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## THIRTY YEARS OF POST-SOVIETISM: an unfinished decolonisation

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**The Kremlin has interpreted EU enlargement as a threat to its natural interests ever since the European Neighbourhood Policy was launched in 2004.**

**This explains why it is impossible for the Kremlin to understand why other states from its extinct orbit might autonomously aspire to decide their own future and look towards the European Union without covert external manoeuvring pushing them to do so.**

**The militarisation of the post-Soviet space is one of the most disturbing situations since the dissolution of the USSR and a clear risk to European security**

**Even the official statistics show that the pace of integration remains sluggish. All Kremlin policy demonstrates that it values the integration of the post-Soviet space more for geopolitical than economic reasons.**

**Thirty years on, the post-Soviet space remains in a process of decolonisation.**

**U**pon the USSR's demise in December 1991 the formerly federated republics of the Soviet Union became independent states, in name at least. The links between these new subjects of international law had to be rebuilt on top of the previous relations between the republics in the Soviet system. Before, everyone knew who was in charge – the Communist Party was the sole and central political actor – and they knew how to avoid problems and coexist without drawing interference. Starting from that premise, it was abundantly clear to everyone – state officials and people (I deliberately avoid using the concept of citizens) – that the USSR was a federation, but one with a single central point (Moscow), and that all the peoples within it were equal, except the Slavs, who were a bit more equal than most, and the Russians, who were above everyone else.

The asymmetry that existed between them in the Soviet period was clearly reflected in the correlation of forces that took hold later. Once Soviet clarity disappeared, relations between the republics – much less fraternal than official propaganda made out – became more complex as they developed into relations between sovereign states that were replete with more or less buried tensions and among whom one actor continued to dominate, alone: Russia. In this regional framework, at once both new and old, national aspirations grew that had already manifested themselves in the past (e.g. in the Baltics,<sup>1</sup> Ukraine, Armenia and Georgia) and new ones surfaced, as in Central Asia.

1. We will leave the Baltic states out of this analysis because for various reasons they managed to solve the post-Soviet conundrum very early on.

Russia has always taken for granted its hegemonic role in the space left by the USSR and the legitimacy of its interests there. Hence, Moscow does not speak of emerging power but rather of restoring what should never have ceased to exist but which collapsed because of Westerners. As the highly influential Russian analyst Sergei Karaganov (2014) pointed out after the annexation of Crimea, Western strategy “rests on misunderstanding and miscalculation. The misunderstanding is that this is, at root, a stand-off over Ukraine. To Russians, it is something far more important: a struggle to stop others expanding their sphere of control into territories they believe are vital to Russia’s survival”.

Hence, the Kremlin has interpreted European Union enlargement as a threat to its *natural* interests ever since the European Neighbourhood Policy was launched

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in 2004. The same convenient logic explains why it is impossible for the Kremlin to understand why other states from its extinct orbit might autonomously aspire to decide their own future and look towards the European Union without covert external manoeuvring pushing them to do so. Such manoeuvring, the Kremlin says, was behind the so-called colour revolutions in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan in the early 2000s and in Ukraine again with Euromaidan in 2014. It should come as no surprise then that based on this principle Moscow would revive and refine the old tool of disinformation to high degrees of sophistication and achieve unprecedented levels of interference in third countries, particularly the European Union and the United States.

### Frozen conflicts and hot conflicts

Time passing and a lack of resolution led the conflicts in Transnistria and Nagorno-Karabakh in the late eighties and early nineties to be the first to be called “frozen conflicts”. The same term was later applied to South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2008. The Russian annexation of Crimea in February–March 2014 and the hybrid war in the occupied part of the Donbas (Donetsk and Luhansk) have brought the existence of these four conflicts back into focus.

The Kremlin’s main argument for its interventions in the former Soviet space is the presence of Russian minorities in all these new states. Some 25 million ethnic Russians were indeed left outside Russian territory and became citizens of other countries after the USSR’s

dissolution. Moscow designates all Russophones as compatriots. This ambiguous definition permits a leap to be made from the wording of article 61.2 of the constitution (“The Russian Federation shall guarantee its citizens protection and patronage abroad”) to the definition used by the Russian Foreign Policy Concept (2013), according to which Russia must “ensure comprehensive, effective protection of the rights and legitimate interests of Russian citizens and compatriots residing abroad”. According to this logic, Russia has the right to protect its compatriots wherever they may be – in other words to intervene, even militarily. As part of this, Moscow has developed what some experts call passportisation (Klein, 2019), a policy of granting Russian passports with the greatest of ease to all Russians and non-Russians (Abkhazians and Ossetians, for example) who want them despite being citizens of other states. In this way, Moscow increases the number of compatriots to defend whenever it deems it appropriate.

As for Ukraine, Russia says it respects its territorial integrity and sovereignty but at the same time considers them to be one people who cannot be separated except by artificial means. This partly explains why Moscow does not perceive its relationship with Ukraine only as a foreign policy issue and wraps it in an essentialist narrative. The Kremlin is also very interested in convincing domestic and international audiences that Russia has no conflict with Ukraine and what is happening in the occupied part of the Donbas is an internal conflict between Ukrainians, in other words, a civil war.

However, after evaluating the facts, a ruling by the International Criminal Court (ICC, 2016) rejected this biased viewpoint, concluding that the war in eastern Ukraine is “an international armed conflict between Ukraine and the Russian Federation”. As for Crimea, in March 2014 the United Nations adopted a resolution (GA/11493) calling upon states not to recognise the annexation with 100 votes in favour, 11 against and 58 abstentions.<sup>2</sup> In a highly significant gesture, even Russia’s two most important partners, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, abstained from recognising the annexation. The Crimean Tatars, the real historical inhabitants of the peninsula, are another group who do not support the annexation and have thus become a favourite target for repression by the local authorities.

The Minsk agreements negotiated between Ukraine, Russia, France and Germany in 2015 over the cessation of hostilities in the Donbas made it possible

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2. The 11 countries that voted against were: Armenia, Belarus, Bolivia, North Korea, Cuba, Nicaragua, Russia, Syria, Sudan, Venezuela and Zimbabwe. Among the abstentions were Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, as well as China and India.

to reach a state of “neither war nor peace”. But there is no hope of them succeeding because Russia’s is not a neutral presence. Not only does it arm and support the insurgents financially, it also supplies it with irregular fighters and has on at least two occasions provided the support of its regular armed forces. Unsurprisingly, then, the ceasefire is continually breached. The Kremlin could bring the military confrontation to an end, but it is in Moscow’s interests to keep Kiev busy with the war effort rather than concentrating on its primordial task of democratically reforming its system and proving that this is possible outside the Russian orbit. It is a situation without parallel on European soil since the Second World War: a territory illegally annexed *manu militari* by a third state and a front that has been ongoing for over seven years and has claimed some 13,000 fatalities and displaced 1.5 million.

The militarisation of the post-Soviet space is thus one of the most disturbing situations since the dissolution of the USSR and a clear risk to European security. Logically, the central actor in this situation is Russia. And while Azerbaijan and Armenia also share responsibility neither would have reached their current levels of military capacity without Moscow’s acquiescence. Yerevan has repeatedly complained about the sale of arms to Azerbaijan by a government (the Russian) that is meant to be a friend and institutional partner, but in vain: a SIPRI study (Wezeman, 2015) shows that 85% of the weapons purchased by Baku between 2005 and 2014 came from Russia.

Pride in its regained military capacity is an inherent part of how Russia understands power, and is prized above economic and social development: “Our country is finding its place. Compare the Soviet armed forces, lumbering and expensive, with the nimble military of modern Russia [...] Russia will not yield. This has become a matter of our nation’s life or death” (Karaganov, 2014).

### **Dynamics of integration ... or marriages of convenience?**

The creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in December 1991 provided the necessary legal framework to manage relations between the new sovereign states. Of the 12 original members (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia in 1993, Moldova, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Ukraine) nine remain: Georgia, Ukraine and Turkmenistan having *de jure* or *de facto* left at different times. But this administrative framework – supplemented in 1992

by the Collective Security Treaty – has failed to meet Moscow’s expectations or those of its other members. Once the initial shock of disintegration passed the smaller states, particularly in Central Asia, began to appreciate their sovereignty and to demonstrate their discontent in ways that varied in their openness and directness but were nevertheless quite clear. From the year 2000 onwards, Putin’s arrival in power brought an active policy of reintegration of the post-Soviet space that culminated in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) created in May 2014 by Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, and which Armenia and Kyrgyzstan joined a year later.<sup>3</sup>

This project, much like the entire integration dynamic, is afflicted by one particular structural problem: Russia’s outsized influence at all levels (political, economic, military, energy, elites, etc.) compared to its

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partners, even the better-resourced like Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan. They may not all show it publicly in the same way, but all Russia’s partners are aware of something familiar: the Russian will to dominate by imposing the leadership role it considers natural. The Kremlin’s use of the Russian minorities present in all these countries has not gone unnoticed and the annexation of Crimea has made it abundantly clear how far Moscow is willing to go. That is why Kazakhstan and Belarus, Russia’s main allies, have resisted the further integration Russia would like, which would go beyond the merely economic to encompass a political settlement with sovereignty transfers in the manner of the EU.

The Eurasian Economic Union is President Putin’s flagship project. With it, he seeks to demonstrate that Russia can lead a regional project capable – he believes – of becoming a global actor situated between the European Union and China. All its members have the same voting power, but Russia’s outsize presence is overwhelming: it alone accounts for 86% of the group’s GDP (Maufrais, 2017). The institutional design is mainly inspired by the European Union but in practice it is a far cry from true cooperation between partners with a genuine balance of national interests.

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3. This text analyses the organisations formed only of post-Soviet states, meaning that we do not address the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, India and Pakistan), which is highly important in the Kremlin’s view.

Five years on, even the official statistics show that the pace of integration remain sluggish (CISSTAT, 2020). Some studies (Bhutia, 2019) even indicate that trade between EAEU members was higher before the free trade bloc existed: in 2018, for example, trade with Russia accounted for 96.9% of all trade within the Eurasian Economic Union while trade between the four smaller countries made up the remaining 3.1%. Meanwhile, the EU and China remain the main trading partners of the most economically powerful members (Russia, Kazakhstan and, in part, Azerbaijan, thanks to its gas). Indeed, EAEU membership is only of real economic importance to the weaker members (Belarus, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan), especially when it comes to meeting their energy needs.

The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) was created in May 1992 to provide the new states with an institutional framework that could ensure collective security. The current members are Armenia, Belarus, the Russian Federation, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Ukraine, Moldova and Turkmenistan have always remained outside, while Azerbaijan and Georgia left in 1999, followed by Uzbekistan in 2012. With little risk of military aggression by a third state – Russia’s perennial sense of being threatened by NATO aside – the main activity is directed at the fights against drug trafficking, organised crime and terrorism. In addition to hosting military exercises and training, the CSTO is especially useful for collaboration in the arms trade.

All Kremlin policy demonstrates that it values the integration of the post-Soviet space more for geopolitical than economic reasons (Dragneva, 2018). For poorer partners, on the other hand, like Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Belarus and Armenia, it is an opportunity to send immigrants to Russia and receive Russian investment. However, Crimea has had one undoubtedly unwanted consequence for the Kremlin – the consolidation of two ideas in the minds of Russia’s EAEU partners: not to deepen the political side of integration and as far as possible to reduce dependence on Russia by developing relations with the European Union and China.

### **In conclusion, when will this recycling of the old come to an end?**

Any expectation of change and hopes that the collapse of the Soviet system would bring democratisation have above all been undermined by the old ways of doing politics being recycled, supported by the old mechanisms of collusion and corruption. In this setting – of a dramatic lack of even a minimal democratic political culture – the most prominent reformers were pushed aside, when they weren’t being persecuted or physically eliminated. Except in Ukraine and Georgia, most people returned to the familiar ground

of conformity and resignation. Meanwhile, regional dynamics remain subordinate to Moscow’s interests. Thirty years on, the post-Soviet space remains in a process of decolonisation.

Autocrats and oligarchs, drawn to a greater or lesser degree from the ranks of the Soviet elites, control most of the independent states and stateless secessionist regions. In this context, it is unlikely that the pandemic will prove to be a spur towards improvement. On the contrary, many of these leaders will take advantage of it to eliminate irritating opponents or journalists. If COVID-19 risks jeopardising their survival in power by exposing their regimes’ serious shortcomings none will have any incentive to manage the crisis by prioritising their people’s well-being. The Belarusian president’s display of virility at an ice hockey game with the pandemic in full flow is one caricature of that reality.

As the Azeri analyst Leila Alieva (Alieva, 2019) points out, Putin considers that he “is ‘copying’ the West by getting involved in various geographic areas; to either establish Russia’s military presence, help incumbent regimes, use secessionist conflicts to preserve Russia’s influence ... or dragging states, where possible, into the Russia-led regional organisations”. This is true. The Kremlin is always arguing that the European Union manoeuvres and exerts pressure on any of its neighbours that make policy decisions that are independent of Russia (e.g. Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova for a few years). But let’s compare: while the broad spectrum of Russian retaliation towards its wayward ex-Soviet neighbours ranges from protracted trade blockades and frozen conflicts to military occupation, can anyone imagine the EU or its most important member, Germany, deploying comparable policies against, for example, the UK in revenge for Brexit?

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