



REASSERTING HEGEMONY IN CENTRAL ASIA: RUSSIAN POLICY IN POST-2010 KYRGYZSTAN

Reafirmar la hegemonía en Asia Central: las políticas rusas en Kirguistán tras 2010

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While there has been considerable international focus on Russia's assertive foreign policies in Ukraine and the southern Caucasus, Moscow's increasing influence in the former Soviet states of Central Asia has received much less attention. A shift in policy after 2010 has been particularly successful in the development of a much stronger Russian relationship with Kyrgyzstan, a state that had previously developed a moderately pro-Western foreign policy, and which plays a key strategic role in the region. Kyrgyzstan has downgraded security and political ties with Western states, joined the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), and developed closer security ties in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). This article analyses these policy shifts and characterises the new Russian stance as "hegemonic", indicating both Russian military, political and economic dominance in the relationship but also significant popular support in Kyrgyzstan for closer ties with Moscow. Russian policy has relied on an integrated approach to foreign policy that includes initiatives in the fields of security, economy and politics, and also forms of "soft power" and cultural influence. The case of Kyrgyzstan suggests that analysing Russian policy within the framework of hegemony is a useful way to discuss both the potential for increased influence and the significant constraints faced by Russian policy-makers in the Eurasian region.



Abstract

Russian Foreign Policy; Kyrgyzstan; Central Asia; Hegemony; Regional Security
Política exterior rusa; Kirguistán; Asia Central; hegemonía; seguridad regional



Key words

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Fechas

Aunque ha habido un foco internacional considerable en las enérgicas políticas exteriores rusas en Ucrania y el Cáucaso meridional, la creciente influencia de Moscú en los antiguos estados soviéticos de Asia Central ha recibido mucha menos atención. El cambio en la política tras 2010 ha sido especialmente exitoso en el desarrollo de una relación mucho más profunda de Rusia con Kirguistán, un estado que previamente había desarrollado una política exterior moderadamente pro-occidental y que juega un papel estratégico clave en la región. Kirguistán ha rebajado los lazos políticos y de seguridad con los estados occidentales, se ha unido a la Unión Económica Euroasiática (UEE) dirigida por Rusia y ha desarrollado vínculos de seguridad más estrechos en la Organización del Tratado de Seguridad Colectiva (OTSC). Este artículo analiza estos cambios en la política y califica la nueva actitud rusa como «hegemónica», señalando tanto el dominio militar, político y económico ruso en la relación como el considerable apoyo popular en Kirguistán para tener vínculos más estrechos con Moscú. La política rusa ha confiado en un acercamiento integrado a la política exterior que incluye iniciativas en los campos de seguridad, economía y política, así como formas de «soft power» e influencia cultural. El caso de Kirguistán sugiere que estudiar la política rusa dentro del marco de la hegemonía es un modo útil de analizar tanto el potencial de tener una mayor influencia como las considerables restricciones que se encuentran los responsables de las políticas rusas en el área de Eurasia.



Resumen

1. Introduction

Along its borderlands and throughout the former Soviet space, Russia is engaged in constructing a variety of models of hegemonic political order, from the proto-states of Eastern Ukraine to state-building initiatives in Chechnya, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. (Lewis, 2015; Cooley, 2014).¹ A parallel process is reasserting Russian influence in Central Asia, most notably in its relations with Kyrgyzstan, a strategically important republic once seen as moderately pro-Western in its foreign policy orientation and democratically-inclined in its domestic politics. After 2010, Russia developed a set of overlapping policies – security, political and economic – that reclaimed Russian primacy in Kyrgyzstan and institutionalised its influence through multilateral organisations and bilateral economic and security agreements. I argue that this relationship is best understood through the concept of hegemony, and explore how it is constructed with reference to political, economic, military and “soft power” instruments. The article contributes to a wider research agenda on the nature of Russian policy in the former Soviet space, and to an IR literature on regional hegemony.

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2. Hegemony in IR

In discussing this relationship between Russia and Kyrgyzstan, I follow the tradition of IR theorists who reject realist views of hegemony, which only consider material – primarily military – aspects, and instead characterise hegemony as reliant on some form of consent and characterised by legitimacy. Ikenberry and Kupchan (1990) argue that hegemonic power has a dualist character. It combines material incentives (offering or denying political and economic rewards to foreign leaders to ensure compliance) and ideational activities that achieve hegemony when foreign

¹ Research for this paper was funded by the ESRC research project “Rising Powers and Conflict Management in Central Asia” (ES/J013056/1). Interviews were conducted by different members of the research team during three visits to Kyrgyzstan in the period 2013-2015.

leaders “internalise the norms and value orientations espoused by the hegemon and accept its normative claims about the nature of the international system” (1990, p. 286). Agnew has argued that hegemony reflects much more than simply a differential in material power, but instead relies on the “enrolment of others in the exercise of your power by convincing, cajoling, and coercing them that they should want what you want” (Agnew, 2005, p. 2). For Lebow, hegemony “requires acquiescence by allies or subject states, and this in turn rests on some combination of legitimacy and self-interests” (Lebow, 2001, cited in Clark, 2012, p. 22). Clark argues that hegemony in international society should be understood as sharply differentiated from what he terms “primacy”, the dominance of a power as measured in material terms. Hegemony, on the other hand, requires a normative basis that lends legitimacy to a hierarchical relationship (Clark, 2012, pp. 23-25). Theoretical approaches that emphasise consent as underpinning hegemony owe much to neo-Gramscian readings, which argued for ideational and cultural aspects to explain the resilience of hierarchical social relations. Antondiades argues that “[w]ithout diminishing the importance of material power and dominance over material resources, [the Gramscian view] understands hegemony not in terms of coercion, but in terms of consent, shared beliefs and commonsense” (Antondiades, 2008, p. 4).

This strand of IR literature on hegemony primarily examines a single global hegemon, focused primarily on the role of the US in post-1945 global affairs (Cox, 1993; Clark, 2012). Regional hegemony has not received the same attention in the theoretical literature strategies (Deyermond, 2009; Prys, 2010), perhaps because of the preoccupation with the US role as a global hegemon and the emphasis within regional studies on prospects for non-hierarchical integration. Most theorisation of regional hegemony examines a relationship between a hegemon and a regional system of states, such as the “hegemonic security order”, which Frazier and Ingersoll-Stewart (2010) consider as one type of regional security complex, or the “hierarchical regional orders” discussed by Pereira (2013). Instead of examining Russia as a hegemon among a system of states, in this article I focus on one bilateral relationship, albeit with wider regional impacts.

Deyermond (2009) successfully revisited the concept of regional hegemony in the Central Asian concept, but concentrated on the way in which potential hegemons and sub-hegemons might coexist, arguing that the region demonstrated a “multi-level hegemony”. Mearsheimer argued that Russia would re-emerge as a regional hegemon, as a result of the international system, but used the concept only in relation to military dominance (2004). By contrast, Prys (2010) suggests that regional hegemons are characterised not by military dominance but by “hegemonic behaviour”, such as the provision of public goods or the management of conflict. I return to Clark’s notion of hegemony as combining material dominance with a normative, legitimising element, and emphasise neo-Gramscian readings that suggest different forms of consent that might contribute to hegemony. This approach goes beyond a focus simply on bargaining power between two actors, as used in other attempts to categorise “hierarchical regionalism” (Pereira, 2015), but also recognises the importance of shared discourses and post-colonial identities in constructing this relationship.

3. Policy shift

Russia’s post-Cold War decline in regional and international affairs led some to argue that its role in the Central Asian region was in terminal decline (Nixey, 2013; Kazantsev, 2010) or would be marked at least by “caution rather than assertion of dominance” (Matveeva, 2013, p. 495).

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These diverse views reflected differing views within the Russian elite about the extent to which Russia should attempt to retain or reassert an hegemonic relationship with Central Asian states (Matveeva, 2013). As a result, Russian policies towards the region before 2010 were often “fragmentary, reactive and even self-contradictory” (Troitsky, 2012, p. 8). Some of this ambivalence remains in Russian policy discourses, but in official policy a clear policy choice emerged in 2011, when Vladimir Putin set out what Sakwa terms “Putin’s big idea for his third term” (Sakwa, 2014, p. 138). This was a bold strategy to reassert Russia’s self-identification as a “Great Power” by consolidating and formalising a Eurasian regional identity for the Russian state, including through a new integrative supranational institution, the Eurasian Union. In Central Asia this new policy of hegemonic regionalism resulted in what Liik has labelled a “Pivot to Eurasia”, which promotes Russia as a dominant regional power in Central Asia and asserts a stronger Asian orientation in Russian foreign policy. In Kyrgyzstan this new assertiveness has resulted in a policy that has been characterised as the creation of a “client state” (Cooley & Laruelle, 2013).

At one level, as Lukyanov argues, this shift to the east can be understood primarily as a reflection of Russia’s disappointment in its relations with Europe, rather than any essentially expansionist aims (Lukyanov, 2014, p. 23). Certainly, as Cooley argues, regional primacy is seen as essential to underpin Russia’s great power status more widely (2012, p. 52). However, the shifts in policy on Kyrgyzstan also suggest a developing view of regionalism more generally, characterised by the hierarchical role of a regional hegemon, rather than cooperative relations under supranational bodies (as developed in the EU) or the assertion of Westphalian sovereignties (as emphasised by members of ASEAN). This has broader implications, informing a Russian concept of global order based on “re-legitimis[ing] geopolitical spheres of influence as an organising principle of international life” (Liik, 2014, p. 15). These spheres of influence are partly defined by geopolitical imperatives, but also claim an historical legitimacy built upon sets of shared ideas and values defined in civilisational terms. Understanding the process whereby Russia has reasserted hegemony in Kyrgyzstan therefore contributes to the broader debate about Russian policies in the former Soviet space and in the international order more widely.

Russian policy was also strongly influenced by events in Kyrgyzstan itself. By 2010 Kyrgyz relations with Russia were in difficulty. Despite strong Russian objections, in 2009 the government of President Kurmanbek Bakiev agreed a further five-year lease for a US military base at Manas. In politics, Kyrgyz nationalist sentiment – potentially opposed to a strong Russian presence in the country – was playing an increasing role. Russia’s demographic card – a significant ethnic Russian minority in the country – was fading. At independence, there were more than 900,000 ethnic Russians living in Kyrgyzstan; but only 439,860 were left at the 2009 census. Those who remained reportedly felt abandoned and forgotten by Moscow (Toursunov, 2010). Against this backdrop of declining Russian influence and consolidation of a US military presence, Russian officials extended their contacts with the political opposition, and encouraged Russian media to highlight corruption and abuse of power of the regime of President Kurmanbek Bakiev. It is unclear whether Russia aimed to oust Bakiev, or merely wanted to place pressure on him to comply with demands to close the US base. Whatever the goal of Russian policy, events took on their own momentum, and in April 2010 opposition demonstrations forced Bakiev to flee the country, leaving a chaotic situation in his wake. An interim government, headed by Roza Otunbaeva, took power, but in the south of the country, in the towns of Osh and Jalal Abad, hundreds of people died in June, in serious inter-ethnic violence between Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities (Matveeva, 2012; Melvin, 2011). The Russian government declined an invitation by interim Kyrgyz President Roza Otunbaeva for Russia to intervene militarily to stop the violence.

The shift to the east can be understood primarily as a reflection of Russia’s disappointment in its relations with Europe

This failure to intervene to halt the Osh violence was interpreted by some analysts as a set-back for Russian policy aspirations in the region. Troitsky argues that “Russia’s reputation as a regional stabilizer and guarantor of stability was severely damaged” by the failure to respond militarily to the Osh crisis (Troitsky, 2012, p. 25). De Haas notes that “[t]he reluctance of Moscow and the CSTO to interfere in this domestic unrest raised doubts about the value and effectiveness of the organization and about the Kremlin’s reliability, at least for the regimes in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan” (De Haas, 2015, p. 4). However, such views misinterpret Russia’s approach to security in the region, which differs sharply from the conflict management strategies of Western states. While Western actors – mainly within the framework of the OSCE – discussed typical components of a short-term liberal peacebuilding approach in response to the Osh violence (deployment of international police missions, reconstruction and reconciliation programmes, and encouragement for democratisation and minority rights) Russia’s policies prioritised long-term stabilisation, through the promotion of a stronger central government and an enhanced Russian security and economic presence. In this mode of strategic thinking, direct military intervention was not a priority and could damage the long-term Russian effort to develop broader, institutionalised hegemony in the region, which depended on the maintenance of a measure of legitimacy for Russian presence in the region. As one observer suggested, such a deployment could easily end badly for Russia, “not with a calm withdrawal and a feeling of a duty fulfilled, but with rocks, sticks and the image of ‘Russian occupiers’, exploited by ...[local] elites for political ends” (Minin, 2010).

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4. Russia’s mechanisms of hegemony

Rather than relying on military intervention, Russian policy in Kyrgyzstan has attempted to integrate a range of initiatives in different policy areas. Previous analyses have emphasised the importance of linking Russian policy in different policy domains (Nygren, 2008; Tolstrup, 2009), and a similar approach is used here to provide analysis of Russian policies in four main areas: military-security issues; the political sphere; cultural and soft power initiatives; and economic issues.

4.1. Military and security policies

Although military force might be expected to be interpreted as a material aspect of hegemony, in the case of Kyrgyzstan Russia’s military basing and security assistance is probably more significant in a symbolic and discursive role. Russia’s security engagement, underpinned by constant interaction among security and intelligence officials of the two states, creates shared assessments of potential security threats, and a common understanding of the appropriate response. This was relevant both in bilateral security relationships and in the role played in security affairs by the further development of the Russian-led security organisations, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO).

4.1.1. CSTO reform

After the 2010 Osh events, a Russian think-tank published a report in 2011 calling for significant reforms to internal decision-making procedures in the CSTO, and a development of capacity to mount peacekeeping-type operations, along the lines of other regional security organisations (Yurgens, 2011; Cooley, 2013). The CSTO did undertake some reforms, amending its charter in

December 2010 to allow a joint response to a much wider range of conflict situations, including armed conflicts inside member-states and more stress on the development of a joint military force, the Collective Operational Reaction Forces (KSOR). KSOR had been set up in 2009, and on paper should have included 18,000 ground troops and 1,500 special forces, managed through a joint military headquarters (Rozanov & Dovgan, 2010, p. 68). But media reports suggested that movement towards a fully operational, joint rapid reaction force was still a long way off, and for the foreseeable future military operations under the CSTO banner would in effect be conducted by the Russian General Staff, with the CSTO only having a consultative role (Mukhin, 2013). In 2007 the CSTO agreed that peacekeeping forces could be formed under CSTO auspices, but the CSTO only conducted its first peacekeeping exercises in October 2012, in Kazakhstan, and their development remained at an initial stage (De Haas, 2015).

In reality, CSTO reform only partially addressed its difficulties in developing a more capable military force with the capacity to intervene in conflict situations and effect peacemaking and peacekeeping functions. The withdrawal of Uzbekistan from the organisation in December 2012 removed one political obstacle to future agreement among its members, but the political and operational limitations of the CSTO were still not fully addressed. However, as Nikitina has argued, the effectiveness of the CSTO should not be measured with reference only to metrics of functionality. Instead, it is more comparable to many non-Western regional organisations that serve to maintain ideational values, such as sovereignty, rather than seek organisational functionality and effectiveness (Nikitina, 2010, p. 49). However, although it does inculcate and reflect some shared values and norms, the defining characteristic of the CSTO is its relationship to the single regional hegemon. As such, its predominant ideational role is to act as a “secondary institution” to the “primary institution” of Russian hegemony. Firstly, it provides discursive legitimacy to Russia’s claim for military pre-eminence in the region. In this sense, frequent disputes within the organisation only serve to offer a multilateral veil for what remains, at heart, a Russian-dominated military bloc. Secondly, it promotes shared discourses about the meaning of security and shared ideas about the appropriate responses to internal conflicts. Its activities and discourses reflect a very different understanding in Moscow, Astana and Bishkek of how stability should be achieved in Central Asia. Rather than prioritising multilateral military peacekeeping interventions, Russia and its Central Asian allies preferred to develop strong state-building regimes through bilateral security and military relationships.

The most important shifts in Russian security policy towards Kyrgyzstan after 2010 were in the sphere of bilateral rather than multilateral relations

4.1.2. Bilateral military deployment and security assistance

The most important shifts in Russian security policy towards Kyrgyzstan after 2010 were in the sphere of bilateral rather than multilateral relations. In September 2012, during a state visit by President Putin to Kyrgyzstan, a new basing agreement was signed, providing for a further 15-year lease for the Russian airbase at Kant. The agreement created a “unified” Russian military base in Kyrgyzstan, bringing together all Russia’s strategic assets in the country, including the Kant airbase, the jointly-owned Dastan torpedo factory, and a torpedo testing base on Lake Issyk-Kul, and also left open the possibility of a new Russian-Kyrgyz base to open in Osh in 2017 (Gladilin, 2013).² However, the agreement did not significantly increase the Russian

² The Kyrgyz government agreed to sell its remaining shares in the Dastan torpedo factory in July 2013, see The Moscow Times (2013, July).

military commitment and was met with some scepticism by Russian analysts. One argued that “the existing level of Russian military force commitment will be preserved in Kyrgyzstan, where in fact there is not a serious military base of the RF [Russian Federation]” (Gladilin, 2013). There was some upgrading of the Russia military capacity, including new fighter planes (Kucera, 2014 December), but more importantly the new legal framework for the base served to institutionalise Russian military dominance as a symbolic geopolitical presence. The basing agreement took on more significance within the context of a wider security relationship, which included Russia’s success in persuading the Kyrgyz authorities to finally close the US airbase at Manas. President Almaz Atambaev had promised to close the base during his 2012 election campaign, and at the end of the base’s lease in 2014, the last US troops left the base and it was transferred to Kyrgyz control.

The US airbase had paid significant fees, a point used by the Kyrgyz authorities to leverage economic support from Russia. President Atambaev argued that: “The current situation where a Russian military base is not fulfilling its obligations and even does not pay for the lease does not suit us” (cited in Matveeva, 2013, p. 484). In the September 2012 deal Russia offered to write off nearly \$500m in Kyrgyz debt. In 2013 Russia also offered Kyrgyzstan a package of military assistance and training, reportedly costed at over \$1bn (Kucera, 2013). As with many of Russia’s financial commitments, the details of the equipment and training package were difficult to track, but reportedly Russian arms shipments reportedly began in December 2013 and continued through 2014-15.

According to one interviewee, more than 60 Kyrgyz military officers study in Russian military academies every year.³ Russia has also provided training to the Kyrgyz intelligence agencies, which has resulted not only in enhanced capacity among local intelligence operatives but also the development of extensive institutional and personal ties between the local State Committee for National Security (GKNB) and the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB). A new initiative launched in 2013 to place detachments of FSB officials abroad for training purposes initially targeted Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Kyrgyzstan. The inclusion of Kyrgyzstan alongside two unrecognised states is suggestive of an increasingly close security relationship with Russia, and again demonstrates a blurring of Russian conceptualisations of sovereignty in the former Soviet space. Russian FSB officers – numbering about 15 in Kyrgyzstan – were tasked with “provid[ing] advice and guidance to their intelligence and law enforcement agencies in conducting operational, search and other special activities” (Soldatov, 2013). Media and anecdotal reports have suggested that the FSB and other Russian intelligence services have been more active in Kyrgyzstan after 2010, and engaged in a wide range of political engagement and intelligence-gathering activities (Satke, 2014).

Permanent military deployment, coupled with equipment and training for local military and security forces, and the deployment of intelligence officials have all contributed to the reassertion of Russian hegemony within Kyrgystan’s security environment. These ties rely both on material and ideational aspects of hegemony. Alongside training, equipment and troops deployment, Russia’s engagement in this area has produced common understandings of security and potential threats that legitimise Russia’s security role in the country. As a result, its security policy has widespread public and elite support. In a poll, 87 per cent of respondents argued in

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3 Interview, academic, Bishkek, November 2013.

favour of a Russian airbase remaining in Kyrgyzstan, while only 16 per cent firmly supported the US base (Trilling, 2014).

4.2. Political engagement

Russian political engagement in Kyrgyzstan takes place on two levels. One is the arena of formal diplomatic engagement, which has developed significantly since 2010, particularly in connection with the negotiation of the EEU. President Putin visited Kyrgyzstan in 2012, and President Atambaev has been a frequent visitor to Moscow. Many Russian government officials have visited as part of negotiations of accession to the EEU, but have often negotiated directly with other parts of government, rather than with the foreign ministry. The negotiations – particularly with regard to EEU accession – have blurred the boundaries between the foreign and the domestic, as Russian officials have engaged with a wide range of domestic Kyrgyz regulations and practices, including customs regulations, food inspection regimes, and migration rules.

While many of these official delegations engage in asserting what Krause terms “bargaining power”, a more personalised, long-term pattern of political engagement with the Kyrgyz elite produces “hegemonic power” (Krause, 1991; Sozen, 2010). As Krause argues, “hegemonic power involves coopting the decision-making elites and/or legitimating a certain understanding of security (and threats to it) to win continued willing acceptance of the definition of these concepts established by the patron” (Krause, 1991, p. 325). Since the overthrow of President Akaev in 2005, when Russia’s influence with the wider elite was found wanting, Russia has attempted to develop the process of political cooptation of elites at a broader level than previously. Moscow began to work with figures from the whole political spectrum, rather than just with the regime in power. Gaining the support of the political establishment in Moscow became an important career move for political figures in Kyrgyzstan. Opposition and government figures alike travelled to Moscow to gain access to important political figures in the Russian capital. Various political “brokers” – including journalists and academics – often assisted Kyrgyz politicians to gain a profile in Moscow, through arranging formal and informal meetings, or setting up round-tables or seminars. These visits to Moscow have become important rites of passage for aspiring Kyrgyz political figures.

There has also been more political engagement on the level of parliament, again focused on the ideational rather than the material. Russian legislators and officials have encouraged the Kyrgyz parliament to adopt a series of conservative laws, largely copied from earlier Russian examples. In May 2014, President Atambaev signed a law outlawing “false accusations” that appeared to recriminalise libel and impose limits on free speech. Parliament has discussed bills outlawing “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations”, which is a copy of a similar bill adopted in Russia in 2012, and a bill that would institute strict controls on NGOs receiving funding, also a Russian-backed initiative (Toktonaliev, 2014). This latter legislation, which labels NGOs engaged in political activity and receiving foreign funding as “foreign agents”, reflects Russian unease at the continued presence of many Western-funded NGOs in the country, which it views as part of a wider geopolitical challenge to Russia’s dominance in the country. Many Kyrgyz parliamentary deputies agree with the law’s challenge to Western-backed NGOs; others are willing to support such bills to gain support from Russia.

These attempts to set agendas and influence discourse are probably more effective than direct engagement in the political process by backing particular parties or individuals. Local political

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figures expect Russia to play some role during parliamentary elections due in November 2015 (Trilling, 2014). But Kyrgyz politics is profoundly local and external actors are seldom able to influence grassroots politics directly. One local interviewee is sceptical:

Russia is not doing anything in this area. When there is a month left to the next election, they will start rushing in chaotically, then they will bet on one of the existing ones, the money will be wasted foolishly [...]. Those, who get that money, will use it somehow, and then they will quite simply dump Russia.⁴

Despite these problems, Russian policymakers have successfully cultivated personal connections and promoted local allies in Bishkek, although the long-term durability of such ties continues to depend on economic and political benefits for local elites. However, this engagement with political elites also benefits from aspects of Russia's own version of "soft power", including the development of common political worldviews that make it easier to develop a shared discourse among business and political elites.

Russian policymakers have successfully cultivated personal connections and promoted local allies in Bishkek

4.3. Russian "soft power"

The idea of hegemony as incorporating both material dominance and normative, ideational aspects is theoretically more compelling than Joseph Nye's characterisation of "hard" and "soft" power (Antoniades, 2009, p. 9; Nye, 2004; Yoruk & Vatikotis, 2013). However, in policy terms, the idea of "soft power" has caught the imagination of Russia's foreign policy elite and led to a variety of strategies to promote Russian interests through cultural, educational and language policies (Tsygankov, 2006). One form of soft power consists of the spread of Russian culture and language, and the impact of its entertainment, music and film industries that make it an attractive country both for elites and the wider population. Since independence, the use of the Russian language has been in decline in Kyrgyzstan, as the ethnic Russian population diminishes and teaching of Russian in schools has proved difficult to maintain (Blank, 2015). However, Blank's suggestion that Russian culture will become an "historical relic" in the region, with the Russian language increasingly displaced by English or Chinese, remains an unlikely prospect (Blank, 2015). The decline in Russian language use has not been replaced by alternative bilingualisms: English, Turkish and Chinese are languages still largely confined to those benefiting from an elite education. Increased labour migration to Russia, improved institutional ties, and continued Russian education and training for Central Asians will ensure a continued relevance of the Russian language for political and business elites, and for many labour migrants.

A second aspect of the Russian understanding of "soft power" is a more carefully planned and calibrated set of actions, which Saari argues resemble more the "active measures" pursued by Soviet intelligence services in the Cold War than Western modes of engagement with civil society and the media (Saari, 2014). "Soft power" and "public diplomacy" initiatives began in earnest following the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004 but have become much more extensive throughout the CIS since Putin's return to power in 2012 (Chatham House, 2014). Saari identifies four strands in this post-2005 public diplomacy, all of which are present in Kyrgyzstan. First, as noted above, the Russian authorities sought to engage with actors from

⁴ Interview, political and security analyst, Bishkek, November 2013.

both opposition and government and promote their own political ideological positions. The second pillar of the new strategy was the creation of pro-Moscow NGOs, think-tanks and youth groups, created both in Moscow and in CIS states. A third strand focused on the use of Russian-language media, both those based in Russia and those located in CIS states. A fourth area included language and cultural policy, with a stress on historical linkages between Russia and its neighbours (Saari, 2014, p. 57). Such initiatives attempted to challenge the predominance of Western-funded NGOs and Western-funded engagement with cultural and political elites, through exchange programmes, media projects and international linkages.

After independence, an active network of NGOs emerged in Kyrgyzstan, mostly funded by international organisations and donors, and espousing broadly liberal political ideas. Since 2010, in direct response to this proliferation of “Western” NGOs, a variety of Russian NGO and think-tank projects have been launched in Kyrgyzstan. *Rossotrudnichestvo* (the Federal Agency for CIS Affairs, compatriots, living abroad and international humanitarian cooperation), which took responsibility for Russia’s foreign aid programme in May 2013, has shifted attention to funding initiatives in the post-Soviet space, and has been active in Kyrgyzstan. Typical of these projects is the Moscow-based NGO, “Eurasians – New Wave”, founded in 2010, which has developed student links, trained journalists, and campaigned in favour of the Eurasian Economic Union. According to its website the group aims to strengthen “historico-cultural, scientific and educational links between Russian and Kirgizia” conduct research and publishing programmes, support media coverage of Russian-Kyrgyz relations and support for the Russian language (see www.enw-ru). Other projects include the Goncharov Fund, which promoted training programmes and study tours. Other projects have reportedly been promoted by the Presidential Administration in Russia, and according to unofficial reports, by the Russian intelligence services.

For the most part, these projects are not perceived as particularly successful. In interviews, local pro-Russian activists complain that there is no overall strategy. There are sharp differences among rival groups and individuals, with particular problems emerging between the Russian embassy – which is viewed as a rather closed institution, with limited links with local society – and local Russian journalists and activists, many of whom accuse Russian diplomats of insufficient activism and professionalism.⁵ One interviewee said:

Rossotrudnichestvo, where is it? What was this agency created for? Nobody knows anything about it. I – for one – don’t feel its presence in any way. ...there was some optimism that a specialised structure, something like USAID or the British Council, had been created and that now Russia would appear here, create a structure, there would be a system of communication. [But] there’s nothing here.⁶

Many local Russian activists are scathing about official Russian cultural support programmes. As one interviewee argued: “the Russian culture so far holds thanks to the Soviet legacy. That is to say, it is not the merit of the current work, but again is the result of inertia”.⁷ Projects tend to follow very traditional mechanisms – a photographic exhibition on Russian-Kyrgyz relations, a drawing competition for school children, visiting lectures and study tours for journalists.

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5 Interviews, Bishkek, April 2015.

6 Interview, Bishkek, November 2013.

7 Interview, Bishkek, November 2013 .

Funding is reportedly very limited, and has been cut back significantly as the Russian economic crisis has developed.⁸

For the most part, these Russian-backed “project” NGOs only promote Russian interests, rather than any thematic ideas or goals. Russian NGOs are not for the most part involved in development or humanitarian work: development projects continue to be conducted either through the UN or with local government structures. There is little engagement with local communities. One interviewee is critical: “They are mainly using hierarchy, i.e. neither communities, nor networks, but hierarchical models. They work via the authorities, via officials, and so on. I can’t say that it is effective.”⁹ In addition to development work, international organisations and Western NGOs have been active on issues such as human rights abuses, torture or discrimination against minorities. On occasion, Russian diplomats are reported to have intervened in individual human rights cases involving ethnic Uzbeks who hold Russian passports. In the case of Usmonjon Kholmiraev, for example, who died after being tortured in a police station in southern Kyrgyzstan, Russian diplomats reportedly intervened and demanded a proper investigation. However, there is little strategic policy interest in such matters, and Russian academic experts on the region and think-tank reports downplay issues of justice or human rights, instead reiterating official discourses of stability and strategic positioning (RIAC, 2013). This difference of emphasis reflects a much broader divide between the Russian emphasis on using project NGOs to provide new means for mobilising support for the authorities and the Western approach that views civil society as a means to promote long-term stability through good governance, democratisation and rule of law (Yurgens, 2011, pp. 24-25).

In terms of maintaining Russian hegemonic discourses and shared understandings of geopolitics and security, the Russian media has been much more effective than Russian-backed NGOs. Polls suggest that Russia’s main channel, Russian Public Television (ORT), is the second most popular channel in the country, only behind the local national channel. Some 20 per cent of the population get most of their news from ORT. Since local channels have limited budgets to cover foreign news, many people received international news primarily from Russian sources (Rickleton, 2014). In the print media, popular local Russian-language editions, such as *Delo Nomer*, embrace anti-Western narratives and conspiracy theories. However, Kyrgyzstan also has a lively Kyrgyz-language press, which has a much broader range of views, including more nationalist positions. Russia has actively promoted new online news services, particularly its new global news operation, Sputnik. A new site set up in December 2014 offers news in both Kyrgyz and Russia (visit www.sputnik.kg), and plans radio broadcasts and phone apps (Sputnik, 2014). However, local journalists remain sceptical: such operations are still not able to shape the news agenda in Kyrgyzstan, where local agencies and press continue to be the key sources of news and analysis.¹⁰

Blank (2015) argues that “Russia... lacks the capacity to deploy soft power on the requisite scale in Central Asia and win the support either of the local governments or the population”. In Kyrgyzstan, at least, this is clearly not the case. There are many shortcomings in Russia’s “soft power” policies, but the strong historical and cultural ties, and the influence of Russian

Russia has actively promoted new online news services, particularly its new global news operation, Sputnik

8 Interview, activist, Bishkek, April 2015.

9 Interview, analyst, Bishkek, November 2013.

10 Interviews, journalists, Bishkek, April 2015.

television broadcasting, remain decisive. There is little doubt that Russia continues to be a favoured external partner for much of the population. In a 2010 poll, 89 per cent of respondents argued that Russia should be a priority country for development cooperation: by comparison China was favoured by only 1 per cent of respondents, the US by 0.8 per cent, and Turkey by 0.6 per cent (M-Vetkor, 2010, pp. 8-10). In 2014, according to another poll, 90 per cent of respondents in Kyrgyzstan declared either a “great deal” or a “fair amount” of confidence in President Vladimir Putin; President Barack Obama won the confidence of only 26 per cent, while Chinese leader Xi Jinping gained the approval of 35 per cent (Trilling, 2014).

These overall figures disguise some complexities in this post-colonial relationship with Russia. For many Kyrgyz, their views of Russia are coloured by experiences of racism, police brutality and discrimination as labour migrants. Others, while criticising Russia, also expect more assistance and support from the former colonial power. A parliamentary deputy says:

what do the Turks do? If you graduate from a Turkish university, you will definitely get a job with a Turkish firm. But [Russians...] do not even give a student stipend, or state-funded university places, and [they] also humiliate our people and every day we get a coffin back [from Russia].¹¹

Others make a distinction between Russia and its present regime. One graduate of a Moscow institute says: “when I mean I am not pro-Russian, I mean, that I don’t like what’s happening in Russian politics. But I have a lot of friends, I speak Russian, I read in Russian, I watch [TV] in Russian, therefore I am very pro-Russian in that sense”.¹² The same interviewee argues that society has become polarised between two camps:

there are two radical viewpoints. One is very pro-Russian – socially this is the majority, and this is not in Bishkek, but in the regions and it is due to inertia: people have got used to thinking, that mother Russia will save us all; there are young people among them, too, but those who have not been migrants. And there is the majority of people in Bishkek, let’s say people like me, experts, who are very sceptically predisposed.¹³

This polarisation has only been accentuated by the conflict in Kiev, which has divided opinion into pro and anti-Russian positions. Apparently minor incidents fuel polemics. In 2015, in the run-up to the events to mark the 70th anniversary of Victory Day on 9 May, the government did not use the Russian St George’s Ribbon, which has become identified with separatist movements in Ukraine, instead promoting a different coloured version of the symbol. Russian nationalists protested against the change. The war acts as a discursive device for post-colonial assertions on both sides. Kyrgyz politicians frequently remind Russian leaders of the role of Central Asians in the war, noting the role of the Panfilov Division, which consisted largely of Kyrgyz and Kazakh recruits, in defending Moscow in 1941.¹⁴

Increased Russian nationalism inside Russia – including continuing attacks on migrants by neo-Nazis or discrimination by the police – can also provoke more anti-Russian sentiment at home. Sharp historical differences also emerge from time to time. In 2016, many Kyrgyz wish

In a 2010 poll, 89 per cent of respondents argued that Russia should be a priority country for development cooperation

11 Interview, Parliamentary deputy, Bishkek, November 2013.

12 Interview, Bishkek, November 2013.

13 Interview, university lecturer, Bishkek, November 2013.

14 Interview, Bishkek, April 2015.

to mark the 100th anniversary of the brutal repression by Tsarist troops of an anti-Russian rebellion. Some activists and historians have even sought a recognition of the events of 1916 as an act of genocide.¹⁵ The Russian authorities remain opposed to any such characterisation of Russian history in the region, highlighting what they view as the positive, progressive impact of Russian rule on Central Asia. Even academics and independent experts repeat this discourse, expressing concern about “the growth of nationalistic mindset among the people who deny the Russian historic and cultural contribution into national development in principle” (RIAC, 2013, p. 15). There is no attempt in Russian official thinking to come to terms with the colonial past, and this represents a serious weakness in Russian strategy for the long term. In the short term, however, such differences have limited impact on politics, since significant political mobilisation around such viewpoints is difficult. Political figures that have been characterised as Kyrgyz nationalists have seldom succeeded in politics at a national level. Regional leaders such as Melis Myrzakmatov, a former mayor of Osh, who promoted a Kyrgyz nationalist agenda, have been marginalised from public life.

These contested aspects of Kyrgyz relations with Russia – including the postcolonial ambivalence that is central to much of the discourse – suggest that the legitimacy of Russia’s hegemonic position, which still rests on historical and cultural legacies, requires constant reinforcement. However, Russia’s active attempts to construct legitimacy – through think-tanks, NGOs and educational initiatives, have been only partially successful. Russian television broadcasting, however, remains a powerful force in shaping agendas and asserting and maintaining shared understandings of the world.

5. Economic policy

Traditionally, regional hegemons are expected to play a powerful economic role, providing public goods in the form of a free trade zone in a region or investment in public infrastructure. This viewpoint coincides with the post-colonial discourse of many Kyrgyz citizens, who expect Russia to play a positive role in supporting the local economy. In the 1990s, however, Russia offered virtually no economic public goods for the region, partly because it was undergoing its own economic crisis, and partly because of domestic opposition to what were viewed as wasteful Soviet-era subsidies to Central Asia. This began to change as the Russian economy improved after 2002. Firstly, it opened its economy to labour migrants from Central Asia, producing a huge flow of remittances to Kyrgyzstan. Secondly, in Kyrgyzstan it began to offer development assistance and strategic investments in major infrastructure projects. Thirdly, Russia’s promotion of the Eurasian Economic Union promoted free trade in the EEU area, albeit at some cost of trade with other countries and regions.

5.1. Labour migration

Studies of regional hierarchy often try to distinguish deliberate state-sponsored interstate transfers from other non-state economic activity (Pereira, 2015). In the case of labour migration, such a distinction is unhelpful. While all of this activity takes place in the private sector, it continues to be effectively regulated by the state, which has the capacity to refuse

Regional hegemons are expected to play a powerful economic role, providing public goods in the form of a free trade zone in a region or investment in public infrastructure

15 Interview, journalist and activist, April 2015.

entry to migrants or expel those already in its territory. Russia's ability to regulate the flow of migrants – through changes in work permit regulations or residency requirements – provides it with a constant lever of influence over Central Asian republics. New regulations introduced on 1 January 2015 required migrants to have an international passport rather than domestic identity documents, and to pass Russian language tests; work permits have also become more expensive. Entry into the EEU should reduce these bureaucratic burdens on Kyrgyz migrants and is one of the reasons why there has been widespread support among many Kyrgyz for membership of the new bloc (Lelik, 2015).

The level of remittances to Kyrgyzstan rose rapidly after the early 2000s, reaching the equivalent of 31 per cent of GDP in 2013, the second highest level in the world, according to World Bank figures. Migration on this scale is a powerful source of leverage that becomes institutionalised, as regular patterns of migration begin to define the country's political economy. Labour migration also produces patterns of intrusiveness that go beyond a purely economic exchange: it has effects on social stability, as families become divided, and on personal and national identity, as migrants seek to stabilise their identities at home and abroad. Perhaps unwittingly, Russia becomes involved in complex questions of social identity and nation-building in countries such as Kyrgyzstan. Migration also blurs the boundaries of the foreign and domestic domains, mixing domestic concerns in both countries with interstate and multilateral regulations and institutions. The Russian government faces constant domestic political pressure to limit the flow of migrants into Russia, where anti-migrant sentiment remains very high (Matveeva, 2013). This factor favours Russia's more selective approach to engagement in Central Asia and the Caucasus: by encouraging migration from Kyrgyzstan and Armenia, while discouraging illegal migration, especially from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, Russia hopes to produce a more manageable scale of labour migration across borders.

There is some evidence that Russian medium-sized business investments have been increasing since 2012. However, the most significant investments have occurred through state initiative

5.2. Strategic investments

Russian commercial investments by private companies were very limited in the post-Soviet period. One interviewee commented: "... if we consider the Kyrgyz-Russian, Kyrgyz-Turkish and Kyrgyz-Chinese joint enterprises, then of course with Russia we have the least of all."¹⁶ There is some evidence that Russian medium-sized business investments have been increasing since 2012. However, the most significant investments have occurred through state initiative. During President Putin's visit to Bishkek in September 2012, he announced a series of state-directed economic measures that were explicitly tied to closer security and political linkages with Moscow. Russia focused on key strategic areas of investment that would produce the maximum institutionalisation of Russian influence and play to Russia's areas of particular expertise.

In hydroelectricity, Russia offered investment in the construction of the Kambarata-1 hydroelectric plant (with Russian energy holding company Inter RAO UES leading the project) and the construction by RusHydro of the Upper Naryn hydropower plant cascade (Gladilin, 2013). The Kambarata-1 plan involves constructing one of the largest dams in the world to fuel a huge hydro scheme that promises to solve Kyrgyzstan's energy needs and offer the potential for export to China. The project dates back to the Soviet period, but needs at least \$2bn in investment. It has also been strongly opposed by Uzbekistan, because of the potential impact

16 Interview, parliamentary deputy, Bishkek, November 2013.

on downstream agriculture. Some reports suggest RAO-UES was also unenthusiastic about the deal, seeing it as commercially and politically risky (Eurasianet, 2013).

Russia's second major long-term investment was in Kyrgyzstan's gas distribution system. In an agreement signed in April 2014, Russia's Gazprom purchased the struggling Kyrgyz utility company KyrgyzgazProm LLC, setting up Gazprom Kyrgyzstan as the exclusive importer of natural gas in Kyrgyzstan, and the owner of the Republic's gas transport and distribution systems. Gazprom promised some 35bn roubles of investment in 2015-2017 and an increase in gas supply from 22 per cent to 66 per cent of the population (Gazprom, 2015). The geopolitical implications of such an investment became immediately clear, when Uzbekistan refused to provide any more gas for the southern districts of Kyrgyzstan, an embargo that lasted until December 2014 (Kommersant, 2014). Uzbekistan finally relented during the 2014-15 winter, reportedly after Russian pressure. The Gazprom ownership and investment programme has been agreed at an interstate level, and the investment programme extends up to 2030. Such strategic investments ensure a long-term institutionalisation of Russia's role in Kyrgyzstan's energy sector. However, the government has few other options for investment in the sector, and Gazprom offers both investment and much needed expertise to maintain an ageing Soviet-era distribution system. For the most part, although they were criticised by the political opposition in Kyrgyzstan, which argued that such deals undermine Kyrgyz sovereignty (Kalybekova, 2013), Russian strategic investments in the energy sector appear to have been viewed by the wider population as largely legitimate.

In Armenia, Russian strategic investments in energy have been matched by similar acquisitions in the transport sector (Lewis, 2014). There have been similar intentions in Kyrgyzstan. In February 2014, the Russian oil major Rosneft appeared to have agreed a deal to manage Bishkek's Manas airport, but later reports suggested that the investment had been put on hold, as Chinese companies also bid for a \$1bn investment (Satke, 2014). Some analysts suggest that this apparent setback was the result of Western sanctions on Russia: more likely delays and problems in Russian investments in Kyrgyzstan are primarily the result of manoeuvring by Kyrgyz elites, attempting to maximise their advantage by using geopolitical competition to raise the investment stakes.

6. Eurasian Economic Union

An important strand in the literature on both global and regional hegemony has been its ability to reproduce dominance and enhance legitimacy through the creation of institutions. These secondary institutions provide a rule-based institutional process that allows hegemony to be informed by multilateral participation. Effective secondary institutions improve the legitimacy of hegemonic relationships by imposing constraints on the dominance of the hegemon through the use of supranational bodies and agreed rule sets to manage interstate relations, and ensuring that hegemony is characterised by the provision of public goods through such institutions. The Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which entered into force among Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus on 1 January 2015, is designed to produce just such an effect of legitimation, consciously borrowing from the regulatory and institutional innovations of the European Union.

The EEU emerged on the basis of the earlier Customs Union, which had been established in 2010 among Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus. The Customs Union removed customs barriers

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among the three countries, but raised tariff and non-tariff barriers with other states, leading to a sharp decline in trade across the Kyrgyz-Kazakh border. Liberalising trade across this border became an important goal for the Kyrgyz authorities and helped to persuade them to accede to the EEU, despite the potential negative impact on traders involved in a lucrative import and re-export trade in Kyrgyzstan for Chinese consumer goods. Opposition to the EEU in Kyrgyzstan was led by pro-Western liberals, some Kyrgyz nationalists, and those involved in the cross-border trade with China. But a majority of the population appear to have been in favour. In a 2014 poll, some 71 per cent of respondents favoured joining the EEU (Trilling, 2014).

Evidence from transport data provide an alternative empirical basis for the idea that deeper integration with Russia reflects more than just a political project in the Kremlin, but also institutionalises existing links at a popular level. Air link data, which have been used elsewhere to measure processes of regionalisation (Good, 2011; Derudder, 2005), reflect the importance of Russia in Kyrgyzstan's external ties. Out of 167 scheduled international flights in one week in January 2015, 109 were destined for Russia, compared with just 11 to China. Flight schedules only offer a rough approximation of existing travel and economic links, but the preponderance of links to Russia, catering above all to labour migrants, is striking. In January 2015, there were 49 flights a week to Russia from Bishkek, and 60 from Osh. By comparison there were 27 scheduled flights to Turkey from Osh and Bishkek, and 11 to China (all to Urumqi).¹⁷

During 2012-13 negotiations of a "Road Map" for Kyrgyzstan's entry into the EEU were often accompanied by public stand-offs between the two sides (Eurasianet, 2012). President Atambaev announced that he "would not be pressured by anyone", and asserted that Kyrgyzstan would only sign if the agreement met its interests (Kabar, 2013). Western analysts interpreted these public spats as evidence of a deep-seated reluctance on the part of the Kyrgyz leadership to join the new pact, perceiving "thinly disguised aversion" to the project in the statements of Kyrgyz officials (Casey, 2014a; Casey, 2014b). A more convincing account suggests that these clashes were partly about maximising various forms of financial compensation for Kyrgyzstan as, and gaining agreement to delay the implementation of the most damaging aspects of the Customs Union, particularly those related to the re-export of Chinese goods. Most polls appear to show a large majority of the population in favour of joining the EEU, although a significant minority remained sceptical about the political and economic benefits of the Union, pointing to the risk of inflation from higher prices for imported goods and the difficulties of developing more manufacturing capacity to replace the expected downturn in trade (Kloop.kg, 2014).

In May 2014 a Road Map to join the EEU was eventually agreed by Kyrgyzstan, which involved multiple regulatory and legislative changes, and a complete overhaul of Kyrgyz customs regulations and procedures. Negotiations continued to focus on the monetary compensation Kyrgyzstan requested to bolster its agricultural and industrial output to compensate for its expected losses in cross-border trade. In late November 2014, a joint Russian-Kyrgyz Development Fund was agreed, including 500m USD capital and a low-interest loan of 500m USD (Kommersant, 2014, November; Yedovina, 2014). This appears to have been sufficient to persuade the Kyrgyz leadership to proceed with the deal, although the alternative – exclusion

In May 2014 a Road Map to join the EEU was eventually agreed by Kyrgyzstan, which involved multiple regulatory and legislative changes

17 Such data can only offer approximations. Moscow and Istanbul both act as transit nodes for other international destinations. Many people from Kyrgyzstan also use Almaty airport in Kazakhstan, which offers a wider range of international destinations, including EU destinations. Data retrieved from http://www.concept.kg/eng/business_travel/airtickets/schedule_osh/ and http://www.concept.kg/eng/business_travel/airtickets/schedule_bishkek/

from a Russian-Kazakh trading zone and possible new restrictions on migration – was never an economically viable option.

On 23 December 2014, President Atambaev signed the agreement for Kyrgyzstan to join the EEU, and the Kyrgyz authorities began the legislative and regulatory amendments required by the Road Map. Russia began multi-million-dollar infrastructure upgrades for its customs services, particularly on the border with China. Kyrgyzstan finally joined the EEU fully in May 2015, with full compliance with new customs procedures expected to be achieved by January 2017 (Kloop.kg, 2015). In reality, preparation was slow. At the beginning of April 2015, only one of 96 laboratories in the country had received accreditation for analysis of foodstuffs to the new standards, and a whole range of questions – from certification of goods to customs procedures – remained unclear to local businesspeople. Only the Irkeshtam border post with China – recipient of 6m USD investment by Russia – was expected to be ready by early May (Mikhailov, 2015).

The EEU represented the final step in institutionalising a qualitatively new framework for Russo-Kyrgyz relations, which combined security, economic and political cooperation in long-term, institutional forms that sought to maximise the legitimacy of Russia's hegemonic role in the region. This framework, however, faced significant challenges, primarily as a result of the downturn in the Russian economy in 2014-2015. This reduced the level of remittances for many economic migrants, which had an impact on construction and trade sectors inside Kyrgyzstan, and raised questions over Russia's commitments to long-term strategic investments in Kyrgyzstan and its ability to ensure the continued viability of the EEU.

7. The EEU and the New Silk Road

Although there are tensions in the Kyrgyz-Russian relationship, even Kyrgyz nationalists do not offer an alternative regional spatial imaginary for Kyrgyzstan's development. US models of Central Asia as a region linked to South Asia through Afghanistan, Turkish models of a greater Turkic world or Islamist spatial conceptions of a new political order in the region are widely dismissed in Kyrgyz society as fanciful or undesirable. Unlike Ukraine or Georgia, there is no alternative cartography among Kyrgyz nationalists that could mobilise support for a shift in foreign policy.

The only alternative spatial project builds on the growing economic and political relationship with China, and reflects the regional map constructed by the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Indeed, in material terms, China challenges Russian dominance in the Central Asian region, with extensive investments in infrastructure and an apparent willingness to provide certain types of public goods through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and a "New Silk Road" project, announced in September 2014, to which it has committed 40bn USD, but which so far lacks a clear organisational structure. In March 2015 Kyrgyzstan joined the Chinese-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which has an initial commitment of 50bn USD, and which Central Asian states hoped would be a major source of funds for the region.

Sino-Russian relations involve both cooperation and competition in the region, but there is no doubt that China's extensive economic plans for Central Asia are viewed as a potential threat for Russia's strategy, and there is thus some competition between rival regional structures in

There is no doubt that China's extensive economic plans for Central Asia are viewed as a potential threat for Russia's strategy

Central Asia. For example, China has attempted to promote the SCO (in which Russia and four of the Central Asian states are members) as the basis for economic assistance to the region, but this has been opposed by Russia, which instead proposed an alternative banking structure based on the existing Russian-led Eurasian Development Bank, based in Almaty (Gabuyev, 2014). As a result, China has proposed alternative structures to fund projects in SCO members – such as a 20bn USD China-Eurasia Fund – but it has also continued a vibrant bilateral investment programme. In December 2014, for example, Kazakhstan and China signed contracts worth 14bn USD (Gabuyev, 2014). Chinese ambassador to Russia Li Hui argued that the New Silk Road project is compatible with the EEU project (Kommersant, 2015), and the Russian and Chinese governments have opened negotiations to ensure cooperation between the two projects (Butrin & Yedovina, 2015). In practice, however, tensions between Chinese and Russian economic strategies are likely to emerge, further contesting Russia's reassertive hegemony.

8. Conclusion

In an op-ed in 2014, Masha Gessen argued that Kyrgyzstan had become the victim of a newly expansionist Russia, claiming that “Kyrgyzstan is a perfect lab rat: It is small and poor and extremely susceptible to Russian pressure” (Gessen, 2014). In reality, Kyrgyzstan is not simply the unwilling and impotent target of Russian expansionist policies – closer integration with Russia is supported by a large majority of the population and offers potential economic benefits for some business and political elites and for many labour migrants. Both Russian and Kyrgyz elites and much of society share a common spatial imaginary that is not challenged by any other emerging geopolitical cartography, even that of China and the SCO. Thus the relationship with Russia represents a classic hegemonic relationship, in which both coercion and consent are intertwined and relations are institutionalised in bilateral and multilateral mechanisms.

Using the concept of regional hegemony, with its emphasis on shared norms and legitimacy, offers a useful framework that emphasises Russia's potential to develop a new legitimised spatial presence in the CIS, and also emphasises the limits to its potential reassertion of influence. Russia's policy in Kyrgyzstan represents a model for developing a hierarchical relationship with a neighbouring state where pro-Russian sentiment is relatively widespread. The outstanding feature of these policies has been the ability to combine state-led political, military and economic policies, together with actions aimed at producing symbolic, discursive and ideational effects. Such policies are probably difficult to replicate in other Central Asian states, such as Uzbekistan, where nationalist sentiment is higher and Russia's levers of influence are weaker, and where legitimation of Russian dominance is therefore more difficult. Indeed, the need for Russia to acquire some level of consent and legitimation for its policies in the region suggests that its policy of a resurgent Eurasianism faces significant constraints.

Moscow's reassertive hegemony in the region also faces other serious challenges, notably in economic affairs. Russia's hegemonic position is dependent on the success of the EEU as a trading zone, the continued availability of jobs for Kyrgyz labour migrants, and success in delivering effective investments in the energy sector. As the Russian economy faces a troubled period of low growth it may prove difficult to maintain economic assistance and investment and employment for migrants. However, since its instruments of soft power are relatively ineffective, Russia's ability to continue to supply economic benefits to Kyrgyzstan is critical. If Russia is unable to deliver on its economic promises, pro-Moscow elites may face the kind of

political turmoil that has rocked Kyrgyz politics twice before in the 2000s, with unpredictable political and geopolitical consequences.

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