinely developing a greater interest in China and its policies. For Ukrainian policymakers, most rises in positivity when mentioning China do not appear spontaneous. Spikes in positivity are strongly correlated with credit—when offered (Q3 2012 and Q1 2015, and Q4 2012) or actually disbursed (Q3 2009 and Q1 2012). Yanukovych, in addition, appears to use ties with China to influence his relations with the Kremlin. There is an unconfirmed rumour that Yanukovych used the development commitments he received from China in late 2013 (where Ukrainian diplomats supposedly received investment pledges from China of more than USD$30 billion, see Government Portal, 2013b) to build pressure for various concessions from Russia.[20] The tactic was to threaten Russia's influence in Ukraine by integrating another major player—China—into the region. The Kremlin would fear reduced leverage over Ukrainian elites, who could soon more easily generate finances from China. Events appear to support this rumour. The 2013 trip to China coincided with Yanukovych's most intensive manoeuvring between Russia's Customs Union and the EU's Association Agreement. Yanukovych's goal in this manoeuvring was reportedly to extract as many benefits and concessions from both the EU and Russia as possible (A. Wilson, 2015a, p. 348). This tactic to pressure Russia may have been helped by China's formal announcement of the "Belt and Road Initiative vision," which was announced at this time, too (Makocki & Popescu, 2016, p. 42). Thus, Yanukovych allegedly used Chinese commitments as bargaining chips. While many projects were planned with China (Government Portal, 2013a; Izmirli, 2014), many collapsed with the exit of Yanukovych's regime, the annexation of Crimea, and the

[20]. This was relayed to the author by way of a casual conversation with an expert on Ukrainian elite politics in September 2016.

conflict in the Donbas region (Z. Liu, 2016). The possibility to copy policies from China for authoritarian persistence never fully materialised.

But what Yanukovych's interactions and words with China do suggest is, given enough time, Ukrainian policymakers may have followed a path similar to what Chinese policymakers have done to enhance authoritarian persistence. At the time of Q3 2012 outlier in figure 5.1, Yanukovych met with both Chinese and Russian officials to ask for "observer status" for Ukraine in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). To recall, the SCO is a regional security organisation that works at "developing and implementing agreed measures to prevent, identify and suppress… [threats to member states'] political, economic and social stability" (Shanghai Cooperation Organization, 2001, pp. 1–3). China and Russia are founding members. The organisation appears to have been part of the reaction to the Colour Revolution regime changes that began in 2000 (Ambrosio, 2009, pp. 159–165). By all appearances, SCO is anti-regime-change talking shop. "I am convinced that active bilateral interaction with SCO and APEC members—primarily Russia, China and India—will contribute to the successful implementation of our intentions," Yanukovych told a Chinese diplomat on 14 September 2012 (Liaison Office for Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovych, 2012b). Days earlier, Yanukovych met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Sochi, Russia, and discussed the prospect of Ukraine's SCO observer status (Dzerkalo Tyzhnia, 2012). At the time, Afghanistan, India, Iran, Pakistan, and Mongolia were SCO observer states. Clearly, Yanukovych was laying the groundwork for Ukraine to join this group of observer states (Lukashenka's regime was doing the same and gained observer status in 2015). Yanukovych's efforts to position Ukraine closer to the SCO could have continued down a foreign policy path that resembled an aspect of China's (and Russia's) foreign policy: to hedge against regime change through participation in the SCO.

Russia's invasion of Crimea put China-Ukraine relations on hold and explains the remainder of Ukraine's SA data in figure 5.1. This shifted the Poroshenko

regime's foreign policy focus to Europe. The only other top Ukrainian policymaker within this study's timeframe who is vocal about ties with China is Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk (in office February 2014 to 14 April 2016). Yatsenyuk's positive language while mentioning China is, however, primarily to snub Russia. After the 2014 Russian invasion of Crimea, Russia and Ukraine have engaged in tit-for-tat import bans (Reuters, 2018). On 15 January 2016, a 20-car container train left the Ukrainian state-owned Illichivsk Commercial Seaport to test the viability of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR). The TITR connects Ukraine with Central Asia, China, and beyond, but avoids Russian territory (Daly, 2016; Lyalikov, 2016). When the train-cars (half of which were empty) arrived in China 15 days later, Yatsenyuk declared Ukrainian officials had "launched this experimental train to make Russia understand that the economic and transit blockade of Ukraine would fail" (Liaison Office for Ukrainian Cabinet Ministers, 2016). Yatsenyuk's words—in the lead-up to and aftermath of this bypass test—account for the small up-tick in positive sentiment in Q3 2015 and Q1 2016. But the TITR and hopes of deeper trade with China were largely symbolic. For example, the new route to China cost 30 percent more per container than the original route through Russia (Xinhua News Agency, 2016). Yatsenyuk's positivity was not so much for China and its policies, but rather as a way to slight Russia. In the same breath as mentioning China, Yatsenyuk often speaks of "other countries where we earn hundreds of millions" and the failure of "Russia's economic blockade" (Liaison Office for Ukrainian Cabinet Ministers, 2015, 2016). While Yatsenyuk's positive language when mentioning China produces small rises in the sentiment analysis results, this does not support the theory of positivity towards China making policymakers more likely to copy Chinese policies for authoritarian persistence. Yatsenyuk's positivity is a response to regional politics, not greater interest in China or its policies.

Ukraine's SA results do not prove this study's hypothesis, but they do suggest it. The results also objectively demonstrate shifting foreign policy interests for

different regimes. The SA results show a small but consistent rise in Yanukovych's positive language when mentioning China while, at the same time, Yanukovych also displayed interest in Ukraine's observer membership in the SCO—an organisation that aims to enhance regime stability for its members. Although not mutually exclusive to long-term Ukraine-China ties, rumours and parallel events suggest in the short-term Yanukovych only wished to use Chinese ties as a bargaining chip between Russia and the EU. Under Poroshenko's regime, the SA results show a subdued positivity as attentions move away from China. As Prime Minister Yatsenyuk's language highlights, this is because the Poroshenko regime was more focused on its disagreements with Russia and its relations with the EU, and others, than developing ties with China. The SA results are a heart rate monitor for China-Ukraine relations. Its pulse can serve as an objective marker to reinforce arguments about changes in relations and policy.

5.4 Process-tracing of Omnibalancing

Section 5.4 uses explaining-outcome process tracing to establish whether President Yanukovych's administration sought alignment with China to counter the existential domestic threats generated during the Euromaidan crisis. The section argues that, between mid-2013 and February 2014, all but one of the seven enabling conditions specified in Chapter 2 were present. It argues further that the Kremlin's trade and energy coercion served as the external trigger that pushed the regime to deepen economic and security ties with Beijing. Following that, Yanukovych's December 2013 visit to China formed the pivotal step for omnibalancing. This produces a three-part causal chain, linking internal threats to the regime with foreign policy alignment with China, which attempted (but ultimately failed) to omnibalance threats and prolong the Yanukovych regime. The sections that follow identify the trigger event (5.4.1), trace the presence of each omnibalancing enabling condition (5.4.2), summarise the enabling conditions in a truth table (5.4.3), set out the

process-tracing causal mechanism in a wireframe figure (5.4.4), and trace the process of the Yanukovych regime's omnibalancing attempt (5.4.5).

5.4.1 Trigger Event

The key crisis event for examining Viktor Yanukovych's attempt to omnibalance with China for authoritarian persistence is the Maidan Revolution of Dignity, which unfolded between 21 November 2013 and 22 February 2014. During this period, intense mass protests and ensuing political instability threatened his regime. Faced with a growing domestic existential threat, notably elite fragmentation and mass protests, Yanukovych looked to external sources of support to ensure the survival of his regime. While many focus on Yanukovych's fateful decision to turn away from the EU and consider deeper integration with Russia, this chapter examines Yanukovych's lesser-known alignment effort with China—a move designed to omnibalance against his regime's domestic threats.

As mass protests heightened and regime fissures began to widen, Yanukovych travelled to China from December 3 to 6, 2013, a time when Kyiv was gripped by escalating tensions, mass protests, and protesters clashing with riot police (BBC, 2013). Protesters, increasingly backed by dissatisfied elites, had gathered en masse in Independence Square. It will be argued below that the degree of elite support (using the word "loyalty" would be too strong a word) was an essential element of regime stability in Ukrainian politics, where politicians were often wealthy business men and women. In the context of the Euromaidan, elite support for the regime was wavering. Yanukovych's trip to Beijing at this critical time underscores his belief in the importance of China as an external partner capable of helping him to stabilise the crisis. During his visit, he sought to strengthen Ukraine's participation in China's emerging Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), negotiating credit lines and investment deals to address the growing economic pressures and to placate alienated oligarchs. Yanukovych's calculation was clear: by securing financial lifelines and partnerships

from China, he could not only address Ukraine's economic shortfalls but also retain support from powerful Ukrainian oligarchs who were essential to his regime's survival. Indeed, Yanukovych might even be able to negotiate better terms from Russia or the EU.

Yanukovych's attempt to omnibalance against internal collapse by leveraging Chinese financial agreements was evident but ultimately failed. By the time the protests escalated into a full-fledged national crisis, the regime lacked the internal cohesion needed for survival. Nevertheless, Yanukovych's engagement with China during this critical episode demonstrates a significant attempt to use external alignment to stave off internal destabilization, fulfilling the essence of an omnibalancing strategy.

5.4.2 Internal-Threat Profile: Ukraine's Omnibalancing Enabling Conditions

This section (like the others for Belarus and Russia above) examines the enabling conditions for omnibalancing that were present during the crisis event under study. During the Euromaidan, the Yanukovych regime was experiencing a high number of enabling conditions: this section argues that all are present except for the low state capacity enabling condition, which is ambiguous, having low administrative capacity to provide public services and good but high coercive capacity to protect the regime and provide security. This high number of enabling conditions (a score of 7.1 in table 5.1 above) means the ease or likelihood whereby a regime can or will omnibalance is high during this crisis.

5.4.2.1 Presence of Internal Threats: Present

The Yanukovych regime faced significant internal threats during the Euromaidan revolution between 21 November 2013 and 22 February 2014. Mass protests erupted in response to his abrupt decision to withdraw from pursuing an EU Association Agreement, a move seen by many Ukrainians as capitulation to Russian influence (C. Miller, 2023, Chapter 5). These protests morphed into a broader

demand for reform and resistance to Yanukovych's increasingly authoritarian rule, reflecting a growing popular dissatisfaction with his mode of politics, rewards for his inner circle, and widespread corruption (A. Wilson, 2014). Protesters occupied public spaces, notably Independence Square (the Maidan), and the regime's responses to these protests, including the violent dispersal attempts, only intensified the resistance. Additionally, Yanukovych faced internal threats from elite fragmentation. Key oligarchs, whose support was crucial to his regime's stability, began to shift their alliances, with some even financially backing the protest movement (Sakwa, 2015b; A. Wilson, 2022). This elite wavering, combined with mass protest, indicated the severity of internal threats to regime survival.

5.4.2.2 High Stakes for Leaders: Present

For Viktor Yanukovych, the stakes during the Euromaidan revolution were incredibly high. The cost of losing power was not merely political but extended to potential legal retribution, loss of personal wealth, and the risk of physical harm. Yanukovych's regime leaned heavily on corrupt patron-client networks and dislodging Yanukovych from power might trigger prosecutions against oligarchs and political figures associated with him. To control formal institutions, such as the Ukrainian parliament, Yanukovych "relied largely on informal means, such as bribing deputies" (D'Anieri, 2023, p. 171). Yanukovych also appeared to have feared for his personal safety. The evidence for this is how Yanukovych eventually fled to in the early hours of 22 February 2014 to Russia, leaving behind colossal signs of personal enrichment at his vast personal estate (A. Wilson, 2014, pp. 59–60). There is ample evidence that Yanukovych feared the loss of power and what might happen to him in the process. The enabling condition for high stakes was present.

5.4.2.3 Institutional Checks Degraded or Absent: Ambiguous

Institutional checks on Yanukovych's power during the Euromaidan were ambiguous. Although Ukraine had nominal democratic institutions, the Yanukovych regime manipulated the judiciary to strengthen his presidential powers (D'Anieri,

2023, p. 172). “By the end of 2010 Yanukovych had obtained the kind of strong presidential constitutional arrangement that prevailed in Russia, and had a tightly run patronage machine […] that could reward friends, punish enemies, and raise money” (ibid., p. 173). This highly centralised presidential system allowed him to dominate the executive and legislative branches. He stacked the judiciary with loyal appointees, particularly through his manipulation of the Constitutional Court, which restored the more presidential 1996 constitution (D’Anieri, 2023, pp. 172–173; Sakwa, 2015b, Chapter 3). Institutional erosion was evident in the regime’s ability to arbitrate power without strong checks to limit executive overreach. This erosion of checks enabled his limiting of domestic opposition until the protest movement overwhelmed his security apparatus and attracted support from the country’s oligarchs, causing him to flee (touched on above). Thus, Yanukovych had done much to degrade institutional checks on his power. In theory, this would make it easier for Yanukovych to enact unpopular or damaging foreign policies, if that’s what it took to save the regime.

5.4.2.4 Low State Capacity (Administrative vs Coercive): Present

In 2013-2014, Ukraine exhibited sharp limits in terms of state capacity, particularly in administrative effectiveness. It is common knowledge that Ukraine during this period was highly corrupt, which suggests inefficient administrative state capacity (Bullough, 2015). Although the regime invested heavily in coercive capacities (A. Wilson, 2014, p. 345), such as the Berkut police forces, which were used to suppress protests. Despite this, the state faltered when faced with widespread and prolonged civil unrest (D’Anieri, 2017, p. 210). Thus, although capable, state coercion was unreliable. Moreover, despite the regime’s coercive reach, it struggled to maintain order beyond force. This is, perhaps, the product of a combination of existing enabling conditions, such as low administrative capacity mixing with low legitimacy (see the enabling condition directly below). Global and regional economic crises paired mismanagement had led Ukraine into a precarious

economic position, further reducing state capacity (D'Anieri, 2023, pp. 165–166). Low administrative capacity would make it more likely for Yanukovych to seek financial means elsewhere, including Chinese loans (Izmirli, 2014). Therefore, low state capacity was ambiguous in Ukraine. Administrative capacity was without doubt low. While coercive capacity had the potential to be effective, in practice it under-performed—but protesters did not know this. In terms of the Euromaidan crisis, it can be said the coercive capacity was, at the very least, perceived to be high. Many protesters were killed by regime security forces. For example, on 20 February 2014, "seventy protestors were shot dead by snipers" (A. Wilson, 2022, p. 349). There was uncertainty about which side—the protesters or the security forces—would prevail. Therefore, during the crisis, the coercive capacity was high.

5.4.2.5 Questionable Legitimacy: Present

Yanukovych's legitimacy was highly questionable, particularly as public confidence continued to erode following his withdrawal from the EU Association Agreement. His presidency had increasingly come to be viewed as driven by self-serving political and personal interests, particularly his overt alignment with oligarchic interests and opaque governance practices. Voting irregularities in earlier elections (such as in the 2012 parliamentary elections) and subsequent adjustments to the constitution added to the public perception that Yanukovych's rule was illegitimate (D'Anieri, 2023, p. 175; A. Wilson, 2022, p. 344). The legitimacy deficit was deepened further by his decision to jail political opponents such as former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, a move seen as reflecting both authoritarianism and political opportunism (Sakwa, 2015b, Chapter 3). Thus, the Euromaidan movement crystallised wider perceptions of Yanukovych's illegitimacy, as millions of Ukrainians protested not just the EU turnabout but also endemic corruption, misrule, and impunity under his tenure. Low legitimacy can generate discontent and undermine support for the regime, which can create conditions conducive for omnibalancing.

5.4.2.6 Fragmented Elite: Present

Elite fragmentation was a critical enabler of Yanukovych's regime demise during the Euromaidan crisis. Throughout his presidency, Yanukovych heavily relied on the oligarchic elite to maintain power, using a system of patronage to reward support. However, as regime instability grew, several oligarchs began distancing themselves from Yanukovych (D'Anieri, 2023, p. 173). These elites, especially those with extensive business interests, were alarmed by the growing instability and economic downturn, fearing that their financial empires could be severely jeopardised by the burgeoning revolution. Some oligarchs even began to covertly support or finance elements of the opposition (discussed below), further fracturing Yanukovych's power base. The division within the elite weakened Yanukovych's ability to negotiate an external solution to Ukraine's problems, such as stronger ties with China, and left him vulnerable to the growing discontent on the streets. The fragmented elite undermined Yanukovych's control. Therefore, political elites became a source of threats rather than a source of regime support.

5.4.2.7 Vulnerable Geopolitical Position: Present

Ukraine's geopolitical position during the Euromaidan revolution was precarious, fitting well within the omnibalancing framework. Pressured on both sides between deeper EU engagement and Russia's equally fierce desire to maintain Ukraine within its orbit through economic pressure and political influence, Ukraine found itself severely geopolitically vulnerable. Yanukovych's vacillation between East and West, playing Russia against the EU, left Ukraine isolated at the height of the crisis (Sakwa, 2015b, Chapter 4; A. Wilson, 2015a, p. 348). Both sides exerted economic leverage—Russia threatening trade sanctions and leveraging Ukraine's energy dependency, while the EU conditioned closer ties on reforms, including the release of jailed opponents like Yulia Tymoshenko. As the stakes grew, "Yanukovych struggled to find a way forward that did not involve rejecting either Russia or the EU, either of which might be disastrous to him politically" (D'Anieri, 2023, p. 235).

Yanukovych's overtures to China, particularly during his December 2013 visit, were in part an attempt to seek a third path to balance these external pressures. And it also could have been a way to threaten Russia's influence over Ukraine by integrating China into the region. The Kremlin might fear reduced leverage over Ukrainian elites, who could switch allegiance to China. Alignment with China under the BRI could facilitate economic development and put Ukraine in a stronger position vis-à-vis the EU and Russia. However, the vulnerable geopolitical position of Ukraine exacerbated the internal crisis, as Yanukovych was increasingly seen as being out of touch with the national interest, further accelerating internal fractures.

5.4.3 Truth Table

The following truth table, Table 5.1, lists the seven enabling conditions (Z1 to Z7) discussed in section 5.4.2 (above), which are factors potentially conducive to omnibalancing, with the outcome (Y) indicating whether omnibalancing was attempted. Each condition is assigned a binary value (Yes = 1, No = 0), with ambiguous conditions assigned a value of 0.1 to reflect uncertainty.

Table 5.1 Omnibalancing Enabling Conditions Truth Table: Ukraine

c Cases	Z_1 Presence of Internal Threat(s)	Z_2 High Stakes for Leaders	Z_3 Institutional Checks Degraded or Absent	Z_4 Low State Capacity (Administrative & Coercive)		Z_5 Low Legitimacy	Z_6 Fragmented Elite	Z_7 Vulnerable Geopolitical Position	Y Omnibalancing
State	Yes	Yes	Yes	Low	High	Ambiguous	No	Yes	Attempted
Value	1	1	1	1	0.1	1	1	1	7.1

Table source: This enabling condition truth table was created by the author. The value of 1 denotes the presence of the enabling condition. 0 indicates the enabling condition is absent. The value of 0.1 indicates ambiguity.

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Table 5.1 is a Boolean summary of the qualitative assessment developed in section 5.4.2 (above). First, Yanukovych confronted acute internal threats during the Euromaidan, such as mass protests and widening elite defections. Therefore, Presence of Internal Threats (Z1) is coded 1. Because the personal costs of losing office included prosecution, loss of wealth, and possible physical danger, High Stakes for Leaders (Z2) is also 1. Section 5.4.2 documents how presidential control over the Constitutional Court and parliament had hollowed out institutional checks, so institutional checks (Z3) are likewise recorded as present (scored a 1). State capacity is judged mixed: administrative capability was low, while coercive capability appeared high but ultimately proved unreliable; this qualified scoring administrative capacity as “Low” (1) and coercive capacity as “Ambiguous” (0.1) for Low State Capacity (Administrative & Coercive) (Z4). Yanukovych’s legitimacy had been eroded by corruption, selective justice and the reversal of the EU Association Agreement, which indicates the Low Legitimacy enabling condition being present (a value of 1). Elite cohesion had fractured. Key oligarchs financed the regime opposition and, over time, started to abandon the Yanukovych regime. Therefore, Fragmented Elite (Z6) is also present (scored a 1). Finally, Ukraine’s exposed position between EU conditionality and Russian coercion makes geopolitical vulnerability (Z7) present, too (again coded 1). Summing these values yields an enabling-condition score of 7.1. Considering the maximum value for all seven enabling conditions is 8 (Low State Capacity is so central to omnibalancing that it takes two points) means all but one omnibalancing enabling condition were fully in present and the last was ambiguous. In line with the analytical framework, any positive score for value “Y” requires evidence that an alignment was at least attempted. Section 5.4.5 (below), therefore, goes on to argue that omnibalancing with China was ‘Attempted’ (Y), reflecting Yanukovych’s December 2013 turn to China in search of credit and diplomatic backing.

5.4.4 Wire-framing of Causal Mechanism

Figure 5.2, “Omnibalancing Process-Tracing Wireframe for Ukraine” (directly below), combines the Boolean assessment of enabling conditions (argued for in section 5.4.2 and summarised in table 5.1 above) into a step-wise process-tracing framework, which depicts the causal narrative developed in section 5.4.5 (also below). The left-hand column records the seven conditions whose presence, absence, or ambiguity was evidenced for in 5.4.2 and coded in table 5.1. The adjacent column repeats those codings for the Ukraine case, thereby anchoring the subsequent mechanism in its situational context. Moving right, the figure sets out the causal chain itself: a crisis trigger event, three causal mechanism parts, and the outcome. For each part, to top cell is a sequential header (e.g. “Part 1”, “Part 2”, etc.) the upper-middle cell summarises the action (e.g., “Pressures the Yanukovych regime”, “Openly develops deeper strategic ties”, etc.), the lower-middle cells contain right-facing arrows to underscore temporal sequencing and the direction of the action (e.g., starting with the trigger that drives part 1, which then drives part 2, and so on), and the bottom cell identifies the action’s main agent (e.g., “the Kremlin”, “Yanukovych”, etc.). The final column states the process-tracing outcome (“Omnibalancing is attempted but is not enough to balance the threats to the Yanukovych regime”). In short, the wireframe converts a list of factors into a falsifiable causal chain. It specifies who did what and when and provides a visual map for the events discussed in detail in section 5.4.5 (below).

Figure 5.2 Omnibalancing Process-Tracing Wireframe for Ukraine

Enabling condition	Ukraine	Mechanism:	Trigger	Part 1	Part 2	Part 3	Outcome
Presence of Internal Threat(s)	Yes	Action:	Pressures the Yanukovych regime to refuse closer integration with the EU and to join the Eurasian Economic Community. Date: late 2012 and into mid-2013.	Openly develops deeper strategic ties with China. Date: third quarter of 2013.	Generate more instability, exacerbating existing threats and compelling Yanukovych to strengthen ties with China. Date: 21 November 2013 onward.	Receives substantial credit lines and loans from China Date: 3–6 December 2013	Omnibalancing is attempted but is not enough to balance the threats to the Yanukovych regime
High Stakes for Leaders	Yes						
Institutional Checks Degraded or Absent	Yes						
Low State Capacity (Administrative & Coercive)	Low						
	high						
Low Legitimacy	Yes						
Fragmented Elite	Yes		→	→	→	→	
Vulnerable Geopolitical Position	Yes	Agent:	The Kremlin	Yanukovych	Euromaidan Protesters	Yanukovych	

Source: This causal mechanism framework is adapted from Winward (2021, p. 560).

5.4.5 Causal Narrative

This section examines the causal chain of key events whereby the Yanukovych regime's attempt to omnibalance with China to enhance authoritarian persistence during the 2013–2014 Euromaidan Revolution of Dignity—identified as a major political crisis for the Yanukovych regime. The Maidan Revolution was a defining moment in Ukrainian politics. The mass protests and elite fragmentation and (eventually) defections toppled the Yanukovych regime. Amidst this turmoil, Yanukovych sought to prevent his regime's collapse through external alignments, particularly with China. This causal narrative explores the timeline and mechanics of this alignment effort with China, analysing how the pressures from Russia and domestic instability combined with Yanukovych's dealings with China in an attempt to omnibalance rising threats. Ultimately, the analysis reveals that although the strategy was clear, the timing and execution were insufficient to stave off regime collapse.

The crisis event for the regime is the Maidan protests. But the trigger for omnibalancing with China occurred earlier at some point in late 2012 and into mid-2013. The trigger was a combination of factors. First, it became apparent to the Yanukovych regime that the Ukrainian elite—some of whom were part of Yanukovych's winning coalition for holding on to power—were dissatisfied with the regime's unfair distribution of state rents. Second, the Kremlin had been sending strong signals to the Yanukovych regime that it needed to join Putin's "political" Eurasian Economic Community project (later named the Eurasian Economic Union) at least as early as December 2012 (Kyiv Post, 2013). Third, by mid-August 2013, Putin began to apply economic pressure (before he had offered Yanukovych a preferential gas price deal) to make clear what Russia wanted the Yanukovych regime to do. And as will be demonstrated in this section, the Yanukovych regime responded by intensifying its relationship with China. Therefore, the trigger for omnibalancing with China begins at some point in late 2012 and into mid-2013

because Russia began to apply pressure upon the regime to join Eurasian Economic Community.

The Kremlin's increasing pressure on the Yanukovych regime was over the EU association agreement. The Yanukovych regime felt the need to protect themselves against this pressure, but also believed they could benefit from both the EU's and Russia's efforts to attract Ukraine. Indeed, it had long been publicised by the Yanukovych regime that it wanted deals with both Russian and the EU (Varfolomeyev, 2013). But Russia began to apply pressure.

For instance, Andrew Wilson (2014, p. 64) notes:

> Ukraine was actually being bullied by Russia. In mid-August, Russia closed its borders to virtually all physical exports. Heavy industry in east Ukraine was deliberately targeted. So were particular Ukrainian oligarchs who favoured the EU agreements[...] The initial forecast of the actual, rather than merely predicted, damage of Russia's measures was between $2 billion and $2.5 billion in the second half of 2013, which was about 1.5 per cent of GDP.

The Yanukovych regime's ties with China formally began in a Ukrainian state visit to China in 2010, but gained new significance in April 2011 when Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Kyiv. During this visit, both leaders signed "The Agreement on Cooperation between [Yanukovych's] Party of Regions of Ukraine and the Communist Party of China" (President of Ukraine, 2013b).

But the trigger timeline coincides with an uptick in Ukrainian meetings with Chinese diplomats. Initially, these meetings might seem to suggest Ukraine's preparation to participate in China's emerging Belt and Road Initiative, which would soon be formally announced in September 2013. However, a closer look reveals that the cooperation involved went in other directions. A sentiment analysis of this period (referenced in one of the major chapters of this dissertation) reveals a modest rise in sentiment towards China starting in 2012. This, however, was followed by a much

sharper rise in the third quarter of 2013, which aligns with the application of economic pressure from Russia, as described in Wilson's (2014, p. 64) work.

An examination of Yanukovych's speeches during this time emphasizes the benefits to Ukraine of strengthening ties with China. It appears these speeches and meetings were strategically aimed at sending a message to Russia: Ukraine would respond to Russian pressure by fostering stronger relations with China.

Until the application of pressure from the Kremlin, Yanukovych had been careless with ties with China. A joint construction project for the Boryspil airport express train in Kyiv became a "trough for corrupt Ukrainian officials" (Goncharuk et al., 2016, p. 17). Chinese officials were cautious of pursuing joint projects in Ukraine (Z. Liu, 2016, para. 12). At the same time, Ukraine had resources that China was interested in, such as grain, farmland, and increased access to markets via the saki deep-water port in Crimea (Izmirli, 2014; SCMP, 2014). Therefore, despite unpleasant experiences, China was still interested in investing in Ukraine. In the growing stakes over the eu agreement vs Russia, Yanukovych sought to use these ties to his advantage.

For example, the Chinese were particularly interested in maintaining military-technical cooperation with Ukraine. This included certain advanced sectors, such as jet engine design, manufacturing and repairs, pilot training, and submarine maintenance (Kirchberger, 2016). Russia, meanwhile, had frustrated China by refusing to repair submarines or train maintenance crews in China—insisting instead that these tasks be completed on Russian soil. To address these concerns, Yanukovych developed an alternative plan: he considered offering China the option to rent the NITKA aircraft carrier pilot-training base in Crimea if relations with Russia deteriorated (Kirchberger, 2016, p. 16).

In May 2013—just a month before predictions of economic damage from Russia—Yanukovych met with PRC Central Military Commission Vice Chairman Xu

Qiliang, likely to further discuss this arrangement (President of Ukraine, 2013a). Later, in September 2013, Yanukovych also met with Politburo member Liu Yunshan. At this meeting, Yanukovych stated, “The development of strategic relations with China is one of the priority directions of Ukraine’s foreign policy” (President of Ukraine, 2013b).

Further evidence to support this alignment with China appeared earlier, on 29 January 2013, when journalist and member of Ukraine’s Upper House of Parliament Sergii Leshchenko wrote, “Yanukovych has lost the support of Ukraine’s oligarchs...so he is now dependent on his own inner circle” (Leshchenko, 2013, 2014).

Based on this triangulation of evidence, while the foundations for developing ties with China were likely solidified during Yanukovych’s 2010 visit to China (Kyiv Post, 2010), the real trigger for omnibalancing with China likely occurred in response to Russian economic pressures that began in earnest around mid-2013. Therefore, in Figure 5.2 above, titled Omnibalancing Process-Tracing Wireframe for Ukraine, the trigger for the causal mechanism has “The Kremlin” as the actor of the trigger and “Pressures the Yanukovych regime to refuse closer integration with the EU and to join the Eurasian Economic Community” as the action of the trigger.

These pressures prompted Yanukovych to send various signals to Russia through high-level military exchanges with China and negotiations over leasing the NITKA training base. Additionally, Yanukovych repeatedly emphasized the potential benefits of stronger partnerships with China—to both domestic oligarchs and external actors like Russia.

For domestic oligarchs, the message was to remain patient, as promising Chinese deals would soon emerge. For Russia, it was both a warning against further aggression and an invitation to negotiate.

Part 1 of the causal mechanism is Yanukovych's seeking deeper ties with China. Much of the evidence for this part of the causal mechanism has already been touched on in the justification of and the triangulation for the trigger (above). Before the full-blown crisis of the Euromaidan protests, Yanukovych's intensified engagement with China, particularly during the latter half of 2013, was part of a strategic process to omnibalance both domestic elite fragmentation and external pressures from Russia. Argued above, by 2013, Yanukovych faced increasing dissatisfaction among the Ukrainian oligarchs. Sakwa (2015, Chapter 3) describes Ukraine's political system under Yanukovych as an "Oligarch Democracy" where "[o]ne hundred people control some 80–85 per cent of Ukraine's wealth." Support from the country's oligarchy was essential for political stability. The regime's failure to keep oligarchs content through equitable distribution of rents took the form of elite fragmentation and become an internal threat. Oligarchs like Kolomoisky and Poroshenko supported the protests (Sakwa, 2015b, Chapter 3; A. Wilson, 2022, pp. 342–343). As demonstrated above, externally, the Kremlin was applying economic pressure for Ukraine to abandon closer ties with the EU. This convergence of internal fragmentation and external bullying led Yanukovych to explore a previously underutilised relationship: deepening political and economic cooperation with China.

China proved an appealing partner for omnibalancing because Beijing represented economic investment without the political pressures of Western conditionalities or Russian predation. Also demonstrated in the trigger section above, from mid-2013, Yanukovych initiated more high-level military and economic agreements with China (Kirchberger, 2016), mindful that this closer cooperation could serve dual purposes. Domestically, aligning with China was intended to send reassuring signals to Ukrainian oligarchs that Ukraine was capable of accessing economic capital without caving to either the EU's democratisation agenda or Russia's expansionist one. Yanukovych's speeches around this time (see the sentiment analysis chapter) highlight a deliberate strategy to foster stronger

partnerships with China, not just for immediate economic gain but also as a geopolitical statement to Russia. For instance, Yanukovych had pursued China-Ukraine cooperation in projects such as renting Crimea's NITKA military base to China, signalling to Moscow that Ukraine had other strategic options if the Kremlin's economic bullying continued.

In Figure 5.2 above, the actor for part 1 of the causal mechanism is "Yanukovych" and the action is "Openly develops deeper strategic ties with China".

Part 2 of the causal mechanism is the outbreak of the Euromaidan protests. The mass protests that began building on 21 November 2013 further heightened the regime's need for external support, and thus accelerated Yanukovych's efforts to solidify his ties with China. Internationally framed as an outcry against Yanukovych's refusal to sign the EU Association Agreement, the protests swiftly metamorphosed into a national movement challenging the regime's governance, corruption, and its pivot toward deeper integration with Russia (Sakwa, 2015b, Chapter 4). It appears the rapid growth of the protests, coupled with the deepening elite fragmentation, amplified Yanukovych's belief that securing economic agreements with China had become an important element to regaining control.

Part 2 of the mechanism driving towards omnibalancing is has the actors as the "Euromaidan Protesters" and their action as "Generate more instability, exacerbating existing threats and compelling Yanukovych to strengthen ties with China" in Figure 5.2 above.

Part 3 of the causal mechanism is where Yanukovych, despite there being protests in Kyiv, chooses to go to Beijing. Although the protests were growing, Yanukovych appeared confident he could keep them under control. He chose not to put off the China visit. Yanukovych noted to Ukrainian TV interviewers that "if he cancels the visit, [Ukraine's] economy may suffer" (BBC, 2013). Yanukovych was "the guest of honour of the Ukrainian-Chinese business forum in Beijing to authorise

a memorandum on the construction of a deep-water mega-port in Crimea" (Izmirli, 2014). "Yanukovych had hoped to count on China's help" (Z. Liu, 2016). And while reports vary to the size of credit lines (BBC, 2013; Copper, 2016; Government Portal, 2013b; InPress.ua, 2013; Izmirli, 2014), substantial funds were promised. Yanukovych and Chinese leaders sighed a raft of China-Ukraine cooperation agreements, including a 2014–2018 China-Ukraine Strategic Partnership Development Plan worth a potential USD $18 billion in lines of Chinese credit (Copper, 2016, p. 102). USD $8 billion would go towards investment within the Ukrainian economy, and USD $10 billion would address the $15.1 billion in maturing debt (Izmirli, 2014; Tkachev, 2013).

The causal mechanism in Figure 5.2 above describes part 3 with the actor being "Yanukovych" and the action as "Receives substantial credit lines and loans from China."

The inflow of Chinese credits, joint projects, and the revenue generated from might have been earmarked for a selection of Ukrainian oligarchs to buy support. However, it could just have easily been otherwise—Yanukovych could have simply continued to enrich himself and his inner circle. Events moved too quickly for this omnibalancing attempt to fully play out.

While Yanukovych succeeded in getting economic agreements during his visit, the protests outpaced his ability to follow through on his omnibalancing plan. Events such as the impending collapse of state control and violent clashes on the streets of Kyiv overtook Yanukovych's attempts to broker deals with the few remaining oligarchic allies.

5.4.6 Outcome Assessment

Yanukovych's omnibalancing strategy—while coherent in theory—ultimately failed to prevent his regime's collapse. Despite securing significant financial commitments from China, the omnibalancing effort was insufficient in addressing the core internal threats the regime faced, particularly elite fragmentation. Ukraine's oligarchs, whose support was necessary for maintaining regime stability, had largely pivoted away from Yanukovych by early 2014. The external alignment came too late, and materialisation of the Chinese economic deals was contingent on conditions Yanukovych had no time to fulfil amidst social unrest. This outcome is described in Figure 5.2 above as "Omnibalancing is attempted but is not enough to balance the threats to the Yanukovych regime".

Omnibalancing with China could have provided the economic rebalancing necessary to buy oligarch loyalty and suppress growing discontent, but the intensifying protests—exacerbated by isolated violent clashes, the inability to control Kyiv's streets, and alienation from large portions of the Ukrainian populace—tore apart any meaningful internal cohesion. The regime's inability to handle the combination of street pressures, elite wavering, and Russian bullying over the Eurasian Economic Union left Yanukovych with scant options. His reliance on external forces and beleaguered internal alliances left Ukraine with a fractured power base, easily upended when violence flared once again at the end of February. The omnibalancing attempt, in this context, was too little and arrived too late to mitigate the rapid decline of the Yanukovych regime during the Maidan crisis.

Yanukovych's attempt to omnibalance using China during Ukraine's 2013–2014 political crisis encompassed noteworthy strategies and processes. While the elements of omnibalancing—counterbalancing domestic threats with external alignment—are evident in his 3–6 December 2013 visit to China, Yanukovych ultimately could not secure the internal stability required to withstand mounting pressures. Alignments with China could theoretically have provided financial stability

and mollified elite resistance, but the chaotic escalation of protests swiftly outpaced these efforts, leading to Yanukovych's eventual downfall in February 2014.

5.5 Case Conclusion

The chapter has argued that the Yanukovych administration's turn to Beijing during the Euromaidan crisis constituted an instrumental but ultimately unsuccessful attempt to shore up regime survival. Between mid-2010 and early-2014, top policymaker sentiment towards China moved from near-silence to conspicuous positivity. The apex of this trajectory coincided with widening popular protest, elite defection, and Kremlin coercion. All but one of the seven omnibalancing enabling conditions were present, and Yanukovych's 3–6 December 2013 visit to China, which produced large credit promises and talk of a strategic partnership, formed the pivotal step in a three-part causal chain that sought to use deeper alignment with China as a means for authoritarian persistence. Yet this strategy foundered. Yanukovych's efforts to halt elite defections with promises of Chinese finance were too late. Elite cohesion collapsed and the Yanukovych regime fled. No substantive Chinese-style governance reforms were adopted, though preparatory signals suggest they might have followed had the government endured.

The sentiment analysis series supplied the empirical bedrock for this narrative. By tracing quarterly fluctuations in presidential and prime-ministerial sentiment across more than fifty thousand texts, it identified a timeframe in which favourable references to China both trended upwards and pinpointed when they spiked. The largest spike was during the Maidan protests. It was unattached to routine summits or trade cycles. This directed attention to the Beijing visit and further justified selecting the Euromaidan protest for deep process tracing investigation. Despite gaps in the Ukrainian web archive, cross-checking with contemporaneous press releases and diplomatic communiqués confirmed the reliability of the pattern.

The omnibalancing framework also helped to structure the process-tracing analysis. The truth table showed a cumulative enabling-condition score of 7.1, suggesting a high propensity for the regime to seek external alignment to address internal threats. Placing the enabling conditions against the events of Euromaidan protest crisis emphasised how Russian pressure operated as a trigger, and how domestic fragmentation forced the leadership to look beyond Russia to China. The exercise illustrated the power and the limits of omnibalancing. It explained why China was courted, yet also exposed the boundary beyond which foreign alignment cannot substitute for shattered elite consensus and low legitimacy.

Taken together, the Ukraine case qualifies the dissertation's wider claims. It confirms that post-Soviet leaders do look to Beijing when internal peril peaks. Furthermore, big-data analyses of positive sentiment are a credible indicator of bilateral relations. It also suggests, however, that external support cannot guarantee regime survival once its pillars (legitimation, co-optation, coercion) have disintegrated or the leadership loses its nerve. The mixed-method design of sentiment analysis to locate critical junctures and then process tracing to unpack them, therefore, combine to deliver a rigorous analysis. Ukraine stands as a demonstration of omnibalancing, which ultimately does not deliver authoritarian persistence. Ukraine stands as a demonstration of omnibalancing, which ultimately does not deliver authoritarian persistence. However, the case does show that omnibalancing with China was seen by the regime as a viable strategy.

Chapter 6. Comparative Evaluation

6.1 Introduction

This chapter draws the theoretical, empirical, and methods strands of the dissertation together. It advances two central claims. First, the revised, seven-condition model of omnibalancing, when paired with sentiment analysis, explains why Minsk and Kyiv sought to use Beijing to shore up their regimes, whereas Moscow did not. Across the three cases Belarus and Ukraine each satisfied at more than half of the enabling conditions, worked to receive large Chinese credit lines, and presented those arrangements domestically as markers of modernisation. Crisis conditions in Ukraine and difficulties implementing the omnibalancing strategy in Belarus (resulting in a development feedback loop) meant that omnibalancing was attempted but ultimately failed in both cases. Elite fragmentation and the collapse of legitimacy appeared to reach a tipping-point in Ukraine from which the regime could not recover. Russia, by contrast, met only two enabling conditions, experienced no existential domestic shock (despite the Bolotnaya protests) in 2006-2016, and therefore deepened its partnership with China for long-term strategic reasons rather than as an omnibalancing strategy. Second, the longitudinal sentiment data contribute independent support for these findings. Spikes in positive references to China coincide with the internal crises in Belarus and Ukraine and are absent during Russia's Bolotnaya mobilisation. The method therefore helps to identify when external alignment is crisis-driven and when it is routine statecraft.

The chapter proceeds in five steps. Section 6.2 presents a combined enabling-condition truth table, translating the enabling condition and process-tracing results of each of the case study chapters into a single, comparable matrix. Section 6.3 undertakes the cross-case comparison: it examines how differing configurations of threat, capacity, and elite cohesion produced an attempted omnibalancing in Minsk,

an acute but abortive attempt in Kyiv, and no attempt in Moscow. Section 6.4 considers the implications for a revised omnibalancing theory, specifying the threshold at which the cumulative weight of enabling conditions appears to trigger external alignment and identifying the points at which that strategy is likely to fail. Section 6.5 reflects on the contribution of sentiment analysis, assessing its utility for finding research windows for authoritarian learning, the visualisation of bilateral relations, and triangulation (third-party empirical evidence to support claims already supported by evidence). Section 6.6 synthesises the chapter's findings and locates them within the dissertation's wider argument that engagement with China is a contingent rather than an assured pathway to authoritarian persistence in the post-Soviet space.

6.2 Omnibalancing Comparisons

Table 6.1 (below) summarises, in a single comparative matrix, the assessment of the seven revised omnibalancing enabling conditions (Z1–Z7) across the three case studies. The table records whether omnibalancing (Y) was successful, attempted, or not attempted. The table functions as a Boolean truth table. For each condition the case-study chapters allocate one of three qualitative judgements: present, absent, or ambiguous. These judgements are derived from the detailed process-tracing in Sections 3.4 (Belarus), 4.4 (Russia) and 5.4 (Ukraine). These judgements are then expressed numerically: presence = 1, absence = 0, ambiguity = 0.1. Condition 4 (Z4) is bifurcated, accounting for administrative and coercive capacity individually. The maximum attainable score for any case is 8. Summing the cell values yields a country-level propensity-for-omnibalancing score. The final column records whether the leadership sought to use alignment with China to counter internal threats during a crisis.

The table presents the case study countries—Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine—alphabetically. Chapter 3, section 3.4, provides the detailed evaluation that

generates values in Table 6.1 (below) for Belarus. Table 6.1 shows that four conditions were clearly present and one was ambiguous. Domestic protest, elite–public discontent over economic issues and Russia's pricing pressure satisfied "Presence of Internal Threat(s)" (Z1). The personal risks to Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenka if unseated met "High Stakes for Leaders" (Z2). Constitutional referendums had long since removed formal constraints on Lukasheka's power, which means "Institutional Checks Degraded or Absent" (Z3) is satisfied, too. Administrative and coercive capacity both remained high, so "Low State Capacity (Administrative & Coercive)" (Z4) is not present and scored 0 and 0. Lukashenka's legitimacy was fraying but not collapsed, hence a score of 0.1 for "Low Legitimacy" (Z5). Elite unity endured during the crisis, which meant "Fragmented Elite" (Z6) also scored a 0. However, yet the country's exposed position between the EU and Russia warranted a 1 score for "Vulnerable Geopolitical Position" (Z7). The aggregate of 4.1 therefore reflects a middling propensity for omnibalancing. These conditions were sufficient for an attempt, and Section 3.4 traces the ultimately abortive China-centred strategy around the Great Stone Industrial Park, coded "Attempted" in column Y.

Chapter 4, section 4.4, provides the materials used to populate Table 6.1 (below) for Russia. It shows that none of the protests, economic dips or oil-price shocks that occurred between 2006 and 2016 escalated into an existential challenge to the Putin presidency; "Presence of internal threat(s)" (Z1) is therefore coded 0. Although removal from office might expose Putin to legal or financial risk, the precedent of orderly elite exits and his consistently high approval levels render the personal stakes indeterminate, hence an "Ambiguous" score (0.1) for "High stakes for leaders" (Z2). Formal veto points were hollowed out by the super-presidential constitution and the subordination of parliament and courts, so "Institutional checks degraded or absent" (Z3) is coded 1. As detailed in 4.4.2, bureaucratic performance was weak whereas the coercive apparatus remained effective: administrative

capacity is treated as low (1) and coercive capacity as high (0), giving a composite “Low state capacity” (Z4) score of 1. The regime retained broad approval, especially after the 2014 ‘Crimea consensus’, so “Low legitimacy” (Z5) is judged ambiguous (0.1). Sistema kept oligarchs and siloviki aligned with the Kremlin, warranting a 0 for “Fragmented elite” (Z6). Finally, Russia’s ability to deter neighbours and withstand Western sanctions meant that it did not occupy a “Vulnerable geopolitical position” (Z7), again scored 0. Summing these entries yields 2.2; the absence of cumulative pressure explains the “No” entry under “Omnibalancing” (Y).

Table 6.1 Comparison of Omnibalancing Enabling Conditions in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine

c Cases	Z_1 Presence of Internal Threat(s)	Z_2 High Stakes for Leaders	Z_3 Institutional Checks Degraded or Absent	Z_4 Low State Capacity (Administrative & Coercive)		Z_5 Low Legitimacy	Z_6 Fragmented Elite	Z_7 Vulnerable Geopolitical Position	Y Omnibalancing
Belarus	Yes	Yes	Yes	High	High	Ambiguous	No	Yes	Attempted
Value	1	1	1	0	0	0.1	0	1	Belarus Total = 4.1
Russia	No	Ambiguous	Yes	Low	High	Ambiguous	No	No	No
Value	0	0.1	1	1	0	0.1	0	0	Russia Total = 2.2
Ukraine	Yes	Yes	Yes	Low	Ambiguous	Yes	Yes	Yes	Attempted
Value	1	1	1	1	0.1	1	1	1	Ukraine Total = 7.1

Source: This enabling condition truth table was created by the author. The value of 1 denotes the presence of the enabling condition. 0 indicates the enabling condition is absent. The value of 0.1 indicates ambiguity.

Chapter 5, section 5.4, provides the evidence that provides inputs for Ukraine in Table 6.1 (above). All seven enabling conditions are reassessed with reference to the Euromaidan crisis (November 2013–February 2014) and then coded according to the rules set out in section 6.2. “Presence of internal threat(s)” (Z1) is coded 1. Nationwide demonstrations, the occupation of Kyiv’s Maidan and mounting calls for regime change created an existential danger for the Yanukovych presidency. This meant “High Stakes for Leaders” (Z2) is present and scored 1. Loss of office implied likely criminal prosecution, asset seizure, and personal jeopardy; Yanukovych’s subsequent flight to Russia illustrates the severity of these stakes. “Institutional Checks Degraded or Absent” (Z3) scores 1. The 2010 Constitutional Court ruling that reinstated the super-presidential 1996 constitution, together with systematic co-option of judges and deputies, removed effective parliamentary or judicial constraints on the executive. “Low State Capacity (Administrative & Coercive)” is recorded as 1.1. Administrative state capacity was poor, this accounts for the score of 1. Tax collection, public-service provision and budget management were all underperforming. By contrast, the coercive apparatus, though sizeable, fragmented under pressure. Therefore, coercive capacity was capable, but it failed to protect the regime. Therefore, the state’s coercive capacity is ultimately ambiguous: it was highly capable but due a combination of factors it failed. Therefore, it scores 0.1. “Low legitimacy” (Z5) is also present 1. Rampant corruption, selective justice and the volte-face on the EU Association Agreement eroded public confidence. “Fragmented Elite” (Z6) is present also present, scoring a 1. Key oligarchs (e.g., Kolomojskyj, Poroshenko, Pinchuk) withheld media support, financed the opposition or signalled neutrality, depriving the presidency of its traditional patronal coalition. “Vulnerable Geopolitical Position” is also present, adding the final 1 count. Simultaneous EU conditionality and escalating Russian trade-and-energy coercion left Kyiv without a reliable external anchor and amplified domestic pressures. The additive score of 7.1 therefore indicates a very high propensity for omnibalancing. Section 5.4 traces how, in response, Yanukovych sought large, low-conditionality credit lines and symbolic

security ties during his 3–6 December 2013 state visit to Beijing. Because these arrangements never reached implementation before the regime collapsed, column Y is coded “Attempted”.

Thus, Table 6.1 (above) operationalises the qualitative findings of the three case studies, converts them into a comparable numeric format, and makes visible why omnibalancing was attempted in Belarus and Ukraine but not in Russia.

6.3 Cross-Case Comparisons

This section provides a comprehensive analysis of three case studies—Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine—through the lens of omnibalancing. The section argues that although their political contexts and strategies differ, the concept of omnibalancing highlights the importance of regime survival in shaping foreign policy decisions. This section presents a critical comparison of the findings from the three case studies and discusses the broader implications for omnibalancing theory.

6.3.1 Belarus: Long-term Omnibalancing with China, Ultimately Unsuccessful

Belarus exemplifies an active attempt at omnibalancing through its relationship with China, intended as a long-term balancing strategy against internal instability and external pressure from Russia. The Lukashenka regime, facing a precarious situation due to Russia’s pragmatisation of subsidised energy prices and domestic protests against a faltering economic model, attempted relations balancing-act between Russia, the EU, and China. The manifestation of this omnibalancing strategy was the development of the GSIP, which was designed to reduce Belarus’s dependence on Russia and improve economic stability.

Several enabling conditions conducive to omnibalancing were present in Belarus during the drawn-out crisis under study (see Table 6.1 above). These included internal threats (growing protests and economic dissent), high personal stakes for Lukashenka, degraded institutional checks, and a vulnerable geopolitical

position. The government's long-term vision of using alignment with China to maintain internal stability—a type of authoritarian persistence strategy—aligned with omnibalancing theory.

However, this omnibalancing strategy was ultimately a failure. Despite efforts to secure investments and build infrastructure through the GSIP, delays, unmet loan conditions, and China's demanding terms hindered the project's viability. Although Chinese loans provided some capability for Belarus to redistribute resources to regime elites (a key feature in sustaining authoritarian stability), these efforts were insufficient to fully balance against the ongoing domestic and external pressures faced by the Lukashenka regime. The weaknesses of this strategy became untenable with the 2020 presidential election protests. The regime's crackdown erased the original China omnibalancing strategy by moving Lukashenka regime beyond the pale for Western engagement. Facing mass protests and growing instability, Lukashenka ultimately had to fall back on Russian support—ironically countering the very purpose of his omnibalancing strategy with China.

6.3.2 Russia: A Negative Example of Omnibalancing

In contrast to Belarus, Russia provides a negative example of omnibalancing during the 2006–2016 period. Although Russia similarly engaged with China during this timeframe, it did so from a position of relative domestic stability. While there were indeed crises (the 2009 credit crunch, the Bolotnaya protests, and the 2014–2016 oil price collapse), there were not the same level of internal threats to the survival of president Putin's regime. The evidence suggests that Russia's relationship with China, while strategic, did not result from the need to omnibalance regime vulnerability; rather, Russia's alignment with China appeared to be long-term and pragmatic, driven more by international balancing concerns (particularly balancing against the West) than by internal threats that could challenge the Putin regime's grip on power.

Very few omnibalancing enabling conditions were present in Russia's case. For example, in Table 6.1 (above), Russia's enabling condition Y value (that measures the presence, absence, or ambiguous presence of all the omnibalancing enabling conditions) is just 2.2. This indicates two conditions were present (the 2 value), two were ambiguous (the 0.2 value), and the rest were absent. Internal threats, such as the 2011–2012 protests, never escalated to an existential threat. Even though issues like elite fragmentation and legitimacy could be identified as potential vulnerabilities, the regime weathered these efficiently. The regime used selective repression, memory politics and nationalism, and rode public support fuelled by its annexation of Crimea. Russia's state capacity to manage internal threats without recourse to external support, as well as its overall geopolitical strength, particularly in its ability to project power in its near-abroad, meant that omnibalancing with China was not needed.

The Russia case study is an instructive demonstration of the limits of omnibalancing theory. Omnibalancing is not an explain-everything, grand-level theory. Omnibalancing is a specialised theory that, when it is applied appropriately, can be a powerful explanatory tool. In fact, omnibalancing takes place relatively rarely. As the theory section argues, omnibalancing can result in difficult or damaging concessions to the external power, which is might be predatory in exchange for supporting the regime seeking to omnibalance an internal threat (Braga, 2021b). Omnibalancing that results in regime concessions need not be the norm. For example, Welz's (2022) paper gives an example of how a regime can benefit and even thrive through the use of omnibalancing—indeed, this was the Lukashenka regime's original plan. But Russia's case is a useful counter-example, demonstrating the limits of the theory when internal conditions are stable, even if external alignments are expanding. The critique of Düben's (2023) claim of "mutual omnibalancing" between Russia and China is also instructive. The evidence that Russia was omnibalancing domestic threats through its relationship with China is

weak, implying that not all nondemocracies require external alignments to counter internal regime threats, especially in the absence of acute crises. Russia's alignment with China during this period functioned more as routine bilateral cooperation than a regime-survival necessity.

6.3.3 Ukraine: Reactive Crisis-Based Omnibalancing

Ukraine under Viktor Yanukovych presents a vivid example of reactive omnibalancing in response to a clear internal crisis: the 2013–2014 Euromaidan protests. Unlike Belarus's long-term omnibalancing strategy or Russia's strategic alignments, Ukraine's omnibalancing attempt occurred in an acute crisis: mass protests against the regime's politics sparked by Yanukovych's decision to reject deeper EU integration. Facing elite fragmentation and mounting domestic protests, Yanukovych's regime sought external support to shield itself from collapse. In December 2013, Yanukovych travelled to Beijing, where he negotiated economic support from China, which included loans, credit lines, and potential projects that would make Ukraine a participant in China's recently announced BRI. At first ramping up alignment with China to balance pressure from the Kremlin, the Yanukovych regime expanded this tactic into an omnibalancing strategy as the Euromaidan protests compounded the regime's growing lack of support among elites.

Ukraine's omnibalancing conditions were similar to those in Belarus, though more immediate and intense. The presence of strong internal threats (mass protests and elite defection), high stakes for Yanukovych's personal safety, and questionable legitimacy marked a regime facing existential danger. Yanukovych's attempt to omnibalance against these threats by aligning with China illustrates how omnibalancing can occur in response to sudden crises.

However, as with Belarus, Ukraine's omnibalancing strategy failed. Despite securing promises of Chinese loans and aid, the regime collapsed before these

external alignments could provide adequate support. Internal threats—elite defections and the sheer scale of the protests—overtook any potential benefits from alignment with China. Yanukovych's omnibalancing was too late and ultimately insufficient to counter his regime's internal vulnerabilities.

6.3.4 Discussion of Findings: The Boundaries and Strengths of Omnibalancing Theory

The three case studies reveal some applications and limits of omnibalancing theory for electoral authoritarian (hybrid) nondemocratic regimes. In Belarus and Ukraine, omnibalancing was clearly attempted as a means of authoritarian persistence, but in both cases, this strategy failed to secure regime survival. Both regimes faced internal threats that overwhelmed external alignment efforts, even when those alignments provided financial lifelines. The key takeaway from these two cases is that omnibalancing does not necessarily guarantee regime stability; it is often employed as a tactic in desperate situations, where the outcome may still hinge on unpredictable factors such as elite cohesion, public sentiment, or external intervention by other powers.

By contrast, Russia's case usefully demonstrates the limits for applying omnibalancing theory to powerful, internally stable autocracies. Russia's alignment with China did not arise from an immediate existential threat to Putin's regime. In terms of theory, this suggests that when a state enjoys high levels of internal stability and global influence, omnibalancing is less relevant as a foreign policy driver. The assumption drawn from this finding is that not all alignments directly serve internal political purposes; countries like Russia may pursue strategic international alignments without the direct imperative of regime survival. To be sure, regime survival is always a background concern, but it does not necessarily dictate every alignment decision.

This comparison of Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine highlights some factors that influence whether omnibalancing will occur. The presence of internal crises—such as mass protests, failed economies, and elite fragmentation—combined with vulnerable geopolitical positions and degraded institutional checks, appears to make omnibalancing a more likely strategy, as seen in the Belarus and Ukraine cases. On the other hand, in stable regimes like Russia, where many of these conditions are absent or ambiguous, foreign policy alignment can proceed without omnibalancing being a necessity for survival. As discussed in Chapter 2, analysis could be expanded to include democratic regimes, such as President Trump's attempt to use Ukraine to obtain compromising material on Hunter Biden, and the Brexit referendum under the UK Conservatives.

To summarise, despite the fact none of the case studies the omnibalancing case studies featured positive (regime survival) outcomes, this still represents a useful study. The critical comparison of these three case studies illustrates both the explanatory power and limits of omnibalancing theory in explaining the foreign policy decisions of nondemocratic regimes. At its core, omnibalancing offers a valuable framework for understanding how external alignments can be driven by internal regime survival calculations, particularly in states facing crises. The Belarusian and Ukrainian cases demonstrate how omnibalancing is often a reactive measure by regimes fearing collapse.

The limits of the theory are evident in the Russian case. Russia's foreign policy was not dictated by an internal survival imperative during the 2006–2016 period. Russia's case, in particular, highlights an application boundary for omnibalancing, especially when nondemocratic regimes do not face serious internal threats. In these scenarios, international alignments may serve broader strategic purposes without the direct link to regime survival when omnibalancing theory applies.

Overall, the chapter's findings call for a more refined understanding of when and why omnibalancing occurs, recognising that it is not universally applicable to all foreign policy decisions.

6.4 Implications for the Revised Omnibalancing Theory

The theoretical and methods revisions to omnibalancing theory outlined in this chapter form a distinct and significant contribution to the knowledge of the foreign policy behaviour of autocracies. It does so in the following ways.

First, the proposed revisions expand the scope of omnibalancing theory beyond its limited post-Cold War application to the developing world, thereby expanding its applicability to a wider array of political regime types and political economic settings. David's original construct was devised within the Cold War context, which categorised certain regimes as inherently "weak" or "illegitimate." These labels are either obsolete or imprecise today. Reassessing these categories and replacing them with more precise enabling conditions—such as low administrative and coercive state capacity and fragmented elites—provides a more objective and practical framework. The reconceptualisation enables omnibalancing theory to better capture the complexities of modern autocratic states, particularly those seeking to navigate internal unrest alongside an increasingly multipolar world order. By abandoning the superficial, geographically bound concepts like the post-colonial Third World or developing country, omnibalancing theory is updated for contemporary nondemocracies, which may have different political economies and international relations.

Second, the methods adjustments, particularly refocusing omnibalancing as a process tracing exercise and the incorporation of explaining-outcome process tracing, are valuable additions to the operationalisation of omnibalancing theory in case studies. This methods identification enhances the validity of omnibalancing theory, because essentially all omnibalancing studies are historical excavations of

political processes that lead to omnibalancing. By grounding the analysis in a clear, sequential chain of events, explaining-outcome process tracing privileges specificity over general theorising. Instead of a wall of generalised evidence being advanced to make a claim about omnibalancing (like in Düben 2022), this approach makes omnibalancing more applicable to real-world scenarios, acknowledging the contingent aspects of regime survival decisions within crises and helping the reader avoid a simplistic cause-and-effect analysis. For instance, by applying process tracing to the Yanukovych regime's pivot towards China during the 2013–2014 Euromaidan crisis, the decision-making dynamics at play are highlighted, which pinpoints when and why the omnibalancing attempt was insufficient. The visual wireframes, such as those shown for Belarus (Figure 5) and Ukraine (Figure 6), reflect an understanding of "causal mechanisms" as part of a broader narrative of how internal and external threats interact over time. Most importantly, they work against superficial explanations by requiring a demonstration of each part of the process.

Third, the decision to expand and refine the enabling conditions to seven distinct factors (from David's more parsimonious approach) substantially increases the theory's usability. The revised set of enabling conditions (e.g., internal threats, elite fragmentation, state capacity, etc.) adds robustness and specificity to scenarios under which omnibalancing is likely to occur. For instance, splitting state capacity into administrative and coercive capacities ensures that one-dimensional readings of regime power are avoided, while considering "vulnerable geopolitical position" further contextualises external pressures. Building these more precise enabling conditions allows a more systematic assessment across cases.

However, there is some concern about precision when enabling conditions have ambiguities (i.e., low legitimacy may fall into an ambiguous state), as these may inadvertently introduce analytical subjectivity. Future revisions may need to address how ambiguous conditions can be clarified or reduced.

Fourth, the theoretical and practical revisions to prevent quotidian omnibalancing represent another contribution to the study of omnibalancing. The decision to consciously limit the risk of applying omnibalancing too broadly—a pitfall of the theory—is well-justified. As the chapter acknowledges, there is an inherent danger of over-application or quotidianisation: where every external interaction is perceived in terms as omnibalancing. Many alignment decisions, particularly in nondemocracies, may appear to involve internal threat management but could simply be routine foreign policy behaviour. There is an important distinction to be made here. Indeed, autocratic regimes put regime survival before all else. But that does not mean every act or interaction is driven by this concern. This is why this study introduces restrictions such as focusing on crises and anomalous alignment behaviours. The chapter sets limits on over-application and tries to prevent the seeking out of predispositions about whether a state's actions fit the theory. This more measured approach helps to ensure that omnibalancing is applied only where alignment decisions are extraordinary responses to regime-endangering crises, instead of indiscriminately treating all alignment behaviours as potentially omnibalancing. The critique of Düben's (2023) over-application of the concept further justifies this methods precaution.

Fifth, this chapter illustrates the explanatory power of omnibalancing theory when applied correctly through the case studies of Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia. For Belarus, the attempted long-term alignment with China to counter Russian pressure embodies a clear, though ultimately unsuccessful, case of omnibalancing. The case study of Ukraine highlights an instance of reactive omnibalancing during the height of the Euromaidan crisis, where the Yanukovych regime turned to China for financial lifelines as it faced mass protests and elite fragmentation. Both cases underscore the importance of timing, structure, and domestic context in determining whether omnibalancing efforts can succeed. Conversely, the Russia case demonstrates that not all international alignments in nondemocratic regimes are driven by immediate

survival concerns, especially in the absence of internal crises. This serves as a useful negative case, refining the criteria for when omnibalancing might apply and when it does not.

A further methods refinement is to use crises as focal points for omnibalancing. By focusing on crises as moments or windows in which internal threats force nondemocratic leaderships to seek external alignment, the methodology limits the risk of over-extending the omnibalancing analysis. The case of Yanukovych navigating the perils of the Euromaidan protests is a prime example: it is appropriately viewed as an acute crisis where omnibalancing naturally enters as an explanatory mechanism. This refinement helps reign in potential methods excesses seen in some omnibalancing scholarship. Further distinguishing quotidian alignments from crisis-induced omnibalancing sharpens the analytical boundaries of the theory.

Sixth, a contribution from the revisions presented in this chapter is greater applicability to democracies. The chapter opens the door to using omnibalancing to examine democracies facing crisis. Specifically, the chapter theorises potential omnibalancing attempts under democratic leaders (e.g., President Trump's pressure on Ukraine regarding the Bidens, or strategic decisions under parliamentary systems like UK Conservatives during the Brexit referendum). However, this promising thread is left underexplored in the current work. Expanding on omnibalancing within democratic contexts would contribute to further widening the theory's scope and refine its utility in comparative studies across regime types.

The more rigorous methods underpinning provided by the use of process tracing—especially the variant of explaining-outcome process tracing—aligns well with the crisis-based nature of omnibalancing. This method utilises a step-by-step approach to assessing whether or not enabling conditions, like fragmented elites or a vulnerable geopolitical position, increase the probability of a regime initiating omnibalancing strategies. This application is demonstrated in the detailed case study

of Ukraine, where the specific convergence of pressures from mass protests, a fragmented oligarchic elite, and external coercion from Russia pushed Yanukovych towards his diplomatic engagement with China. The method's emphasis on identifying the causal chain within a specific crisis event ensures that researchers can effectively link foreign alignment decisions to internal regime survival, offering clearer and more testable hypotheses regarding the motivations guiding nondemocratic alignments.

Finally, the critical reflection on the limits of omnibalancing is a useful finding. The negative case of Russia case shows that even when relations with external powers like China deepen, these alignments do not always amount to an omnibalancing effort if internal threats do not significantly jeopardise the regime. The evaluation of the "Sword of Damocles problem," which refers to the temptation to overapply omnibalancing to routine diplomatic relations, stresses caution against overzealous theoretical applications. By distinguishing ordinary bilateral cooperation, such as trade agreements or routine military exercises, from acts explicitly designed to counter severe regime-level instability, the chapter refines the theoretical application of omnibalancing.

The chapter's revisions to omnibalancing theory and its methods adjustments significantly enhance the theory's precision and applicability to the analysis of nondemocratic regime survival strategies. Dropping Third World and developing country classifiers in favour of objective enabling conditions, and focusing the methodology on explaining-outcome process tracing ensures that omnibalancing remains a useful and context-sensitive tool rather than a narrative supported by generalised evidence. The chapter highlights the utility of omnibalancing to explore how regimes facing acute internal crises, such as Belarus and Ukraine, may seek to balance both domestic and external threats using diplomatic and strategic alignments.

6.4.1 Reflections on Omnibalancing Success and Failure

For the purposes of this dissertation, omnibalancing is deemed successful only when an externally negotiated alignment demonstrably neutralises a threat or series of threats to a regime's survival. Success therefore requires three observable results: (1) mobilisation of external resources (military, financial, security, or symbolic); (2) rapid conversion of those resources into regime legitimacy, elite cohesion, and or popular repression (based on Gerschewski's three pillars of regime survival: co-optation, legitimation, coercion) (Gerschewski, 2013a); and (3) preservation—rather than further erosion of the regime's core pillars for at least the medium term. Failure, by contrast, is indicated when a regime either (1) cannot secure the promised external support, or (2) does so but is unable to translate it into domestic stabilisation to weather crises or to neutralise existential threats. The crisis itself does not need to be resolved as long as the regime remains in power for the medium term (e.g., for approximately a year or longer). The comparative evidence shows that both forms of failure are common. success is contingent, rare and, in the period studied, absent.

In Chapter 3, Belarus exemplifies a conversion failure. Lukashenka obtained Chinese credit lines and joint development the high-profile Great Stone Industrial Park. But the implementation of the regime's omnibalancing strategy to reduce reliance of Russia via China was complex. Repeated complications such as conditional funds, slow disbursement, and difficulty attracting participants retarded implementation and hindered progress. Omnibalancing stalled in a development feedback-loop: unmet Chinese conditionality, renewed Russian pressure, and mounting socio-economic grievances ultimately obliged the regime to fall back on Moscow (Braga, 2021b). The Lukashenka regime was unable to convert Chinese assistance into omnibalancing.

Ukraine, in Chapter 5, illustrates what might be termed an access failure. Yanukovych negotiated headline agreements worth up to US $18 billion during his December-2013 Beijing visit, but implementation was stillborn. Elite defections,

collapsing legitimacy and accelerating protest outpaced the arrival of Chinese finance.

On the other hand, for Russia (Chapter 4), the Bolotnaya protests never coalesced into an existential threat for the Putin regime. Most enabling conditions were absent, so an omnibalancing move was neither attempted nor seemingly considered. The contrast confirms the dissertation's central claim that alignment with China is a contingent, not an automatic, resource for authoritarian persistence.

The cases in this study suggest that successful omnibalancing requires more than a high cumulative score on the seven enabling conditions. Timing and sequencing are important. The regime's ability to translate external support into domestic survival is essential. State capacity and elite cohesion is needed to implement plans and allocate resources. Where these temporal and organisational requisites are degraded or absent—as what eventually happened to the regime in Kyiv—omnibalancing cannot be completed. Or if the strategy is simply too complex (as in the case of Belarus), then omnibalancing can also fail.

More generally, the dissertation's findings refine omnibalancing theory in three ways. First, they show that enabling-conditions can also be linked to omnibalancing success or failure. Many enabling conditions, for example, might make an attempt at omnibalancing more likely. But depending on what kind of external support is provided (e.g., direct military support versus symbolic words of support), to many enabling conditions can signal the regime is too hindered to implement a successful omnibalancing strategy. Therefore, further study into omnibalancing theory might consider which mixes of enabling conditions and acute threats require what types of external support. One answer to this might be that these crises situations are too context dependent. Therefore, explaining-outcome process tracing will continue to be a valuable tool in analysing and understanding omnibalancing.

The second way this dissertation's findings caution against equating the mere presence of Chinese credit or symbolic support with effective regime insurance. Success requires the external alignment is translated into regime persistence.

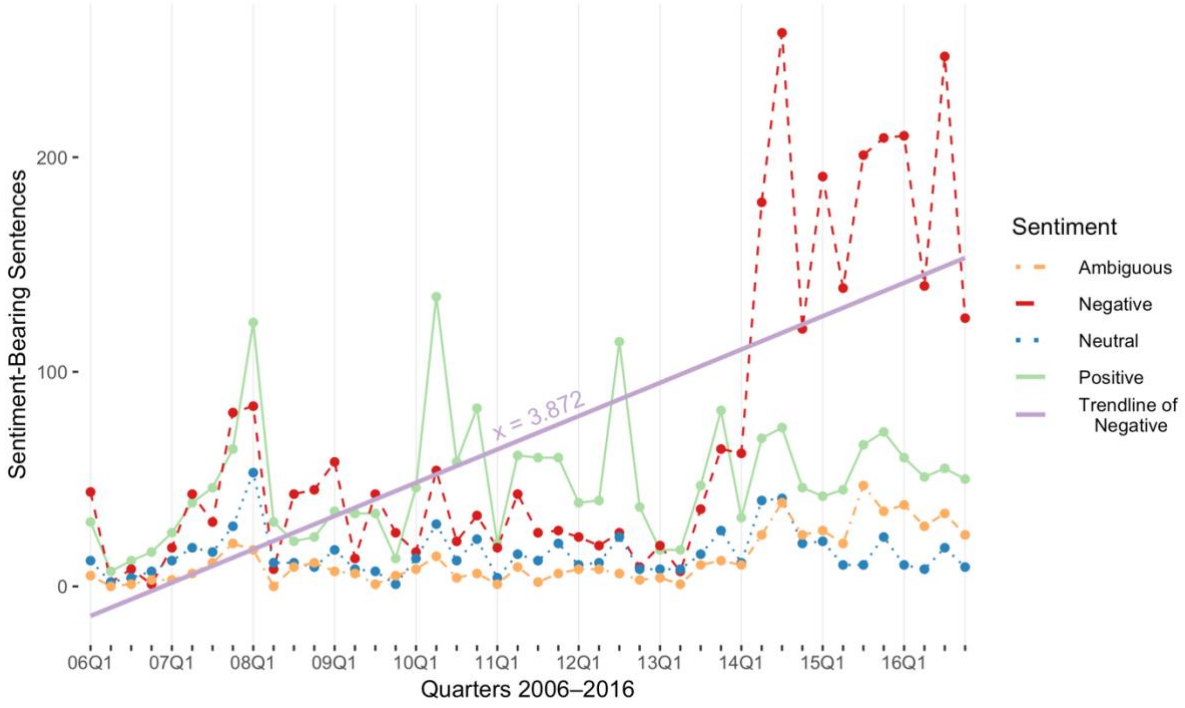
The final way the topic of success versus failure and this dissertation's findings refine omnibalancing is spotlighting the ambivalent role of great-power patrons: China's resources are attractive, yet their release schedules, tied nature and distance can limit their crisis utility. This ties in with the wider authoritarian persistence literature that links physical distance from patrons to regime survival (Bader, 2016). Omnibalancing can therefore be a rational strategy, but the post-Soviet cases demonstrate that its success is not guaranteed.

6.5 SA Results and Visualising Relations

An unexpected finding of this study is how well the SA results function as a visualisation of one country's bilateral relations towards another. The researcher did not anticipate the visualisation of opinion would work so well to monitor developments in a bilateral relationship. Paired with EDA, these visualisations had interesting revelations for how each target country (Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus) conducted its foreign policy. This is clear, for example, when comparing the visualisations of Russia-China (Figure 4.1 in the Chapter 4 case study on Russia) and Belarus-China (Figure 3.1 in the Chapter 3 case study on Belarus) above. In addition, the SA method used here could be used to track how politicians speak about various areas of domestic and foreign policy, such as the internet, gambling, national security, abortion, the Olympics, sovereignty, sanctions and so on, rather than just bilateral partners. The attraction of tracking opinions on policies would be—in a similar approach to this study—to see if politicians' sentiment can be matched with their actions on policy. SA might be able aid in casting predictions about future domestic and foreign policy behaviour of politicians.

The visualisation can track changes (or the lack thereof) in bilateral relations. This would be helpful tool for any researcher looking at a country's relations with other countries. Revisiting the Figure 4.1 above serves as a good example. It has been reproduced below as Figure 6.1 for convenience. The positive and negative sentiment plots (solid-green and dashed-red respectively) in Figure 6.1 demonstrate the differing relations with Russia across three different periods. The years in the graph before Yanukovych's presidency (2006 through 2009), Ukraine's relations with Russia were mixed. President Viktor Yushchenko (incumbent 2005–2010) had a rocky relationship with Russia for many reasons (Yekelchyk, 2015, p. 97). This is clearly illustrated in Figure 6.1 with the interchanging positive and negative sentiment plots. In particular, there were disputes over natural gas prices (A. Wilson, 2015a, pp. 338–340). These are visible by jumps in negative sentiment in Figure 6.1. On 1 January 2006, Russia cut off its gas supply to Ukraine. In Figure 6.1, there is a corresponding negative spike Q1 2006. Gas disputes are also depicted by negative spikes in Q4 2007, Q1 2008, and Q1 2009. In 2010, Viktor Yanukovych's presidency began, which was reported to be sympathetic to the Kremlin. At once in Q1 2010, the positivity of top policymakers towards Russia shifts dramatically, clearly showing this to pro-Kremlin slant to be true. This pro-Kremlin tone maintains itself until Yanukovych's 2013 manoeuvring between Russia's Customs Union and the EU's Association Agreement. This is indicated by the rise in negative sentiment in Q3 and Q4 2013. Finally, the explosion of negative sentiment during and after Q1 2014 illustrate Russia's aggressive actions against Ukraine, Yanukovych's abandonment of Ukraine, and President Poroshenko's loudly anti-Russia regime taking power. The visualised SA results demonstrate all these major changes in bilateral ties.

Figure 6.1 Sentiment Towards Russia: An Example of Turbulent and Worsening Relations. Language Used by Top Ukrainian Policymakers, 2006–2016



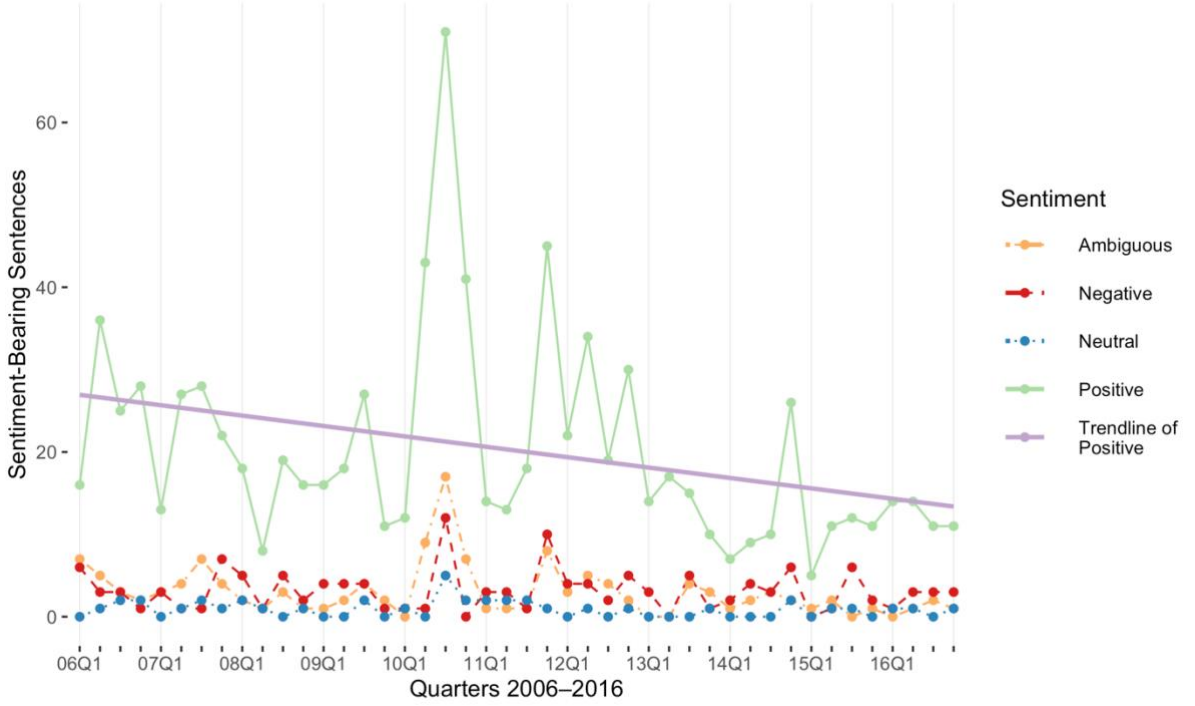
Source: Official press releases, and speech and interview transcripts from various iterations of the Ukrainian "Government Portal" (Government Portal, 2017; Internet Archive, 2020). For a downloadable archive of all sources, visit https://pjbraga.github.io/rub_corpus_and_code/corpus/. Dates on the x-axis are read "06Q1" as 2006, first quarter, "07Q1" as 2007, first quarter, and so on.

Another insight from the SA result visualisation is their ability to depict differing foreign policy approaches. Comparing the visualisations (Figures 3.1 in Chapter 3, 4.1 in Chapter 4, and 5.1 in Chapter 5), particularly between Russia and Belarus (Figures 3.1 and 5.1 respectively), provides insight into differing foreign policy approaches with China. It has been argued that Russia's relationship with China is an "axis of" or "cynical partnership of convenience" (Lo, 2008, pp. 54–55, 2015, pp. 141–150). This is suggested comparing Russia's and Belarus's SA visualisations (but to thoroughly argue this is outside the remit of this chapter). There is a curious phenomenon shown in Figure 5.1 where the majority of Chinese presidential trips to Russia do not correspond with spikes in positivity. Russian presidential trips to

China, though, are met with massive spikes in positive sentiment-bearing language. By contrast, examining Belarus's SA results in Figure 3.1, visits by a Chinese president is met with a massive positivity spike, and one of his trips to China is subdued. These differences reflect the likelihood that Russia does not have a long-term China strategy. Inconsistent positivity for Chinese presidential visits betrays Russian policymakers are largely improvising. The actions of Russian policymakers come with plenty to say. High-level visits from China consistently provoke subdued reactions. On the other hand, Belarus—which has been demonstrated to have been playing a long-game with China—is somewhat the opposite. During Lukashenka's working-visit to China, he has very little to say. When Xi Jinping visits, the corresponding spike is massive. This reflects the fact that Belarus has long had a China strategy. Examined from different perspectives, the SA results contain plenty more realisations to unpack.

Another use for SA is to compare policymakers' opinion on various issues to how they act on policy. As Section 4.3.3 has shown, Russian policymakers' positivity about China has coincided with the close emulation of Chinese internet regulation. This approach could be refined to track what policymakers have to say on specific issues, and then compare it with policy developments. A comparison of topics associated with authoritarianism and democracy could be compared against policy development, such as to track policymakers' sentiment-bearing language when mentioning democracy, the Soviet Union, or press freedom in relation to policies that increase the state's repressive powers. For example:

Figure 6.2 Sentiment of Russian Policymakers When Mentioning Democracy, 2006 to 2016



Source: Official press releases, and speech and interview transcripts for Russian President/Prime Minister Vladimir Putin (Government of Russia, 2008; The Kremlin, 2006), Russian President/Prime Minister Dmitrii Medvedev (Government of Russia, 2012; The Kremlin, 2008), and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (MID Russia, 2006). Dates on the x-axis are read “06Q1” as 2006, first quarter, “07Q1” as 2007, first quarter, and so on.

In Figure 6.2, “Sentiment of Russian Policymakers When Mentioning Democracy, 2006 to 2016,” it is clear top policymakers speak about democracy in positive terms (the solid green line). But these policymakers speak about democracy less often over time. This decline in speaking about democracy is shown by the downward positive sentiment trendline (solid purple), along with a steady reduction in the positive sentiment (solid green) and the remaining sentiment lines remain mostly static. The spike in Q3 2010 is produced by a conference on contemporary governance, which then Russian President Dmitry Medvedev was an active participant (Kremlin, 2010). This is at the height of Russia’s “virtual thaw” with the West (Gel'man, 2015, pp. 113–114). During this virtual thaw, Medvedev was the

image of a more liberal and, possibly, reformist Russia, while in reality Prime Minister Vladimir Putin maintained or increased his control. The other noticeable spikes in Q4 2011 and Q2 2012 relate to the 2011 legislative elections and the 2012 presidential elections. Vladimir Putin and his United Russia party were alleged to have rigged both elections (Hoyle, 2013). The steady decline of “democracy” being mentioned together with positive language on each side of Medvedev’s 2008–2012 fits the argument of an ever more authoritarian Russia under Putin. Figure 6.2 is suggestive of how much more there is to unpack—what other key words and policies may explain important trends. This shows just how easily this sentiment analysis method could be applied in other social science disciplines.

Finally, this study also demonstrates the need for more open-source, Russian-language SA tools, in particular training datasets. Many datasets are readily available in English and other languages (such as French, Spanish, and German), but do not exist in Russian. One major difficulty for this study was finding training or accuracy-test datasets (see Step 3 above). This state of affairs limited this study’s approach to slower, more unsophisticated approaches, such as the sentence-level, lexicon-based approach.

6.6 Conclusion

This chapter has examined, in a single comparative frame, how the Belarusian, Russian, and Ukrainian cases differ and converge when the revised omnibalancing model is laid alongside a longitudinal sentiment analysis. This chapter has reflected that the three post-Soviet cases exhibit markedly different patterns in their engagement with China. Belarus and Ukraine activated most of the seven conditions and therefore turned to China during moments of acute domestic peril; both pursued credit-based alignments that were intended to shore up elite cohesion and buttress faltering legitimacy, yet neither venture delivered regime survival. Russia, by contrast, encountered no existential internal threat in 2006–2016, met only two

enabling conditions and, accordingly, deepened ties with Beijing for long-term strategic and economic reasons rather than for regime-saving purposes. The principal empirical finding is, therefore, two attempted but abortive omnibalancing strategies (Minsk and Kyiv) and one non-attempt (Moscow).

Sentiment analysis (SA) made three contributions to that finding. First, it supplied a replicable map of elite sentiment, showing when and with what intensity China entered presidential and ministerial speech. Second, the SA time-series isolated statistically significant spikes that guided the selection of episodes for process-tracing, thereby reducing selection bias. Third, the absence of comparable positive surges during Russia's Bolotnaya mobilisation provided independent evidence that Moscow's China policy was not crisis-driven. The method thus functioned as an empirical gatekeeper: it indicated where deeper qualitative enquiry was warranted and where it was not.

The omnibalancing framework clarified why similar levels of formal co-operation with Beijing led to different regime outcomes. By revising Steven David's original omnibalancing theory through into seven enabling conditions, the framework captured the structural pressures, which helped characterise how Minsk and Kyiv chose alignment with China. This framework also explained why the same pressures were muted in Moscow. It also exposed the limits of omnibalancing alignment. Once elite fragmentation and legitimacy collapse pass a tipping-point, it appears that external credit and diplomatic cover cannot arrest regime failure. The Russian negative case underscored another limit: without an existential domestic challenge, alignment remains a matter of routine statecraft rather than regime security. And to be clear: Russia could choose to omnibalance at any time. But without pressure from enabling conditions, it is simply unnecessary or illogical.

Taken together, the cross-case comparison answers the dissertation's central question: have regimes in Belarus, Russia and Ukraine used their bilateral relations with China to enhance authoritarian persistence? The answer is, however, a qualified one. All three regimes sought material or symbolic gains from Beijing. But only Belarus and Ukraine attempted to convert those gains into instruments of omnibalancing for authoritarian persistence. Both regimes had very different approaches and both attempts faltered. China thus offered resources that could be mobilised for authoritarian persistence, yet those resources proved neither decisive nor unconditional. The dissertation therefore concludes that alignment with China is a contingent, rather than an assured, pathway for post-Soviet autocracies seeking to prolong their rule.

Chapter 7. Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

This conclusion draws together the dissertation's examination of whether nondemocratic regimes in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine used their relations with China between 2006 and 2016 to prolong nondemocratic rule.

To answer this question the dissertation, combined a revised omnibalancing framework with longitudinal sentiment analysis, and explaining-outcome process tracing. The mixed design first mapped when senior elites spoke favourably or unfavourably about China, then reconstructed the causal chains linking internal threats, Chinese engagement, and regime outcomes. A comparative truth table provided a transparent measure of the presence or absence of enabling conditions across the Belarusian, Russian, and Ukrainian cases.

The enquiry shows that Belarus and Ukraine sought Chinese credit and rhetorical support during moments of existential danger. Russia, facing no comparable crisis, pursued cooperation with Beijing for longer-term strategic reasons. Omnibalancing was therefore attempted—but ultimately unsuccessful—in Minsk and Kyiv; in Moscow it was not required. The findings qualify broad claims about China as a dependable prop for embattled autocrats: alignment can furnish useful resources, yet their value is conditional on domestic capacity, elite cohesion, and timing.

7.2 Synthesis of Main Arguments

This section reviews the dissertation's main arguments and contributions in relation to the core research question: Do regimes in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus use their bilateral relations with China to enhance authoritarian persistence from 2006 to 2016? This section does this in three ways. First, it summarises the

theoretical advances: (1) a regime-type-neutral reformulation of omnibalancing; (2) the specification of seven enabling conditions; and (3) the clarification of how alignment, learning, and policy emulation constitute distinct pathways of external support. Second, it gathers the principal empirical findings from Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine, drawing out the logics that explain why Minsk and Kyiv turned to China during acute crises, why Moscow did not, and what these divergent outcomes reveal about the conditional nature of external alignment as a tool of authoritarian persistence. Third, it reflects on the methodological gains achieved by pairing sentiment analysis with explaining-outcome process tracing. This shows how the mixed design sharpened case selection, disciplined causal inference, and generated incidental insights into foreign-policy rhetoric and strategy. Together, these elements support the dissertation's central claim: engagement with China can furnish nondemocratic regimes with material, ideational, and symbolic resources, yet its capacity to secure a regime's survival is contingent on domestic structures and the coincidence of multiple pressures.

7.2.1 Theoretical Contributions

The dissertation advances a revised, regime-type-neutral formulation of omnibalancing. It dispenses with the Cold-War vocabulary of Third World weakness and instead ties alignment behaviour to a structural asymmetry between regime and state, elaborated with selectorate theory and illustrated by Figures 2.1 to 2.3 in Chapter 2. Within this framework, foreign policy is understood as a function of regime, rather than national, security. To operationalise the argument, the study specifies seven enabling conditions (acute internal threat, high personal stakes, degraded institutional checks, low administrative capacity, low coercive capacity, elite fragmentation and geopolitical vulnerability) and shows how their cumulative weight renders omnibalancing more or less plausible. This move replaces vague references to "weak and illegitimate leaders" with a graded, falsifiable template that travels across hybrid and fully autocratic settings (David, 1991, p. 236).

The second contribution is conceptual. By placing omnibalancing alongside authoritarian learning, the dissertation clarifies two distinct but complementary pathways through which external ties can sustain nondemocratic rule. Alignment with a great-power patron counters immediate threats. At the same time, the observation, adaptation, or symbolic invocation of policies can supply longer-term resources of legitimation and control. This distinction illuminates why Minsk and Kyiv turned to China during crises, yet drew on very different repertoires. Belarus developed "authoritarian branding" (see Chapter 3). Ukraine drew on lines of credit to hold together a fragmenting elite. Moscow, on the other hand, facing no existential peril, confined itself to selective policy borrowing in the cyber domain. Integrating the two literatures thus resolves a recurrent ambiguity in studies of external support: not all cooperation with Beijing is crisis-driven, and not all invocations of China imply genuine policy transfer.

Finally, the dissertation offers a research-method–theoretical synthesis that links large-N text mining with small-n process tracing. Sentiment analysis is used to map when senior elites speak favourably, positively or negatively about China. This tool can flag temporal windows in which omnibalancing or policy emulation can be more likely. Explaining-outcome process tracing then reconstructs the causal chain connecting enabling conditions, crisis onset, alignment decisions and regime outcomes. Together, the two techniques guard against the "quotidian" over-application of omnibalancing (see section 2.3.4.1.1 in Chapter 2) by confining explanation to crisis episodes where both the enabling-condition threshold and a spike in elite attentiveness are met. The result is a transparent protocol that can be redeployed across regions and regime types, and that links theoretical refinement to a replicable empirical strategy. Combining these tools, the dissertation offers a template for future research on the international dimension of authoritarian rule and underlines the continuing relevance of omnibalancing when assessed with contemporary data and methods.

7.2.2 Empirical Findings

The empirical enquiry centred on three country studies, each combining sentiment analysis with explaining-outcome process tracing. In Belarus the Lukashenka administration pursued a decade-long alignment with Beijing that crystallised around the Belarus–China Great Stone Industrial Park. Four of the seven enabling conditions for omnibalancing were clearly present and the sentiment series recorded a steady rise in favourable references to China, punctuated by spikes around credit announcements and presidential visits. Minsk sought to use Chinese finance to compensate for shrinking Russian energy rents and to present a narrative of authoritarian modernisation ("authoritarian branding", see section 3.3.3 in Chapter 3). Yet repeated failures to satisfy loan conditionality, together with renewed Kremlin price coercion, created a development–conditionality feedback loop; the project remained largely symbolic and the regime's structural dependency on Moscow endured.

Russia constitutes a negative case. The Bolotnaya Square protests (2011–12) was the strongest domestic shock within the study window, but it never reached an existential threshold and only two enabling conditions were met. Sentiment analysis confirmed that pro-Chinese rhetoric rose chiefly during set-piece summits and energy deals, not during the protest wave. The partnership therefore reflected long-term strategic and commercial calculations. Selective policy borrowing—most visibly the adoption of elements of China's internet-sovereignty vocabulary—occurred, but it was not driven by acute internal peril. Alignment with Beijing did not serve an omnibalancing function.

In Ukraine the Yanukovych presidency offered the clearest test of the revised framework. All but one enabling condition were present during the Euromaidan crisis and the sentiment series shows an abrupt surge in positive references to China in Q4 2013, coinciding with Yanukovych's state visit to Beijing. The visit produced large,

low-conditionality credit pledges and discussion of Ukraine's future role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation—an explicit bid to counter elite defections and to signal an alternative source of support. Implementation, however, was overtaken by the rapid collapse of regime cohesion: oligarchic backing evaporated, coercive capacity fractured and Yanukovych fled before Chinese funds could be drawn.

Comparison across the three cases yields two observations. First, omnibalancing was attempted only where multiple enabling conditions coincided with an acute domestic crisis (Belarus and Ukraine). Second, even substantial Chinese engagement could not substitute for eroded legitimacy or deep elite fragmentation; the Belarusian strategy stalled and the Ukrainian effort failed outright. Where internal vulnerability was modest (Russia), alignment with China proceeded for conventional power-political reasons rather than as a regime-saving device. The findings suggest external partnership with Beijing is therefore a contingent, not assured, pathway to authoritarian persistence in the post-Soviet space.

7.2.3 Methodological Reflections

The dissertation's mixed-methods design—computer-assisted sentiment analysis paired with explaining-outcome process tracing—has provided leverage that neither technique could supply on its own. Sentiment analysis provided a replicable map of when and how senior elites in Minsk, Moscow, and Kyiv spoke about China. By converting more than seventy-one thousand speeches and press releases into quarterly time-series, the method isolated visually significant inflection points that guided the qualitative investigation. These spikes, which cannot be inferred from trade data or formal treaties, marked the temporal windows in which alignment with Beijing was most likely to carry political salience. In so doing, sentiment analysis performed for contemporary scholarship the cartographic task that Harold Lasswell once hoped quantitative content analysis would achieve: a continuous, numerical trace of changing bilateral relations.

Process tracing then reconstructed the causal mechanisms that sentiment analysis alone could not reveal. The revised omnibalancing truth table first translated abstract enabling conditions into observable indicators, and the step-wise wireframes subsequently linked those indicators to concrete decisions—credit negotiations in Minsk, the abortive BRI deals in Kyiv, and the absence of crisis-driven initiatives in Moscow. This sequential reconstruction disciplined inference, prevented the "quotidian" over-application of omnibalancing, and demonstrated where external alignment could—and could not—substitute for eroded legitimacy or elite cohesion.

The paired approach also generated two incidental findings. First, the sentiment series confirmed that computational text mining can document foreign-policy trajectories with a granularity unavailable to traditional diplomatic sources: the Belarusian and Ukrainian sentiment analysis tracked major loan announcements to the quarter, whereas the Russian series remained flat during the Bolotnaya mobilisation, signalling that China was irrelevant to that crisis. Second, the juxtaposition of the three graphs revealed that Russia, despite its declaratory "strategic partnership", lacked a coherent, China-specific strategy. Presidential visits to Beijing produced predictable surges in Russian rhetoric, yet reciprocal Chinese visits elicited muted responses—an asymmetry not observed in Belarus. The pattern suggests that Moscow's engagement was episodic and Putin-centred, rather than the product of a tailored, Russian foreign policy approach for relations with China.

More broadly, the dissertation shows that sentiment analysis is not merely an exploratory device. It can also be a source of independent evidence, which can be triangulated with archival material, budget data, and memoirs. The process tracing method also benefits from computational pre-selection. By locating positive or negative sentiment spikes, these created temporal windows for investigation. This reduced confirmation bias when conducting research and ensured that causal narratives were anchored in demonstrable elite attentiveness. The methodological synthesis is therefore portable. It can be redeployed to other regions, regime types,

or patrons, and it invites further refinement, such as multilingual corpora or machine-learning classifiers, and so on, to deepen the empirical study of the international dimension of nondemocratic rule.

7.3 Support for Main Arguments

This section argues the material assembled in Chapters 3–6 to do two things for the dissertation's main argument. First, how the three case studies substantiate the dissertation's core claims about the conditional nature of authoritarian support from China. Second, the findings in these chapters have implications for both theory on nondemocratic regimes and foreign policy and government policy. Section 7.3.1 reiterates how the methods and analysis explain why Minsk and Kyiv, but not Moscow, sought to use Beijing to counter acute domestic threats, and also why both attempts stalled. Section 7.3.2 then draws out the consequences of that pattern for scholarship on regime survival and for policymakers.

7.3.1 How the Evidence Supports the Central Claims

The case studies (chapters 3–5) demonstrate that alignment with China can be mobilised in pursuit of regime survival, yet its utility is conditional and frequently transient. In Belarus and Ukraine all but one enabling condition for omnibalancing coincided with acute domestic crisis. Minsk sought to re-package Chinese credit and the Great Stone Industrial Park as a long-term substitute for eroding Russian rents; Kyiv tried, at the height of Euromaidan, to convert promised Chinese finance and prospective SCO links into a bulwark against elite desertion. Process tracing shows that both strategies passed through the sequence anticipated by the revised framework: internal threats, then Chinese credit pledges, and then domestic presentation of that pledge as proof of imminent modernisation. In neither state, however, were Chinese resources disbursed—or domestic pillars re-consolidated—quickly enough to avert renewed dependence on Moscow (Belarus) or regime

collapse (Ukraine). However, it should be noted that the time horizons for the two cases are different. The outcome therefore corroborates the dissertation's central claim that external support from Beijing offers post-Soviet autocracies only a contingent pathway to persistence.

Russia provides the crucial negative comparison. The Bolotnaya mobilisation generated public unrest but left most enabling conditions unmet; the Kremlin's partnership with Beijing therefore remained a strategic, energy-centred project rather than an omnibalancing response. The contrast confirms the second core proposition: where existential threat is absent, deepening Sino-Russian co-operation does not serve regime-security ends.

Across the three cases sentiment analysis validates these conclusions. In Belarus and Ukraine steep, unscheduled surges in positive references to China coincide with the decision points identified in the process-tracing narrative, while similar surges are conspicuously absent during Russia's protest wave. The method thus provides independent, time-stamped confirmation that alignment efforts in Minsk and Kyiv were crisis-driven, whereas in Moscow they were routine. At the same time, the longitudinal series reveal two incidental findings that reinforce the broader argument. The ability of sentiment data to trace bilateral relations with Lasswell-like continuity, and the markedly muted Russian policymaker sentiment to Chinese presidential visits, which suggests the absence of a coherent China strategy in the Kremlin during 2006-2016. Taken together, the qualitative and quantitative evidence substantiates the dissertation's three central claims: (1) the revised omnibalancing model discriminates accurately between crisis-driven and routine alignment; (2) China can be instrumentalised for authoritarian persistence only when domestic pressure is acute and enabling conditions are clustered; and (3) even then, its support is neither automatic nor decisive.

7.3.2 Theoretical and Policy Implications

The findings carry three principal implications for scholarship on authoritarian persistence and for practitioners concerned with Chinese engagement in Eurasia.

First, they refine omnibalancing theory. Alignment for routine commercial gain (Russia) cannot be conflated with alignment pursued under existential pressure (Belarus and Ukraine). Omnibalancing should be analysed via crises and enabling conditions, rather than a structural convenience. The seven-condition template offers a falsifiable guide for future studies across regime types.

Second, like Bader (2016) the evidence qualifies claims that China has become a dependable prop for embattled autocrats. Chinese credit and political symbolism were quick to mobilise but slow to deliver, and their release was conditioned by commercial viability and Beijing's own risk calculations. In Belarus, loan disbursement lagged behind political need. In Ukraine, pledges remained undrawn at the point of regime collapse. External alignment can buy time, improve bargaining leverage vis-à-vis other patrons, or lessen the effects of Western sanctioning, but it does not substitute for eroded legitimacy or fractured elites. Scholars should therefore treat Chinese authoritarian assistance as contingent rather than automatic.

Third, the results suggest some limited practical lessons for policy communities. For Western governments seeking to support democratic consolidation, the most credible constraint on Chinese influence is the domestic strength of political and economic institutions in recipient states. Conversely, Chinese policymakers face reputational and financial risks when lending into governance vacuums. The Belarusian and Ukrainian cases underscore the importance of project-level feasibility and elite cohesion to loan performance. Finally, smaller authoritarian regimes contemplating a "third-wing" strategy should note the Belarusian experience (see

Chapter 3). Without credible administrative capacity and timely implementation, symbolic partnership with China may deepen rather than diversify geopolitical dependence (for example, greater dependence on Russia).

7.4 Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

The dissertation's findings should be read with four principal limitations in mind. First, the January 2006 to December 2016 timeframe excludes two developments that now shape Sino–Eurasian relations: the 2020 Belarusian protests and crackdown, and Russia's 2022 expanded war of aggression against Ukraine. Both episodes may furnish successful, or at least more far-reaching, examples of omnibalancing and therefore warrant examination with the revised framework developed here. Second, case selection is restricted to three post-Soviet states. The enabling-condition template travels in principle, yet its empirical reach remains untested beyond post-Soviet Eastern Europe and across different regime types. Third, data constraints intrude unevenly. Presidential archives in Kyiv were partially removed in 2019, and Belarusian sources are limited largely to Lukashenka's statements. Gaps were mitigated through the Wayback Machine and triangulation, but sentiment analysis still rests on an incomplete corpus. Expanding the corpus to the Russian Duma, for example, might provide greater detail. Fourth, the mixed-methods design has methodological limits. Lexicon-based sentiment analysis struggles with sarcasm, polysemy and subject detection; process tracing, while transparent, retains an interpretive element that could bias the coding of enabling conditions.

These constraints suggest several directions for future enquiry. A first avenue is temporal extension. Reapplying the framework to Belarus to include August 2020 and to Russia to include February 2022 would clarify whether crisis-driven alignment with China has moved from tentative to decisive. A second is a geographical widening. Testing the seven-condition model in Central Asia, the Middle East, or

South-East Asia, and in hybrid or even democratic settings would indicate how far regime type and regional security orders condition omnibalancing. Third, the analysis could be broadened beyond China. Comparing Beijing's support with that offered by smaller patrons, such as the United Arab Emirates or Türkiye, would refine judgements about the substitutability of external sponsors. Fourth, stronger attention to agency is required. The dissertation's structural focus leaves questions of leader psychology and factional bargaining under-specified. These could be addressed through elite interviews or decision-making memoirs once sources open. Fifth, methodological refinement is feasible. Sentence-level sentiment analysis might be replaced or supplemented by machine-learning classifiers that incorporate sarcasm detection and multilingual corpora, allowing the study of Chinese-language sources, too. Finally, scholars seeking a policy-oriented contribution could integrate the present findings with literatures on "sharp power", the Belt and Road Initiative's debt renegotiations, and conditionality in Chinese lending. Doing so would help determine whether omnibalancing remains a viable strategy as Beijing's commercial risk calculus hardens or if Western sanctions expand.

Addressing the temporal, geographical and methodological limits noted above will deepen understanding of when, how, and for whom external patrons constitute a lifeline rather than a mirage for leadership and regime survival.

7.5 Final Synthesis

This final section draws together the dissertation's theoretical, empirical and methodological strands. It argues the revised omnibalancing framework paired with sentiment analysis and explaining-outcome process tracing answers the central research question: regimes in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine could draw on their ties with China for regime security, yet such recourse was contingent upon a precise cluster of domestic conditions and, even when attempted, rarely decisive.

Theoretically, the study recasts omnibalancing as a regime-type-neutral logic governed by seven observable enabling conditions. This revision resolves earlier ambiguities over “weak” leaders, removes the dated Third World template, and integrates insights from authoritarian learning. Methodologically, it couples a transparent truth-table with computer-assisted sentiment analysis to identify moments of elite attention (positive and negative), and then uses process tracing to establish whether omnibalancing or learning actually took place. The design limits the risk of over-applying omnibalancing and supplies a replicable protocol for future work on the foreign policy of nondemocracies.

Empirically, the three cases diverge starkly. In Belarus and Ukraine the simultaneous presence of multiple enabling conditions and acute crisis prompted an overt bid to mobilise Chinese credit and symbolism. Minsk envisaged the Great Stone Industrial Park as a long-term substitute for eroding Russian rents. Kyiv sought emergency finance during Euromaidan to placate its wavering oligarchs. Both efforts stalled: Belarus became trapped in a development–conditionality loop and Ukraine’s regime collapsed before funds could be drawn. Russia, by contrast, exhibited only two enabling conditions and faced no existential peril during 2006-2016; its deepening partnership with Beijing therefore served long-term strategic ends, not regime survival. Across all three cases, the sentiment series mirrors these patterns: positive spikes coincide with Belarusian and Ukrainian crises and are absent during Russia’s Bolotnaya mobilisation, providing independent confirmation of the process-tracing narratives.

The broader implication is that alignment with China can supply material, ideational and symbolic resources useful to embattled post-Soviet rulers, but the utility of those resources is constrained by state capacity, elite cohesion, and timing. Chinese engagement is, thus, a conditional (and not assured) pathway to authoritarian persistence. By demonstrating both the possibilities and the limits of external support, the dissertation refines our understanding of how international links

shape regime trajectories in the post-Soviet space and furnishes a template for comparative research on the international dimension of authoritarian rule elsewhere.

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Appendix 1

Table A1 EDA Variable Tags, Data Types, and Groupings

"Variable" Column Tag	Data Type	Data Grouping
blr	Grouping tag to indicate the variable/measure belongs to Belarus	country grouping tag
rus	Grouping tag to indicate the variable/measure belongs to Russia	country grouping tag
ukr	Grouping tag to indicate the variable/measure belongs to Ukraine	country grouping tag
positive	sentences (recorded by official state media in digital text format) spoken by policymakers bearing a positive sentiment towards China or a comparison country	sentiment analysis results
negative	sentences (recorded by official state media in digital text format) spoken by policymakers bearing a negative sentiment towards China or a comparison country	sentiment analysis results
neutral	sentences (recorded by official state media in digital text format) spoken by policymakers bearing a neutral sentiment towards China or a comparison country	sentiment analysis results
ambiguous	sentences (recorded by official media in digital text format) spoken by policymakers bearing an ambiguous sentiment towards China or a comparison country	sentiment analysis results
yoygdpgrowthperc	year-on-year GPD growth measured in percentage points for the coded country (that is, Belarus, Ukraine, or Russia)	economic growth data
usdmilexptochi	exports to China measured in $USD millions	trade flows
usdmiltotalexp	exports to all bilateral trading partners combined measured in $USD millions	trade flows
usdmilimpfromchi	imports from China measured in $USD millions	trade flows
usdmiltotalimp	imports from all bilateral trading partners combined measured in $USD millions	trade flows
usdmiltradebala	trade balance with China and the coded country (Belarus, Ukraine, or Russia) measured in $USD millions	trade flows

usdmiltradebalaworld	trade balance with all bilateral trading partners combined and the coded country measured in $USD millions	trade flows
usdmiltradevolumes	total trade volumes (imports plus exports) with China and the coded country measured in $USD millions	trade flows
usdmildisbursementcontracts	Grants and loans from China, which have commenced disbursement under contract to the coded country measured in $USD millions	foreign assistance
usdmilcreditlineorstalled	Grants and loans from China, either (a) not yet begun disbursement or (b) frozen or stalled due to contract annulment or other issues, extended to the coded country measured in $USD millions	foreign assistance
usdmilrealdisbursement	institutional records of disbursements of loans from China to the coded country in $USD millions	foreign assistance
internationalevents	dates of international events, which may have had a political or economic impact upon the coded country (operationalised using a dummy variable, where “1” indicates an event took place and “0” indicates there was no event of note for the period in question)	political economic events
regionalevents	dates of regional (between Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia) events, which may have had a political or economic impact upon the coded country (operationalised using a dummy variable, where “1” indicates an event took place and “0” indicates there was no event of note for the period in question)	political economic events
localevents	dates of local (meaning the event is unlikely to have a regional or international impact) events, which may have had a political or economic impact upon the coded country (operationalised using a dummy variable, where “1” indicates an event took place and “0” indicates there was no event of note for the period in question)	political economic events
highlevelvisittochina	dates of presidential state visits to china from the coded country (operationalised using a dummy variable, where “1” indicates an event took place and “0” indicates there was no event of note for the period in question)	state visits
highlevelvisitfromchina	dates of presidential Chinese state visits to the coded country (operationalised using a dummy variable, where “1” indicates an event took place and “0” indicates there was no event of note for the period in question)	state visits