

# Legacy and Responsibility in the Post-Soviet Space

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Two main discourses are currently used to analyze relations between Russia and the other post-Soviet states. The two approaches, post-colonial and post-ideological, underlie most analyses of Russian policies in Eurasia and help establish the conceptual frameworks for Western policies toward post-Soviet states and other countries of the former socialist bloc. These two discourses are intertwined. They are also intentionally or unintentionally reflected in the national political discourses of Russia's post-Soviet neighbors.

This paper focuses on the more prominent *post-colonial* discourse. This is based on a perception of the Soviet Union as an empire, the successor of the Russian Empire. This discourse holds Russian policies in post-Soviet Eurasia to be a form of neo-colonialism. Such a frame, however, raises a basic methodological question: what should be considered the colonies of the Soviet Union and Russia? All former Soviet republics? Or are Ukraine and Belarus exceptions as culturally and historically similar territories? Should the ex-socialist states of Central and Eastern Europe be considered colonies or semi-colonies? Furthermore, post- and neo-colonial approaches might even be seen as flattering to Russia, as they affirm the latter's role as regional leader and as a real, not only legal, successor to the USSR (even if at the official level Russia denies neo-imperial ambitions).

Such ambiguities help explain why classic post-colonial theories are rarely applied to the post-Soviet space. Parallels for creating an explanatory model are available. These include both the European colonial experience and the national guilt recovery strategies of Axis powers after World War II. Both sets of cases involve national self-blame and sincere repentance, even if they differ in their specifics. Twentieth-century de-colonization was partly a result of the conscious efforts of metropolitan centers, while the states defeated in World War II had to admit their guilt under international pressure. The logic of de-colonization and post-colonial guilt led to the development of aid programs to former colonies bolstered by modernization theory. De-

Nazification and similar processes in other defeated states involved shifts of ideology and changes in political elites. Post-Soviet Russia had neither.

### **Political and Ideological Account of the Past: Who is to be Blamed?**

At the level of popular and political perceptions, it is difficult to divorce Soviet-era social stability from ideology. The extent to which relative welfare and stability resulted from the planned economy or were built only at the expense of millions of victims of authoritarianism is still not entirely clear. As there is no definitive answer to the question, in the post-Soviet states there is a temptation to assess the Soviet legacy in an entirely negative light. This is closer to the logic of analyzing German and Japanese regimes after World War II than to the logic of the colonial experience of European powers.

What often results is a politics of guilt. To take one leading example, in their disputes with Russia the Baltic states present themselves as victims of the Soviet regime. They wait for Russia to make the first step at reconciliation by acknowledging its imperial guilt. The unwillingness of Russia to do so is a consequence of Russians' own tendency toward self-victimization. Self-blame was not part of the Russian political discourse in the 1990s because Moscow felt that it was a (self-)liberator and victim of the regime, not a former suppressor. When the Baltic states or Ukraine blame Russia for the Soviet legacy, Russians are offended because they also suffered from the abuses of the Soviet regime.

Russian language minority issues in the post-Soviet states (most salient in the Baltic states and Ukraine) are a case of reverse discrimination resulting from the nation-building strategies of post-Soviet states that opted for an ethnocentric approach as the easiest and fastest way of self-determination. For federal Russia, by comparison, it would have been politically suicidal to adopt an ethnocentric approach, and so it was left to adopt a much more complex civic strategy of nation-building.

Russians are offended by the treatment of Russian-language minorities in other post-Soviet states not because they fundamentally question the ethnocentric approach, but because the basis for post-colonial reverse discrimination is unwarranted. Colonial history is typically accompanied by a discourse of civilization vs. barbarism that is based on ethnic discrimination. In the Soviet Union, however, the goal of creating a Soviet nation based on class identity excluded (at least at the level of ideology) any grounds for ethnic discrimination. Titular nations in the republics were always represented in local political structures, and their national cultures were supported. Linguistic discrimination in post-Soviet states, however, now leads to discrimination in political and educational spheres. This is perceived in Russia as a response that aims at the wrong target.

In the end, the real cause of discrimination against Russian-speaking populations in post-Soviet states is a desire to reestablish historic justice. However, the former metropolitan center no longer exists at the political level, and the Russian Federation presents itself also as a victim. Thus, "vengeance" is taken out on those who personify

the defeated regime but who are in fact not responsible for its sins – ethnic Russian or Russian-speaking minorities.

To a degree, the unwillingness of the Baltic states to take some responsibility for collaboration with the Nazi regime during World War II enables this approach. Accusations aimed at the Soviet regime permit some to avoid acknowledging unpleasant or shameful facts in their own history, facts presented as an induced reaction to the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact and subsequent Soviet occupation.

In the end, both Russia and the Baltic states try to escape feelings of guilt, leading to mutual accusations and a kind of “inculcation race.” As a reaction to the negative attitudes to Soviet policies, Russia embellishes its past, going so far at times as to deny obvious abuses of the Soviet regime. The main challenge for Russia here is to find the right balance between the positive and negative record of the Soviet regime. Twenty years after the collapse of the USSR, Moscow is still not morally ready to do so. If each side (Russia and the Baltic states) were to accept its share of responsibility for the common past, face the facts, acknowledge them, and move on (as the Baltic states appear to have done with Germany), it would help make bilateral relations between Russia and each of the Baltic states less tense.

### **Of Two Minds: Neo- or Post-Post-Colonial Strategies?**

Moscow remains conflicted concerning its “imperial” legacy and the “white man’s burden” it inherited from the Soviet Union. The most frequent Russian counterargument to the claim that the Soviet Union was an empire and all 14 republics Russian colonies is that Soviet Russia was not a dominant metropolitan territory that exploited its “colonies” but, on the contrary, that the central government economically developed the Soviet republics. This would be a rather post-colonial and post-imperial behavior (in line with the communist ideological fight against “imperialism”). Russian strategies after 1991 can thus be named *post*-post-colonial. However, some analysts argue that the economic strategies of the central Soviet government were aimed not at developing the republics but at creating a strong single economy with divisions of labor among all of them, leading to disproportionate development and overspecialization of republican economies.

Regarding economic relations with other post-Soviet states, Russia has been ever more ready in recent years to become a “normal” regional power with no post-colonial guilt or neo-imperial aspirations. In practice, this has translated into a desire to de-politicize economic relations with post-Soviet neighbors, in particular limiting preferential policies. The idea of the Eurasian Union follows from this new line of thought: only those states that want to cooperate on an equal basis with equal contributions are welcome in this new structure. The concept of the Eurasian Union received considerable attention in the West, while in Russia the initiative was met with equanimity. The exaggerated interest of outside observers in the project is easily understood; they inscribe it with the logic of German revanchism rather than post-colonialism, thus perceiving it as a manifestation of Moscow’s efforts to re-build its economic clout. The same Western view existed toward the Collective Security Treaty

Organization and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, seen as Eastern NATO's or "blocs of dictators" created to counter Western structures – this despite the fact that both structures were willing to establish relations with European and Euro-Atlantic structures. This wary approach toward any Russia-led regional structures in Eurasia is based on an instinctive and deeply entrenched fear of revanchism – a parallel with German policies after World War I. But if so, inclusion, not exclusion, is the remedy for revanchism. Perhaps the West would be better off taking Russia's European security treaty initiative more seriously, or at least accept it as an expression of Russia's desire not to be isolated in the security sphere.

One aspect worth scrutinizing in relations between a metropole and its colonies are the modernization policies aimed at developing colonies' economies. In Russia's case, this trend is partially reversed. In the framework of the EU-Russia Partnership for Modernization, Russia itself has become a subject to modernize, while the democratic Baltic states, as members of the EU and NATO, have ended up as source of political and economic modernization for the former metropole. Hierarchical relations are reversed. Similar examples by which a former colony is better placed in an ensuing global hierarchy are the United States and Great Britain, or Brazil and Portugal.

Another reversion can be found in the cultural sphere. Post-colonial theories are heavily influenced by the concept of Orientalism, popularized by Edward Said. This concept posits that the West socially constructed the Orient by negatively inverting Western culture, creating a discourse of hierarchy and civilization vs. barbarism to subordinate indigenous peoples. It is difficult, however, to apply this concept to Soviet or independent Russia. For centuries Russians have been searching for their own cultural and geographic identity and cannot decide whether they are a European, Asian, or Eurasian nation. In contrast, the Baltics, even under Soviet rule, have always been perceived by their Soviet/post-Soviet neighbors, including Russia, as more culturally advanced, European, and genuinely Western. At least at the level of popular perception, it was the metropole that was culturally alienated, not the colonies.

### **Can the Soviet Legacy be Transformed into Russian "Soft Power" in Eurasia?**

Recently, the idea of developing the potential for "soft power" has become increasingly popular among Russian political elites. However, this is mainly based on strategies of maintaining what is left from the Soviet past. The Russian language, still a lingua franca throughout much of the post-Soviet space, is losing its position. Young generations born after the collapse of the USSR usually speak only national languages and prefer to learn English, Turkish, or Chinese. The common past has turned out not to be reason enough for a common future. The Soviet legacy should not be taken for granted and needs reassessment from all former republics, Russia first and foremost.

The main challenge to developing a potential for "soft power" is that Russia does not have any clear political or economic model that appeals to its neighbors. Such a model or ideology could help unite members of regional organizations in Eurasia. Until recently, Russia was not ready to take all responsibility for the development of regional structures, and it did not want to be the provider of regional hegemonic stability. At

present, however, the situation appears to be changing, at least in the sphere of economic cooperation and, to a lesser extent, security.

Strategies of avoiding responsibility follow from an unwillingness to make a positive and negative balance of the Soviet regime's record. But such a task is necessary, even if it is difficult to reconcile with great power aspirations dictated by resources and geography perceived more like curses than blessings. Russians are still of two minds about whether their country should behave like a regional leader or be tired of paying for its virtual regional hegemony. But twenty years after the "civilized divorce," it is high time to make a decision to be free from the past and the "post."