

## Some Notes on the Geopolitics and Geo-economics of Russia's Post-Soviet Neocolonialism in Central Asia

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### **Abstract**

*The subject of “colonialism”, which is linked to a rather long stage in the evolution of civilization, continues to arouse the interest of various theorists and historians in the field of international relations, all the more that the concept has become enriched with the neo- and post- prefixes. As for these novel varieties, it is said that at the end of the Second World War, as a result of the radical change in the global balance of power, the former metropolises – such as the United Kingdom, France, Spain, Belgium –, have left their place to dissimulated, disguised colonial actors – such as the United States of America and the Soviet Union –, the latter being continued, in intricated manners, by its post-Cold-War heir, the Russian Federation. In this paper, I attempt to explain the extent to which the characteristics of Russia's current international relations with the former members of the Soviet Union, which have gained their independence, but live since then under constant Russian pressure, can be framed in the logic of colonial habits. Emphasis is on the Central Asia region, a place that has been the object of geopolitical/geo-economic disputes between several great powers, one of them being the ex-Soviet-imperial tutor, Russia. In order to obtain a portrayal of the Russian colonial-type behaviours, arguments of economic, political, technological or cultural substance are being provided, linking canonical scientific debates of colonialism to contextual ties among the involved stakeholders.*

*Keywords: geopolitics; geo-economics; colonialism; imperialism; neocolonialism; societal challenges.*

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## 1. Introduction

The landscape of *colonial* realities remains a complex one, even *hic et nunc*, when its golden ages are distant in time and the former colonial spaces are legally freed. In more or less discreet and disguised manners, a variety of post-/neo-colonial expressions survived. These are fueled by imperial nostalgias or dominance aspirations, coming from regional and global powers, be they past and present. From the perspective of “the other side”, i.e., the “targeted” entities subject to colonial interest from former or “future” metropolises, such relations are governed by colonial resentments and fears. The scientific interest accompanies such a rich reality, with approaches at the confluence between political-economical (positive) and ethical-moral (normative) inquiries; or between the concerns for individual freedoms and national emancipation, on the one hand, and that of “costly progress” and “beneficial sacrifices” claims, for both individuals and nations, on the other hand. Moreover, the scrutiny of “Western”-type (post-/neo-) colonialism as that of Eastern varieties (i.e., Russian and Chinese) is on the table.

There are analysts who consider that after World War II, “*the former metropolises (Great Britain, France, Spain, Belgium) have left the place of neocolonialist entities such as the United States of America and the Soviet Union*” (Rahaman et al., 2017). The de-colonization movement – that changed the international geopolitical and geo-economic picture – was accompanied by a subtle twist in terms of “re-colonization” from the part of the new powers, labelled as “neo-imperialist”. Although a growing proportion of the former colonies gained political independence, practically all remained within the economic sphere of the former metropolises, which shows that achieving economic independence is much more difficult than gaining political independence. So, the former colonies, due to institutional weaknesses of their adopted economic system (Jora et al., 2019) continued to face poverty, hunger, pandemics, corruption, political instability, civic turmoil, lack of essential financial resources for development, unilateral productive specialization depending on imports of industrial products from metropolises.

The case of the post-Soviet spaces and times only adds to the complexity and complicity of analyzing the novel facets of colonialism, all

the more that Russian theorists and historians (unlike their Western counterparts) do not concede the existence of a *colonial* past for their country (yet the *imperial* past being an undeniable reality – with “words” being thus nuanced such that untrained students could be lost in translation). Russia (even if not assumedly) is concerned with maintaining its imperial vocation by trying to reunify the former Soviet space in a specific way: it acknowledges the new geopolitical and geo-economic circumstances, but in accordance with the rules dictated by it. Even if some may be uncomfortable with the words used, although the former Soviet republics have gained independence from the Moscow “metropolis”, the new independent states have not gained “full/real sovereignty”, as some still depend heavily – economically and politically (and even culturally)– on the former political epicenter. The case of Central Asia is illustrative in this respect.

The present article follows a twofold track (that is in a sense new and incomplete), opening theoretical and applied reflection further on. First, it revisits some key considerations from the mainstream literature devoted to the *conceptualization* of “colonialism”, drawing attention, with regard to the epistemic scenery, on hybrid and somehow unsettled concepts like “neocolonialism”, “postcolonialism”, “tricontinentalism”, etc. Secondly, it tries to import the colonial theoretical mindset to decipher the kind of relation/influence the Russian Federation exhibits with/exerts on the countries that were part of former USSR, with a particular emphasis on Central Asian countries, which have the peculiarity (in contrast to their Eastern European mates) of not being in the range of Euro-Atlantic structures (the European Union, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization) – a fact that “exposes” them to Russian pressure, in addition to their internal frailties. The article adds to a debate: does the Russian attitude have a (neo-) colonial nature?

## **2. A literature review: from *established concepts to novel realities***

The analyses of the colonial phenomenon converge when it comes to highlighting that this type of relationship between state entities represents “*a modern, West European invention par excellence, emerging from the 15th century onward*” (Böröcz& Sarkar, n.y.). In support of this perspective, it is

claimed that we have to deal with an atypical mixture of political, military, economic and cultural phenomena and processes (Gherasim 2019a; 2019b), the most relevant being:

- the unique combination of relationships between the discoverers of the new territories and those who inhabited them, with disruptions or displacement of latter ones' societal continuances;
- the (quasi-)scientific analysis of geography, resources, population, including traditions and customs, to substantiate the monopolization of resources and to justify the unequal exchanges;
- the cancellation of existing forms of economic development to enable the transformation of these regions into captive markets for the products and services offered by the metropolises;
- the promotion of a “commercial triangle” – finished European goods to the colonies>slaves from (African) colonies to the American continent> raw products from there to Europe...;
- the commencement of some modernization projects of the colonies (infrastructure, agricultural/industrial enterprises, administrative and tax apparatus to drain resources to the metropolis);
- the creation of local collaborative elites, specific education systems and cultural architectures that seek arguments for the superiority of the metropolis and the perpetuation of domination.

French philosopher J.P. Sartre (1964) criticized fervently French foreign policy in his work entitled *Colonialisme et néo-colonialisme*, particularly the use of violent means to achieve strategic external outcomes. This work was an important landmark for a whole specialized literature that dealt with this topic, among the follow-ups being the contributions from A. Memmi, F. Lyotard and F. Fanon. Sartre saw colonialism neither as a problem related to an isolated group of outdated individuals or to some evil historical events, nor as an exception to the essence of liberal democracy, but as a structurally inherent system taking into account of the expansion of European-type capitalism. In his view, “*colonialism could not be reformed from above or within by benevolent nationalist elites; it had to be dismantled on the national level through a popular revolutionary struggle itself made to*

*circulate within the broader co-ordinates of an overcoming Third-Worldist of imperialist capitalism” (Sartre, 1964).*

S. Halperin defines the concept of *neocolonialism* as “*the control of less-developed countries by developed countries through indirect means*”. The emphasis is placed on the ways in which great powers influence the state of affairs in less developed states, either directly or indirectly, by using both traditional and new practices. The domain in which the roots of colonialism were most deeply felt is the *economic* one – the appeal to economic means allowed the colonial powers to get most of the expected gains from expansionist adventures. The decolonization process has not changed too much the institutional, relational, social and economic realities of these states. In addition to the dependence configured over time on the former metropolises, these newborn states have gradually become the targets of the interests of the old hegemony, which have been (re)named by analysts the “neocolonialist powers”. International economic/financial institutions (such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization) are accused to have contributed to keeping the former colonies beyond some “neocolonialist curtain” (mirroring the “Iron Curtain, in the ideological West-East European clash), despite the fact that such institutions’ statutes and objectives focus precisely on the economic emancipation of the less developed states (Jora, 2018). Starting from Kwame Nkrumah’s view of neocolonialism, we draw attention to the fact that post-Soviet Central Asian states – similar to African post-colonial counterparts – cannot be considered completely independent if “*most of their resources are further used in the interest and for the development of those in the vicinity of the region or at greater distances from it*” (Northrop, 2012).

*Postcolonialism* is another concept that prepares the understanding of the neocolonial spectre. Without developing an extended discussion on it, we point out that this “state of affairs” requires a composite “state of analysis”, in which realities cannot be understood unless one uses the epistemic lenses of structuralism, realism, institutionalism, functionalism. The key terms that more and more analysts invite us to consider are: hybridity, diaspora, representation, narrative, alterity, multiplicity and knowledge/power, so cultural studies, beyond political-economic one, are to be involved (Gayatri,

1988; Bennington, 1990; Williams and Chrisman, 1993; Ashcroft et al., 2000; Kohn, 2010; Darian-Smith, 2015; Ynalvez and Shrum, 2015).

Another conceptualization related to postcolonial realities is the one stating that “*the anti-colonial movements were not narrowly political campaigns, but developed their own cultural and political positions through the elaboration of a revolutionary ‘tricontinental’ epistemology*” (Memmi, 1965). Or the one speaking of “First world” (free, capitalist, Western), “Second world” (socialist/communist, Eastern), “Third world” (postcolonial, un-aligned to the first two worlds) (Shohat, 1992) and even “Fourth world” (made of “unknown nations” or cultural entities of indigenous peoples with a geography both outside and inside fully-fledged nation-states).

In the following sections we will discuss about “Russian neocolonialism”, and place the analysis in the logic of a term closer to these realities, namely that of “*post-Soviet neocolonialism*”. This conceptual delimitation is needed in order to be able to harmonize the position of officials, but also that of the Russian academic environment (who believe that one cannot speak of Russian neocolonialism because this powerful entity did not have colonies) with the Western perspective, which supports the view that the Russian Federation is only continuing the colonialist policy of the former Tsarist Empire and of the former Soviet Union.

### **3. The Russian conjectures – on “*stealth*” post-/neo-/colonialism**

One of the aphorisms that marked the career of the Russian historian Sergei Solovevis that “*the history of Russia is the history of a country that colonizes itself*”, being stated in 1840. Although it has become a real truism that this great power has constantly promoted colonialism, the representatives of Russian Federation almost always provide a standard answer: there is no talk of neocolonialism in a non-colonial country when speaking of Russia.

The complex and, to a large extent, unpredictable transformations that took place in a relatively short period of time in the former USSR space made it very difficult to anticipate the level at which political and economic stability could be placed. For both diplomatic and academic entourages, the subject of democratization of political regimes in this geographical area has become very attractive. Against this background, one of the analysts of these realities

(Hale, 2005) claims that “...we should study the post-Soviet developments and classify them not as democratization / authorization, but as institutionalization / a-institutionalization, competitiveness / non-competitiveness, and stabilization / destabilization”. It became compulsory for all states resulting from the dismantling of the USSR to enter a race at the end of which a new national identity project was to be contoured. The essence of this belief can be found in the following approach: “No nation is likely to survive, let alone preserve its culture, without a clear understanding of its national idea or a certain vision of its prospects. This makes society and the people vulnerable” (Moiseev, 1999). In order to achieve this outline, it is necessary to develop and operationalize a set of strategies, the most important being: the national development strategy; strategic positioning or repositioning strategy; national security strategy.

Russia’s concern is to maintain its imperial vocation by trying to reunify the former Soviet space in a specific way to the new geopolitical and geo-economic circumstances, but in accordance with the rules dictated by it. It is an unquestionable reality that, although they have gained independence from the “Moscow metropolis”, the new states resulting from the dismantling of the “Soviet empire” have not gained “real sovereignty” as some still depend heavily on it from an economic, political, and even cultural perspective. After 1990, the region surrounding the Russian Federation was at the forefront of its foreign policy, although Russia’s interest varied from one decade to another.

While Russia was led by Boris Yeltsin, the main interest was directed to the Slavic area (Belarus and Ukraine) and to the Trans-Caucasus region (Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia), regions in Central Asia not being of immediate importance. This state of affairs continued in the first years after Vladimir Putin came to power, things changing significantly later. Russia’s interest in the Eastern space (Central Asia) intensified as the country’s relations with the Western states gradually deteriorated, the American interest in the region became obvious, and China’s economic and geo-political strength increased (Lo, 2014). One of the most important axes of the new partnership proposed by the decision makers from Moscow to the ones from

the new independent states was that of a specific type, Russian-led regional cooperation (Esengul et al., 2015).

The new facet of cooperation is strongly influenced by an interesting mix composed of factors of intra-national, but also of international nature, that advance Moscow formats as against regional, Russian-free, solutions of integration. Among the factors that mark Central Asian interstate cooperation, the most *ad rem* are the following:

- Over-focusing on the elements that define statehood (territoriality, sovereignty, legitimacy) may affect the possibility of actively participating in regional structures of economic and security integration (of EU/NATO-types) – and this lack of regional coagulation exposes them to “neocolonial” influences.
- Regionalism is presented, by neo-colonialist propagandists, as a form of supranational structures to which the states decide to transfer some of their national sovereignty – in reality, supranational bodies (we have the example of the EU) do not assume that states give up some of their sovereignty, but agree to exercise it all together.
- The placement of Central Asian states in different development paradigms (some focused on mineral and energy resources, others on infrastructure issues) makes it difficult to reach a consensus on certain strategic objectives – and this opens the door to extra-region coagulants (for instance, from Russia...).
- The type of transition strategy from a centralized system to the market economy (“shock” vs. “gradualism”) differed in the region – for these reasons, it was very difficult to harmonize between the respective states the basic economic targets (i.e., investments from the West), exposing them to Russian politicized capital.
- The persistence of negative phenomena in the societies of this region – such as suffocating government bureaucracy, endemic corruption, authoritarianism – has led to the failure of the attempted economic reforms that might have convinced the international community (the “West”) on their capacities and capabilities to cooperate.
- Each of the autocratic leaders of the countries in that area expects, in the framework of the regional integration negotiations, to triumph their

proposals to show at national level how respected they are, what their justice programs have – while aiming to be regional powers, they unknowingly fall in a kind of *divide et impera* trap.

- The maintenance of conflicts between the states in the region on the correct delimitation of borders, the use of large watercourses, respect for the rights of minorities, etc., despite an impressive number of agreements signed between these countries, add to the tensions and retard the moment of solid and sustainable cooperation.
- The different stage of integration of these republics within the worldwide international geo-political and geo-economic landscape – the accession of these states to the major international organizations took place at different times and with diverse degrees of commitment – put another impress on the weak regional coagulation.

#### **4. The Russian Federation’s “*Game of... Tones*” in Central Asia**

Some analysts say that the main sources of Russia’s foreign policy are not primarily economic, but deeply geo-political. One author (Adomeit, 2012) points out that the intensification of the steps taken by Moscow authorities in the direction of deepening the Russian-type of economic integration (see Eurasian Economic Union – currently made of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Russia) with the states in the vicinity occurs in the immediate temporal and spatial proximity with the European Union’s efforts in terms of its Eastern Partnership (Damoc, 2015). We are witnessing an increasingly fierce competition, but not always fair, between the great powers to attract and keep within their sphere of influence the very same states from Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

In the case of Central Asia, the Russian authorities have to counterbalance another gravitational attraction, the one exerted by China, that uses economic levers to attract as many states as possible in its strategic projects. China, but also the EU, have intensified their trade relations and increased investment flows with the countries of the region, in many situations exceeding Russia’s economic influence, which worries Kremlin decision-makers. Noticing the revival of Russia’s imperial vocation, the states in the region are becoming more reluctant to accept the economic pole of

some geopolitical and strategic intentions. That is why the Russian authorities have begun to pay sensibly more attention to both statements and concrete actions regarding their vicinities.

The dimensions of Russia's partnership with its neighbouring states are multiple, one of the most important being the military one. There are numerous records in favour of the Russian administration carrying out actions to activate the Russian ethnic groups existing in the neighbouring states in order to become certain interventions in their favour. States in the region must pay close attention to both balance sheets proposed by their largest neighbour: on the one hand they are promised economic prosperity, commercial liberalization, increased investment flows, regional stability, predictability, non-interference in domestic affairs; on the other hand, there exists insecurity, instability, centrifugal moves, distrust, and hidden thoughts, etc. Their routes are fluid and so are their choices.

The Moscow authorities show that they have carefully studied the good practices in politics and economics established in other regions, that they take them as a benchmark when elaborating their strategic lines of foreign policy, give them a note of originality, and promote them using all modes of persuasion. The evolutions that have taken place in recent years show that the model of economic integration carried out in Western Europe was used by Russia to convince its neighbours of the good intentions nourished, of the modernity of the foreign policy and the need to understand the great advantages of promoting integration structures such as those that have already proven the benefits.

## **5. The Eurasian Economic Union: Russia, *primum inter pares***

Mimicking the footsteps and masterminded as a bridge to the European Union, the Eurasian Economic Union "*is, without exaggeration, a milestone not only for our three countries but also for all post-Soviet states. ...we propose a model of a powerful supranational union capable of becoming one of the poles of the modern world and of playing the role of an effective 'link' between Europe and the dynamic Asia-Pacific region. ...we propose to the Europeans that they think about creating a harmonious economic community from Lisbon to Vladivostok, a free trade zone and even more advanced forms*

*of integration*” (Putin, 2011). The ambitions of the partners of the former Eurasian integrationist initiatives (Mostafa and Mahmood, 2018) were aimed at the rapid advancement from the first stage of integration – *the customs union between Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia* – to the second stage – *the formation of Single Economic Space, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU)*.

The partners set out to create a common market in which to move goods, services, capital and labour freely. To these four traditional freedoms for the common market stage, it was agreed to add: coordination of monetary and fiscal policies; joint development of transport, energy and information systems; harmonization of sectoral policies and unification of national systems to support research, development and innovation processes. The main challenge facing this new stage of integration that began in 2015 was represented by the different way in which the governments of the participating states looked at the non-economic aspects that wanted to be harmonized. For instance, debatable issues were/are the following ones:

- The Russian decision makers proposed the creation of a “Parliament”, an idea not very well received by the other leaders.
- The differences are also related to the advancement of integration according to the Western-European model towards an economic and monetary union. The issue of the common currency and that of the common bureaucracy to handle the integration issues was raised.
- One sensitive issue was that of keeping the participating states’ freedom in their foreign economic relations: the Belarussian leader was in favour of unification, while the one of Kazakhstan wanted to maintain its freedom to expand relations with China, EU and US.
- Kazakhstan also insists on the need for Central Asian states to work more closely with each other, without becoming heavily dependent on a large economic or military power (in this case, Russia). Still, the military component is not overruled, as the signatory states are also members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

There are studies that oscillate in identifying EEU either as a propensity for regional groupings, in order to find protection, by institutionalizing relationships, from the negative effects of globalization, in the *liberal theories* reading (Cooper, 2013; Connolly, 2014) or, in the realist theories reading, as

a “post-imperial syndrome”, rooted in “annexationist Pan-Russianism” (Van Herpen, 2014), exhibited by an antidemocratic regime that instinctively have imperialistic ambitions (Brzezinski, 1994).

In the present study, and based on considerations exposed above, we consider that the EEU is much closer to the image of a neo-imperial/neo-colonial instantiation (we however de-homogenize these two words despite their convergence – *colonialism* is a “practice”, *imperialism* is the “driver” of that particular practice). Its configuration rather points towards the creation not (just) of a EU-type common market and a democratic network, but of a hegemonic project in the region, powered by and profitable to the Russian Federation.

## 6. Conclusions

The most frequent used modalities in which the Russian decision-makers operate are an interesting combination between the traditional tools, applied since the time of the Tsarist Empire, and perfected during the Soviet period, while others are newer and considered adequate to the geo-political and geo-economic realities of the beginning of the new century: energy provision blackmailing and virtual space propaganda. In fact, the manipulation of inter-ethnic clashes and the activation of “frozen conflicts” have been used in practically all cases, while the cyber instrumentation or even direct military intervention have been resorted to at the right moments, in the right places.

The ingenuity of the Russian authorities regarding the combination of means used in various situations and their degree of sophistication cannot be overlooked. It is also important to point out that the mix of actional instruments was not a set of “spot” concerns, but expresses a robust continuity and a synergistic alignment with the strategic objectives of the country’s foreign policy. Restoring and restating the country’s role as high military-strategic and economic power is an element of continuity in the Russian representation of its own heritage and destiny, and its neo-imperial/colonial orientations are plentifully illustrated by the relations in its neighbourhood.

The attitude towards Central Asia illustrates the point and exploits the vulnerabilities of a region that despite many commonalities (in terms of

Russian interest) are affected by internal misalignments (in terms of market economy functionality, of democratic mechanism, of rule of law), as they are fragmented by geo-political/economic mismatches (with the countries in the region having mutual frustrations and inflated leadership aspirations). This landscape makes it possible for the Russian imperial strategists to find a fertile soil to exercise economic, political and cultural influences, that can be placed, without erring too much, in the range of the neocolonial tools.

The binders that make it possible to advance the “imperial” Russia-lead integration process in this region (EEU) are multiple: the USSR period materialized in infrastructure networks and economic interdependencies; there are functional logistics chains, close economic and technological complementarities and vivid human mobility flows. But far from being an argument for an integrative process designed as a counterweight to Russian influence (due to the dominant internal and external frailties in the region), it only makes it easier for Moscow to coagulate a block that accentuates *its* own power vectors (geographical size, resource pooling, human capital, industrial potential).

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