PONARS Eurasia
NEW APPROACHES TO RESEARCH AND SECURITY IN EURASIA

Russia and Its Two "Shared Neighborhoods"

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The term "shared neighborhood" is applied when a nation or a group of nations is geographically located between disproportionally larger states, relations with which are critically important for the smaller nations. The major powers are also, for various reasons, fixated on interacting with the smaller in-between nations. Importantly, the two-level game of interactions between the major powers and smaller nations is strongly conditioned by the status and dynamics of relations between the major powers themselves. Presumably, it is a shared neighborhood that can cause the most acute international affairs disagreements and be a battlefield in the case of conflicting relations between powers. In post-Soviet Eurasia, the assorted interests of the major powers often and directly collide over the neighborhood. Russia, thanks to its size, geographical location, and imperial past, has two such primary shared neighborhoods at once: its western neighborhood—Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, and partly the Caucasus—predominantly shared with the European Union, and it has its eastern neighborhood—the five Central Asian countries—shared with China.

For China and the EU, relations with the countries they "share" with Russia are not among the priorities of their foreign policy. Conversely, for Russia, the post-Soviet space is the most important area of its foreign policy. Generally, Moscow's priority is to limit the influence of major powers on its post-Soviet neighbors, but this priority is practically unattainable in the case of China or the EU. The interests of Russia and China in the shared region of Central Asia overlap since both are interested in maintaining undemocratic stability. Thus, it is possible for Russia to informally separate spheres of influence and maintain a balance with China (likely to shift in China's favor over time). Achieving a balance regarding the shared neighborhood with the EU and limiting the efforts of European actors to democratize the countries of the neighborhood is much more challenging. Russia's western shared neighborhood will remain a region of fierce competition, and containment of the European democratizing influence will continue to demand a disproportionate amount of resources from Russia.

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Russia in Post-Soviet Eurasia

According to the Russian Council on Foreign and Defense Policy: "most post-Soviet countries could not create a modern state, resistant to destructive external and internal influences. … Sovereign status of a nation with which Russia borders is a part of a political game between the European Union, the United States, China, and Russia."

Indeed, Russian politicians and observers of Russian politics agree that leadership in Eurasia must be a priority for *any* Russian foreign policy strategy. The significance of Eurasia has been acknowledged many times by President Vladimir Putin once he came to power. For example, in 2012, in his (third) inaugural speech, he stated that "our prospects as a country and nation depend on us today and on our real achievements in building a new economy and developing modern living standards, on our efforts to look after our people and support our families, on our determination in developing our vast expanses from the Baltic to the Pacific, and on our ability to become a leader and center of gravity for the whole of Eurasia."

However, Russian influence in the post-Soviet region has been steadily declining, albeit at a different rate in different sub-regions and sectors. This was part of the multidimensional disintegration of the post-Soviet space. First, the level of economic interconnectedness with other post-Soviet countries decreases. The share of intra-CIS trade in Russia's external trade demonstrates a steady downward trend: from around 24 percent in 1994 to under 15 percent in 2010 and only 12.5 percent in 2017.

Also, the post-Soviet period was marked by numerous though unsuccessful attempts to organize the space around Russia through regional integration projects. By some accounts, no state has initiated as many inter-governmental treaties as has Russia across various policy areas—from economy to energy and security. "Treaty activism has been at the heart of Russian efforts to restructure its relations with FSU members," according to professor Michael Slobodchikoff. Numerous regional organizations were initiated by Russia, and all of them shared one distinctive feature—they provided a very limited level of authority delegation to intergovernmental institutions. Similarly, the most recent project—the Eurasian Economic Union— has not become the center of power in Eurasia that Moscow had hoped would emerge. Even Belarus firmly resists Russia's pressure toward "forceful integration." Post-Soviet nations' dependence on Russia is declining in all important areas: economy and mutual trade, foreign policies and security, culture and media, and the use of the Russian language.

While China still recognizes the special role of Russia in post-Soviet Eurasia, Russia is not recognized anymore by the West as a regional leader through which other external powers should build their relations with the countries of the region. Russia is hardly viewed as the *only* regional leader by post-Soviet nations as well.

The Russian Premises for Dealing With "Shared Neighborhoods"

Russia, China, and the EU have different preferences regarding the shared neighborhood states, though in all cases, the rationale for building relations with the neighborhood countries is not economic. The Russian leadership is predominantly moved by considerations of domination and control, the EU by considerations of security, while for China, the territories of Central Asian countries are a platform for promoting its ambitious economic projects.

In both "shared neighborhoods," Russia's influence is principally limited; there is no country for which Russia could achieve a situation whereby the former would have no other choice but to follow the latter. This means that in both shared regions, Russia needs actually to *share* the neighborhoods with China and the EU, trying to negotiate with them and establish a sustainable balance regarding smaller in-between nations formally or informally.

Generally, Moscow would prefer non-democratization in the post-Soviet space and therefore tries to limit as much as possible the "democratizing" influence from neighboring countries on itself. The threat of such "destructive" influence does exist from the neighborhood shared with the EU (and directly from the EU, too) but is absent from Central Asia, making the region easier for Moscow to deal with.

Russia and China in Central Asia

Being, like Russia, an authoritarian state, China should be a convenient partner for Russia, and its place in Russian foreign policy increased dramatically after 2014 and the imposition of Western sanctions. However, experts emphasize a growing asymmetry between Russia and China. For instance, Alexander Gabuev at the Carnegie Moscow Center argues that "the basic trend is one of Russia and China moving toward a deeper asymmetrical interdependence, with Beijing enjoying a far stronger position." In professor David Lewis's opinion, while Russia presents the EAEU and the Belt and Road Initiative as integration projects of equivalent significance, their rhetoric cannot disguise the growing gap between China's and Russia's economic power. In the *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, several authors argue that although Russia is retaining the prevailing role in the security domain, China is catching up with Russia in various economic indices, notably generated by the Belt and Road Initiative.

It is important that this growing asymmetry seems not to be a problem regarding the Russia-Chinese shared neighborhood in Central Asia. The countries of Central Asia do not pose any democratization threat. In addition, China is generally indifferent to Russian integration efforts; it has its own pragmatic interests regarding this region that are not in conflict with those of Russia. China needs stability in the region to realize its ambitious economic projects. Russia may thus well pursue its own strategic interests in Central Asia,

being China's un-official "junior partner." Existing and emerging constraints on Russian policy are not related to China but rather to the internal political dynamics of Central Asian countries themselves.

Russia and the EU

The situation in the shared neighborhood with the EU is principally different. This region is a real "battlefield" between Russia and the West. Unlike China, the EU is the most inconvenient partner for Russia. It is the home of "color revolutions," popular protests, discontent, and democratization. Also, the EU has expanded to the east to integrate small countries, which, had the situation been different, could themselves have been inside rather than outside the shared neighborhood with Russia.

The evidence that the Russian leadership takes these threats coming from the West extremely seriously is Russia's National Security Strategy (the revised version of this document was approved by Putin on July 2, 2021). The document lists *inter alia* the following national priorities of Russia: "development of safe information security, protection of Russian society from destructive information-psychological influence," and "strengthening of Russian traditional spiritual and moral values, the preservation of the cultural and historical heritage of the Russian people." Regarding these priorities, scholars have pointed at the emergence of a new media strategy, what professors Vera Tolz and Yuri Teper call "agitainment," a highly ideological coverage of political events that is presented in the most appealing way, being able to engage various viewers. The presentation of Ukraine on Russian television, which has remained the most popular story on political talk shows in recent years, is the best illustration of this "agitainment." It is worth adding here that for Russian audiences, primarily those in Moscow and St. Petersburg, the post-Soviet region that Russia shares with the EU (especially Ukraine) arouses incomparably more interest than the countries of Central Asia.

In the shared EU neighborhood, where Russia needs to keep Belarus and Armenia "inside" and Ukraine down, Russia has initiated a concerted effort consisting of military aggression, proxy war, and systems of disinformation. One of the elements of Russian policy vis-à-vis this region is to create and maintain instability through frozen conflicts and other mechanisms of destabilization, primarily aimed at Ukraine.

Russia does not object to the development of pure economic relations between these "conflicted" countries and EU member-states. Its main concerns regarding EU involvement in the neighborhood are its democracy promotion and NATO expansion. Thus, theoretically, if the EU could make a credible commitment that it would change its approach entirely and not encourage political reform in these countries, the friction could be resolved. However, there is no real mechanism for such commitment. For its part, the Eastern Partnership initiative is unwieldy with has too many state and non-state European political actors and elites.

Conclusions

For Russia, the post-Soviet space will remain the most important direction of its foreign policy. However, Russian influence is objectively constrained in both its shared neighborhoods. These constraints manifest themselves in different ways regarding shared neighborhoods with China and with the EU. Generally, countries in the shared neighborhood with China create incomparably fewer problems for the Russian leadership than do the countries in the shared neighborhood with the EU. Formal and informal arrangements on the division of spheres of influence in the shared neighborhood are possible with China, although perhaps not on the most favorable terms for Russia. On the other hand, for Russia, achieving a balance regarding the shared neighborhood with the EU and limiting the efforts of European actors to democratize these countries is principally impossible. It is from this region that threats to Russia emanate, the fight against which will require more and more resources, especially informational.

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