

DIMENSIONS OF STRUCTURAL POWER: RUSSIA AND THE POST-SOVIET AREA

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A phenomenon of power in politics and policy-making is one the oldest and traditional topics of academic inquiry and a key domain in theorizing about International Relations (IR). Scholars have elaborated on a variety of types, forms and dimensions of power in IR and policy-making in general, yet some types of power have gained prominence quite recently as international politics and international relationships have been evolving within the new globalized setting(s). Specifically, the post-Cold War period has ushered out new and complex period with the system of international relations being “scaled down” to the regional level from its former bipolar framework. Although these regions are integral and interconnected parts of the globalized world, however, some large regions (macro-regions) emerged as distinct and “self-sustainable” clusters of states, with their own institutional and structural peculiarities.

The post-Soviet space is one of these macro-regions that emerged on the territory of the former Soviet Union (FSU). Over the past quarter of century since the Soviet break-up, unique characteristics that “glued together” the formerly constituent parts of the USSR diminished significantly, but several factors still crucially influence the regional development dynamics. Among these factors and variables Russia is the key factor predisposing the whole region towards some “regional and international personality” by its sheer size and resources that dwarfs the aggregate potentials of all the other FSU republics [1]. Russia continues to “hold” these states grouped due to variety of structural (including path dependency) links and historically formed legacies that are bolstering Moscow’ strategic rationale and policy-driven motivations in the

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“zone of its privileged interests” within the FSU. In this context, the factor of power with all of its manifestations has been acquiring crucial significance.

A traditional emphasis on coercive/ military power application, being a core element of realist calculus, is one of the oldest conceptualization of power in IR. With an explicit reference to its coercive forms (of employment), power is the central aspect in the Realist thinking of international politics and relations. Imposing its will on the other actor and controlling the outcome is an important characteristic of coercive power. The direct application is the typical feature of this type of power. Compulsory power with a direct control over the other, in M. Barnett and R. Duvall’s opinion, is best understood from the perspective of the recipient, not the deliverer, of the direct action [2]. For the neorealist strand, the total amount of resources available to the actor (state) constitutes its hard power capabilities and is essential in identifying power position of any given state in international structure [3].

The second understanding of power - Institutional power - is closer to the Liberal tradition in IR theories as it encapsulated several important notions on power constraints and the role of institutions in constraining anarchy in international relations. Scholars elaborated on a variety of explanatory approaches as to how formal and informal institutions enable some actors to shape behavior or circumstances of socially distant ones. Yet, the institutional substructure and rules can also generate unequal leverage in determining collective outcomes [2].

Some institutions, for example, can potentially generate and foster unequal distribution of power/resources in favor of some actors. That is the typical case in hierarchical arrangements and institutional formats under the predominant state’ control. At the same time, the classical theory of hegemonic stability describes hegemonic states as powerful states that impose their rule and will largely by unilateral means and without establishing strong institutions [4]. The post-Soviet space is not a traditional case of raw hegemonic dominance, despite of power and resource asymmetries that underlie its unipolar characteristics of this distinct macro-region under Russia’s preponderance. However, Russia’s strategies aimed at the Eurasian integration as well as Moscow’s apparent objectives to institutionalize these integration formats are

to a significant degree aimed to reach “advantages of diffusion” [4, p.686]. In T. Pederson' opinion, an “institutionalized regional system is not only a constraint on the regional big power. It is also an asset in the sense of providing an arena for diffusion of hegemon's ideas. Such diffusion may occur in various ways and to varying degrees. Thus, regional institutionalization may serve to “lock in” neighboring states in a set of rules largely determined by the cooperative hegemony [...]” [4]. The Russia-centered Eurasian Union (2015), which currently includes another five post-Soviet states besides Russia, is one example of institutionalization based on “lock-in” logic.

Another stream in the conceptualization of power in international affairs concerns the notion of soft power. Developed and further elaborated by J. Nay, the concept rests on the idea that power and influence can be exercised via non coercive means and instruments; for instance, shaping ideas and social thinking, through persuasion and indirect influence, setting certain normative and discursive trends, or guiding the organizational principles and understandings. The ideas, norms and cultural predispositions all are important building blocks of soft power-yielding in IR [5]. The soft power approaches and arguments are presented in usually positive connotations.

Nevertheless, there is another type of power, structural power, which is of substantial importance for better understanding and explaining of macro-regional realities and the major trends that beset the policies and politics within the post-Soviet space in a strategic perspective. It may shed light upon the peculiarities of Russian-centered hierarchical international system within the CIS domains and its “internal” characteristics as well as. And though the factor of agency in case of structural power is less pronounced in terms of intentionality, many implicit facets of strategic decisions that concern the future of regional development(s) can potentially be sketched up within the structural power framework.

The conception of structural power was first developed and presented by S. Strange who conceptually detailed and elaborated the four pillars or structures in International Political Economy: (1) security, (2) production, (3) finance, (4) knowledge. S. Strange approaches the structural power as the “power to shape and determine the structures of the global political economy within which other

states, their political institutions, their economic enterprises and (not least) their scientists and other professional people have to operate” [6]. In this light, both tangible and intangible sources of power are included into the notion of structural power, with structural factors (such as geographic location, demography) being connected to the matters like technology, ideas and culture. According to S. Strange, power over structures is more important than the power that rests on resources as the structural power is about “how things shall be done, the power to shape frameworks within which states relate to each other, relate to people, or relate to corporate enterprises” [6, p.25].

In practice, it is supposed that state holds structural power if it possesses significant capabilities related to the main power structures and if its is able to exercise authority/control over the structures. Hence, the most important characteristic of structural power is that these structures themselves become the resources of power framing the rules and the settings of the game; metaphorically saying, the structural power is about shaping and setting the limits of possible. Empirically, the term structural in its policy-oriented meaning may refer to two key aspects: the objective to have an effect on structures; and the objectives to have effects that are sustainable. The major aims of structural diplomacy, for example, include exerting influence or shaping sustainable external political, legal, economic, social and security structures at different relevant levels in a given geographic space [7].

Structural power employs both resource-based and relation-based character, but the context is of great importance for the better understanding of the operational specifics [8]. For instance, analyzing the structural dimensions of influence of Russia and the European Union in the so-called shared neighborhood between these two forces, D.Averre emphasizes that “the static conception of a traditional *droit de regard* enforced by ‘hard’ political–military instruments is misconceived; it misses the point that both the sources and effects of power are more diffused” [9].

Over the past quarter of century Russia’ strategies in the post-Soviet space have undergone significant changes: those transformations ranged from the mere resource allocation issues to the policy modalities and conceptual dimensions of RF international and regional policy performance. In difference

to the “erratic 1990’s”, the foreign policy course of Russia has obtained a substantially more coherent and, at the same time, focused character [10]. Along with pragmatic and practice-orient orientation, the institutional basement and the operational capacities of the policy-making have been bolstered visibly. Russia’s regional assertiveness has acquired more multidimensional character paving the way for more comprehensive modes of regional engagement. The previously dominant “one-leg” apprehension of Russia as a state that can boast just raw military might but lacking other resources and instruments of influence and power gave away for a more sophisticated and nuanced acceptance of realities in this part of the world.

Since the mid-2000’ and, particularly, after the 2010’ an apparent shift has emerged in Moscow’s regional strategies from a classical orientation of alliance and block-building towards the policy convergence (diffusion) strategies within its allies circle, apparent moves to force “non - aligned” post-Soviet states to revert to bandwagoning policies [11], whereby for the openly hostile states making the dissent / divergence extremely costly (the case of Ukraine), if not unbearable for the others.

In this context, structural power ought to be regarded as an important dimension of the regional politics at least on two accounts. First, although Russia is not positioned (in absolute terms) as an “ideal paradigm” of modernization and development for the post-Soviet states as contrasted to the EU, yet that does not automatically purport Russia’ disinterest or rejection of (in) direct influence tools and levers over the region other than coercive means or instances of direct involvement that are supposedly regarded as “last resort” measure. Those influence and power-yielding formats potentially include soft power projections, but in practice Russia’s soft power potential is not as effective as one can imagine given the huge resource asymmetry between Russia and its post-Soviet neighboring states combined.

The issues of macro-regional security and stability are of utmost importance for the post-Soviet states of Eurasia. Vast regions south to the former Soviet Union ranging from the Middle East to the Eastern Asia are engulfed with the

security problems and military risks. Internal instability and state failure, domestic and international terrorism coupled with the unsustainable domestic social-economic conditions in these countries and regions are in relative contrast to the comparative stability of the post-Soviet region; a unipolar regional security system where Russia has reserved a central role of security “keeper” by its mere size and scope of its power projection potential since the Soviet break-up: the regional security system in the post-Soviet space is described as unipolar Russian-centered one [12].

In this sense, security dynamics in these states is structurally interconnected and affected by Russia; yet, given the huge resources asymmetries between the aggregate potentials of all the post-Soviet states and Russia, the former group of states are more structurally predisposed to security vulnerabilities than Russia itself which is also dependent on the military and intelligence assets and infrastructural objects that are located in these states and are indispensable in providing security, both at the operational and structural levels [13].

The hierarchical structure of international relations in the FSU geopolitical space resembles core-periphery relationships specifics [14]. Particularly, in the context of economic, infrastructural and social viability, even after the dissolution of the USSR structural dependence of the CIS republics on the RF still continues to shape their overall foreign policy calculus. Though far from being former colonial states (in traditional connotation) and actively expanding regional and international profile of their interactions, the general parameters of interdependency links might favor deposition to vertical integration. One of the features of hierarchical international systems is that: “[...] economic links are structured vertically to the core at the expense of horizontal links among the periphery states, a fragmentation that sets them apart, allowing divide and rule by the core, and deterring regional economic development. As such, client states need their patron far more than the patron, having numerous clients, needs any individual one of them” [15]. The post-Soviet space, certainly, differs in many respects from the described “post-colonial” patterns of relationships, but importantly, horizontal cooperation dynamics between FSU republics has not been set in motion for a variety of objective and subjective reasons.

A noticeable aspect of this kind of “predisposition” to Russia is the evidence-based observation that horizontal links and cooperation formats between the former Soviet republics (other than Russia) have not been sufficiently developed to offset an crucial importance of bilateral relations each of them hold with Russia. For example, still in 2007 SIPRI’ analysis of regional integration and security dynamics noted: “The predominance of Russia in the former Soviet area (even if it is eroding) represents the most powerful independent variable within the post-Soviet space. Not only is Russia by far the strongest state in terms of size, military forces and economic potential, but it is also has the strategic character of a “hub” to which former Soviet states are joined by a more strategically significant relationship than any pair of such states can have with each other” [16].

Another dimension of structural interconnection is the land-locked status of the majority of the post-Soviet states, which necessitates and forces them to count on the Russia’ geographic and geopolitical location. The later aspect can entail not only security-related implications but also social and economic repercussions. Regardless of policy-driven aspects and modalities, the relationships with Russia as well as foreign policy orientations and alignment patterns of these states are acquiring an additional “layer” that cannot be discarded in a longer-run perspective [17]. Out of the 12 post-Soviet states (not counting the Baltic States) only two are not landlocked (Georgia and Ukraine), whereas the rest depend on the Russia’s communication routs (to a varying degrees).

Over the recent decades, Russia has invested heavily into the spheres and sectors of soft power, information and media technologies as well as in some public policy domains that concern the normative and ideational agenda of the state. Knowledge and information structures have been considered as strategic assets specifically with regard to the CIS countries where promotion of cultural images, narratives and discourses acquired a strategic significance. Doctrinal approaches such as “sovereign democracy” or other normative orientations resonate well with some specific political circles or elites, but are not “diversified” enough to appeal a larger segments or the whole societies to follow. Nevertheless, the Russian language is lingua franca for international

communication between the post-Soviet states, whereby education opportunities in Russia are more open and accessible (financially and logistically) for CIS countries younger generations than, for instance, education prospects in the Western universities. Moreover, there are some sectors and technological domains where Russia's presence is well-established in longer term perspective (i.e. military, military-technical, and security).

Since the Soviet dissolution, Russia continues to be a huge market for the post-Soviet states' products and services that attracts not only commodities but also serves as large labor market for the CIS states. Despite of economic and financial crises and subsequent social-economic difficulties, Russian economy and the remittances that the post-Soviet republics citizens send to their home states constitute a substantial and embedded part of the economic structure of these states. The Economist notes that despite of the tightening of the US monetary policies, in 2016/17 "the rebound in remittances will provide a significant boost to economies across the region, in turn leading to a recovery in domestic demand and imports. The poorer CIS states, such as Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz Republic, are the most remittance-dependent states in the world. The appreciation of the rouble and the recovery in remittances should also lead to the stabilization of the currencies of many of the countries in the region this year"¹. Although the other post-Soviet states could be less dependent on Russia, yet the patterns of social-economic interactions developed over the past decades are rather persistent to evaluate them as embedded features of economic life of these states. The export/import share with Russia in overall trade turnover of the post-Soviet states is varying, yet the median is pivoted around 25%.

At the same time, since the first half of the 2000's, Russia' strategic portfolio of investments in the CIS has been mainly focused on the strategic assets and infrastructural objects that potentially can foster further deepening and broadening of structural links and asymmetrical dependencies on Russia given the uneven resources potentials [18]. Though Russia is not a leader in forging innova-

¹ In 2016, the overall amount of remittances to the CIS from Russia was equaled to about \$40bln. The Economist, Russian remittances to CIS show signs of recovery, 21 April, 2017, <http://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?>

tive business solutions and developing industry technologies on par with the Western states, yet in some cases many advanced business and economic solutions are better “emulated” and later on transferred to the other post-Soviet republics as already “passing” the Russian experience. While high-technology export is less than 3% of Russia’s total exports, in some sectors the Russians retain leading positions (for example, in high-tech armaments production or nuclear technologies). Russia is the 8th largest manufacturer in the world [19]; the fact that could not but to influence the economies of the neighboring smaller states with a similar patterns of economic structure and compatible level of development in both dimensions, production and financial sectors.

In contrast to the other types of power where the cause-effect picture is more apparent and visible, the structural power dynamics and mechanisms of “visualization” are difficult to discern empirically. It is even more difficult to understand multiple facets of Russia’s structural power effects and implications towards the post-Soviet space. Nevertheless, in general, Russia yields certain measure of structural power over the post-Soviet space, and that “share” is of substantial importance for any of the former Soviet states. All the four “pillars” of the structural power - security, production, finance, and knowledge/information - are affecting the current dynamics of the macro-regional developments and will certainly shape the contours of Russia’s presence and engagement modalities within the macro-region in mid- to long-term perspective.

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