

Russia and the Rest: Permeable Sovereignty and the Former Soviet Socialist Republics

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Under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, Russia has become increasingly assertive in what it regards as its “near abroad,” meaning the other fourteen *de jure* independent states that, along with it, once constituted the Soviet Union. The use of this term (*blizhnee zarubezh'e* in Russian) has a history that predates the fall of the USSR,¹ but its meaning has assumed distinctive nuances and connotations since 1991. Specifically, it has come to concurrently denote imperial nostalgia and a desire for the restoration of great-power status, signal a largely (but not exclusively) realist orientation towards intra-regional relations, and delineate the primary geographic scope of Russia’s efforts to re-establish and maintain cultural, economic and political connections beyond its immediate borders. At the same time, the expression “near abroad” not only refers to various dimensions of hard and soft power, but also encompasses a temporally malleable understanding of Russia’s neighbors and the territories they occupy. This layered meaning is exemplified by Moscow’s attempts, on increasingly prominent display ever since Putin’s second presidential term in 2004, to define a privileged sphere of influence for itself in eastern Europe and Eurasia. It is likewise reflected, albeit differently, in the historical-civilizational justification proffered for Moscow’s post-2013 intervention in Ukraine.² Consequently, it is far too simplistic to uncritically regard Russia’s engagement with the erstwhile Soviet republics surrounding it as conclusive evidence of its neo-imperial ambitions, just as it is naïve to blithely assume that such ambitions, in one form or another, are entirely absent.

So how are we to interpret Russia’s complex and at times contradictory attitudes towards what were its peripheries during Tsarist times (and which later became integral elements of a Soviet experiment that touted a class-based “friendship of peoples”) but are now controlled, in whole or part, by their titular nationalities? No doubt, this represents an important and timely topic to address, especially as the perplexing amalgam of motivations guiding the development of the Kremlin’s policies toward the “near abroad” has changed markedly over the years, with pivot points heralded by regional developments as well as the evolution of Russia’s domestic realities. But although much has been written about Moscow’s shifting priorities with respect to the post-Soviet space, notably less attention has been devoted to how the nation-states that comprise this landscape view, and react to, Russia and its overtures.³ This is particularly the case in contexts where relations between the two

¹ See William Safire’s edifying discussion on the etymology of the term (“On Language: The Near Abroad,” *The New York Times Magazine*, May 22, 1994, pp. 16-18).

² Putin’s speech announcing the annexation of Crimea is a particularly salient example of this (“Obrashchenie Prezidenta RF Vladimira Putina (polnaya versiiia),” *Pervyi kanal*, March 18, 2014 [<https://www.1tv.ru/news/2014-03-18/46116-obraschenie-prezidenta-rf-vladimira-putina-polnaya-versiya>]).

³ By way of example, this piece is being finalized on August 9, 2020, the date of the Belarusian presidential election. In the run-up to this event, bristling over changes Moscow has implemented in how oil exports to Belarus are taxed and the perception that the Kremlin was trying to force Belarus into a closer political and economic union on unfavorable terms, embattled Belarusian dictator Aliaksandr Lukashenka publicly accused Russia and its agents of meddling in the country’s internal affairs (Andrew Higgins, “Belarus Says Russian Mercenaries Planned to Disrupt August Election,” *The New York Times*, July 29, 2020 [<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/29/world/europe/belarus-russian-mercenaries-lukashenko.html>]).

sides have not devolved into outright political violence, as occurred in Ukraine in 2014 or Georgia in 2008.⁴

The multi-faceted and diachronically contingent approaches Moscow has adopted when interacting with this region's countries and leaders, and how these have responded to them, also merit more nuanced consideration because of the sheer diversity of the post-Soviet world. For example, the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are not only physically small, but they exhibit national characteristics that plainly differentiate them from nations associated with the eastern Slavic *ethnie*. With the exception of Lithuania, they also have large populations of Russians continuing to reside within their borders, many of whom settled there after these states, which were independent polities during the interwar period, were forcibly incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1940. Finally, post-Soviet Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania all acceded early on to the European Union (EU) and NATO, anchoring them firmly in the wider organizational life of Europe. Small wonder, then, that their interactions with Russia have deviated considerably from those evinced by states like Belarus and Ukraine, which not only share strong historical and cultural ties with their larger neighbor, but are also simultaneously riven by more conflicted or otherwise indeterminate national identities and the ideational cleavages that accompany them.

This is not to imply that Belarus and Ukraine are Moscow's enthusiastic partners—clearly, this is not currently the case. But while the Baltic states resonate strongly with an alternative civilizational project (in the form of Europe and, specifically, the EU) as well as an alternative political project (in the form of the West and its attendant institutions), the remaining, now ostensibly sovereign states of the former Soviet Union are considerably more divided over the extent to which Russia signifies an attractive geopolitical or civilizational beacon. But even within this latter subset meaningful differences are evinced: the predominantly Muslim and non-Slavic states of the Caucasus or Central Asia may be allied to various extents with Russia, but they do not share the same affective affinities that exist between Russians and their co-religionists in Georgia; Georgians and Russians, in turn, are incapable of claiming the sort of filial bonds that purportedly unite the peoples of Belarus, Russia and Ukraine. All of this gives Moscow's connection to the “near abroad” a nested character, with attraction and belongingness to what is often referred to as the “Russian world” (*Russkii mir*)—a concept closely related to, but not synonymous with, the former—radiating outward from the so-called “Slavic core” to more incrementally encompass other nearby polities that exhibit significant economic and strategic, if not ethno-religious, ties to Russia.

In light of these attitudinal disparities, which reflect the lingering vestiges of Tsarist and Soviet colonialism, and the fact that present-day Russia is not only the post-Soviet world's economic engine but also its most formidable military power, we propose treating the sovereignty of those states that lie within the “near abroad” not as absolute but rather relational, in the sense that its exercise is significantly predicated on the relationship that exists between the state in question and the regional

⁴ We have contributed to this latter discussion: Tomasz Stępniewski and George Soroka (eds.), *Ukraine After Maidan: Revisiting Domestic and Regional Security* (Stuttgart: ibidem, 2018); Tomasz Stępniewski, “The European Union and Eastern Partnership: Crises and Strategic Assessment,” *Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej* 14.5 (2016); and Tomasz Stępniewski, “The Eastern Policy of the European Union: The Role of Poland,” *POLITEJA* 41 (2016).

hegemon (Russia) at any given point in time. Conceptualizing sovereignty in this manner permits us to focus analytic efforts on the extent to which, and the ways in which, it is permeable to Moscow's influence and interference. Of course, positing permeability does not presuppose that these only function in one direction. In reality, all states are permeated by outside forces to greater or lesser degrees, either as a consequence of their relative strength in the world system or the international treaties and alliances they enter into and the resultant obligations that they incur. Nonetheless, the objective magnitude and directionality of these effects, when assessing Russia against other post-Soviet states, overwhelmingly inclines towards the former.⁵ It is worth underscoring that *permeate* is a verb of motion, one that implies an external power exercising agency over, or otherwise affecting, the affairs of another polity. Sometimes this takes place in the presence of informed consent, as when states voluntarily cede a measure of autonomy to join the supranational EU; in other instances, however, it comes about as the result of an involuntary relinquishment of some measure of sovereignty.

The articles contained in this special section take up these themes in stepwise fashion. Yuval Weber, in examining why almost seven years after its inception the Russo-Ukrainian conflict continues to fester with no resolution in sight, engages with the status-seeking imperative of Putin's Russia, wherein the baseline comparison being made is to the great-power days of the Soviet Union. In discussing what the loss of Ukraine from Russia's political orbit might portend for Putin domestically, as well as how it would affect Russia's standing in the international order, Weber addresses the first point in the above-noted tripartite typology of how Russia regards the "near abroad." Meanwhile, Boris Barkanov focuses on the second in surveying Russia's foreign affairs through the gaze of Sergei Karaganov, a prominent scholar and strategist who is also a noted realist. Finally, Jeanne Wilson takes up the third in investigating the goals and limitations of Russia's attempts to project soft power in Azerbaijan, an effort she describes as "largely Soviet style in its orientation with a few more contemporary updates, most notably in the realm of the media." However, although these articles utilize diverse case studies to assess what the designation "near abroad" implies, they all share a common emphasis on elucidating not only why the sovereignty of Russia's post-Soviet neighbors has been permeated by Moscow, but also how, and to what degree, this has been achieved.

Specifically, Weber argues that "Russia's structural dissatisfaction with the international order emerged from the ambiguous and overlapping endings to the Cold War in 1989 and to the USSR in 1991." Russia wanted, in other words, to be regarded as a valuable partner by the United States and the West more generally, but the fall of the Soviet Union brought about a loss of global authority and attendant status, causing it to be treated as a middling regional power instead. This contravened the express goals of the Soviet Union's last leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, and post-Soviet Russia's first President, Boris Yeltsin, both of whom wanted to retain great-power status while also undertaking reforms and benefiting from Western aid. Additionally, they desired the United States' assistance in redefining the USSR's, and later Russia's, place in the international system, highlighting what Weber

⁵ An imperfect but still apt analogy: the Baltic states have a quite limited impact on the EU, but find themselves thoroughly permeated by its manifold directives, statutes, and regulations.

regards as the insufficiency of theoretical approaches such as realism and constructivism to fully explain the logic evinced by Moscow.

In particular, Weber focuses on the concept of hierarchy in international relations and the effect it has on domestic politics, along with the role internal factors play in determining Russia's relations with the "near abroad" states (i.e., "second image" and "second image-reversed" scenarios).⁶ As he observes, Russia and Ukraine "went to war because the mere potential for Ukraine to exercise sovereignty outside of parameters set by Russia threatened not only Russia's grand strategy for revising the post-Soviet international order, but also President Vladimir Putin's domestic 'power vertical' system of governance." In this scenario, Putin at a minimum required that Ukraine not side with the EU, and ideally join the Kremlin-orchestrated Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), in order to maintain his legitimacy at home along with Russia's regional standing and security.

Barkanov, meanwhile, examines Karaganov's policy proclivities and their development over time through the lens of self-categorization theory (SCT), positing this as a proxy for understanding the evolution of Russia's international relations under Putin.⁷ Central to his assessment is the realization that Russian elites believe their country belongs, or rather *should* belong, to a rarified club of major powers operating in a multipolar world. Given this, Karaganov is mainly concerned with Russia's international standing relative to the United States and Europe, though he does acknowledge the ways in which this dynamic intrudes upon the post-Soviet region as well. This perspective views the stances Russia adopts relative to the former Soviet states as depending meaningfully on the relations it enjoys with its perceived "rightful" peer-group, cross-border dynamics in its immediate neighborhood being, in significant measure, a reflection of broader geopolitical rivalries and their localization rather than bilateral relations between Moscow and other post-Soviet states as such. Barkanov explains it thus: "almost any significant foreign policy goal Russia pursues in its 'near abroad' implicates the USA and Europe one way or another." In this respect, Russia's relations with the "near abroad" may be conceptualized as a peculiar instance of Waltz's second image, in that the motivation for Moscow's actions in this region often comes at one level of remove from the actual state-to-state interactions that instigate them.

In stressing the realism underpinning Karaganov's views (which match many of the policies adopted by Moscow) and illustrating how Russia's relations with a global hegemon like the United States may affect its attitudes towards regional politics, Barkanov relies on the example of Ukraine. This choice is especially pertinent, as post-Maidan Ukraine has become a proxy battleground for the contending geopolitical and even civilizational visions of Russia and the West. Moreover, as many pundits and scholars have noted, retaining an effective measure of control over Ukraine is a critical component

⁶ On the former, see Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War* (New York: Columbia UP [rev. ed.], 2001); on the latter, consult Peter Gourevitch, "The Second Image Reversed: The International Sources of Domestic Politics," *International Organization* 32.4 (Autumn 1978): 881-912.

⁷ As SCT posits individuals have pre-formed conceptions of what constitutes an in-group and an out-group, Barkanov writes that "[f]or Karaganov, the schema element associated with the realist in-group is realpolitik rationality: behavior oriented toward promoting state security interests, even when this is unprincipled or unethical."

of Moscow's strategy to regain the great-power status that was lost when the Soviet Union dissolved. It is consequently not surprising that, in Karaganov's estimation, the Association Agreement the EU offered to Kyiv in the run-up to the Maidan protests was merely a prelude to NATO enlargement.

Assessing the "near abroad" from a markedly different perspective, Wilson examines Russia's soft power strategy towards Azerbaijan, a country where Russian efforts to exert hard power have proved less-than-successful. Azerbaijan is a country known for pursuing a balanced foreign policy; being a Turkic people, Azerbaijanis exhibit closer ties to Turkey than Russia. Therefore, in spite of sharing an intertwined history, Russia's cultural appeal is rather limited in Azerbaijan. This also holds true for its "compatriot policy," which focuses on retaining affective ties to ethnic Russians and other Russophones living abroad, as well as the concept of the Russian world, to which Azerbaijan only belongs in a tangential sense. Eurasianism likewise does not hold much attraction, as it is predicated on a leading role for Russia. Besides, as Wilson contends, Azerbaijanis "largely perceive Russia to be Armenia's patron and protector in the ongoing Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict over Karabakh." This appearance of ethnic favoritism, coupled with the systematic discrimination Azerbaijanis suffered in the USSR and memories of the violence that took place in Baku during January 1990, when Soviet forces killed more than a hundred civilians, all conspire to attenuate Russia's appeal.

However, Russian soft power resources in Azerbaijan are constrained not only by the circumscribed resonance of Russia's cultural capital and historical narrative, but also the heavy-handed fashion in which Moscow has sought to deploy them. Wilson emphasizes that, unlike in Joseph Nye's original conceptualization of soft power, where it was seen as being diffuse and "generated by resources that are beyond the ability of the state to control," the Kremlin's approach has been decidedly state-led and top-down in its implementation, reflecting its fear of an independent civil society. What this means is that Russia's already meager ability to exercise soft power in Azerbaijan is disproportionately predicated on the remittance-generating capabilities of the latter's economic migrants and the expanded educational-exchange opportunities Moscow has instituted in recent years.⁸ Moreover, Russia has real credibility and commitment problems when it comes to utilizing proverbial carrots in lieu of sticks, with Wilson contending that its "soft power strategy... is continuously undermined by Russia's hard power activities."

Having come full circle, we may now ask the question: to what extent is the Kremlin pursuing a neo-imperialist strategy in the region? The answer, as the authors surveyed here seem to imply, hinges on how exactly one defines imperialism and its scope. With the notable exception of the annexation of Crimea—arguably a special case given the majority of the peninsula's residents are ethnic Russians, a legacy of Soviet resettlement patterns and Stalin's deportation of the native Tatar population during World War II—Moscow does not seem to exhibit much appetite for restoring direct control over any of the constituent states of the former Soviet Union. For one thing, attempting to do so would

⁸ Proving that what is old is often new again, student exchanges were a prominent component of the Soviet Union's soft power strategy (Isabelle DeSisto, "Expectations Versus Reality: Cuban Exchange Students' Encounters with Late Soviet Socialism," unpublished manuscript, 2020).

represent a tremendously costly exercise that, even if it did not lead to war, would certainly further reify Russia's pariah status in the West; for another, it would also make Putin's government, which routinely castigates the United States and its allies for not respecting the sovereignty of states it finds fault with, appear highly hypocritical. However, this is not to say that Moscow will not pursue increasing its regional influence and interference in other ways, either for its own strategic advantage or to spoil the expansion plans of others (e.g., EU, NATO). Whether or not we should regard this as neo-imperialism in a virtual or symbolic sense is a matter of semantics. But while Russia does not seem to be pursuing the restoration of an actual empire, it most assuredly is striving to bolster its hegemonic status in the region. Efforts to do so range from the Kremlin's recently revived interest in **furthering** political and economic integration with Belarus, to its willingness to preserve the stalemated status quo in the Donbas,⁹ to its promotion of the Eurasian Economic Union. Of course, soft power projection also needs to be included in this list, particularly when it is directed at Russophones and Orthodox co-religionists.¹⁰

None of these actions on the part of Russia are unexpected. After 1991 borders changed suddenly, making sovereign states even where none had previously existed. But changing how cartographic boundaries are drawn does not necessarily alter the mental maps that individuals carry around with them, nor the geopolitical aspirations associated with these. Recall of a multi-national Soviet Union, and its Tsarist predecessor, tempers the ability of Russia's political elites to ascribe full independence to the successor states of empire, assuring that Moscow will continue to probe the permeability of their sovereignty. Concurrently, constant reminders that Russia is no longer a major player on the world stage, but arguably a declining power, also bolster its attempts to exert hegemony over the "near abroad," as they are inherently connected to the Kremlin's aspirational seeking after status. After all, there is no such thing as a global power that is not, first and foremost, a regional power.

⁹ This should not surprise us, as there is relatively little that is novel in the Russian foreign-policy playbook. What occurred in Crimea and the Donbas was foreshadowed by Abkhazia and South Ossetia, just as those crises were foreshadowed by Transnistria.

¹⁰ As Wilson explains, it is precisely in those states that are culturally and historically perceived to be closest to Russia that it has the most incentive (and ability) to interfere.