


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Post-Soviet power hierarchies in the making: Postcolonialism in Tajikistan's relations with Russia

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(Received 14 August 2023; revised 31 March 2024; accepted 3 April 2024)

Abstract

This article explores post-Soviet power hierarchies which constitute a unique system of vertical stratification in world politics. It does so by analysing relations between two former Soviet states, Tajikistan and Russia, in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991. The article investigates the underlying reasons for power asymmetries between the two countries, the ways hierarchies are sustained and enforced, as well as perceived and navigated at political and social levels. It is argued that Tajikistan's relations with Russia are explicitly postcolonial without clear-cut colonial precedents in Soviet times. Postcolonialism did not automatically result from the Soviet breakdown. Rather, it has gradually emerged because of the two countries' very different paths of integration into the global capitalist economy, which subordinated Tajikistan to Russia. In this way, new economic asymmetries exacerbated Soviet-era legacies and reinvented them in a new, hierarchical manner. Overall, the article contributes to the debate on the nature of post-Soviet legacies and what it means to be post-Soviet.

Keywords: hierarchies; postcolonialism; post-Soviet; Russia; Soviet Union; Tajikistan

Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 coincided with a high-level inter-parliamentary Tajik–Russian forum taking place in Tajikistan. The event aimed to further advance bilateral cooperation between the two states, which until 1991 had been part of the Soviet Union. As I observed when walking around Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan, several big posters had been placed in the centre of the city in preparation for the event. One of them stated in both Tajik and Russian languages: 'The Republic of Tajikistan and the Russian Federation are united by traditional, friendly relations of strategic partnership, built on the principles of friendly respect and deep trust.' But rather than reflecting the actual situation, this statement seemed sadly ironic. Far from being equal partners, following the breakdown of the Soviet Union the relationship between these two countries became increasingly hierarchical, with Russia in the driving seat of their interactions.

The Soviet collapse resulted in the independence of its 15 constituent republics. As part of this process, both Tajikistan and Russia became members of the international community as independent states. While theoretically equal in terms of their sovereignty, their domestic circumstances differed significantly. Tajikistan embraced independence as a small, landlocked, and resource-poor country and quickly plunged into a devastating civil war (1992–7). Russia, in contrast, emerged from the Soviet Union as its successor state. While Russia also experienced an economic crisis in the 1990s, it was nonetheless in a highly advantageous position as compared to other former Soviet republics. It can be argued that Russia hijacked Soviet history and assets, making them

its own. For example, Russia automatically acquired the Soviet Union's seat on the United Nations Security Council as a permanent member, and all Soviet embassies around the world became embassies of Russia. It also inherited much of the Soviet-era infrastructure and assets. These plain facts reveal that Tajikistan and Russia embraced independence in very different ways. As a result, over the last three decades Tajikistan has gradually found itself in a highly subordinated position vis-à-vis Russia. The country also became a provider of cheap labour to Russia, where currently more than 1 million out of 10 million Tajik¹ citizens live and work.

By analysing asymmetric power relations between Tajikistan and Russia, this article speaks to the literature on hierarchies in International Relations (IR). Hierarchies in world politics refer to multiple systems of stratification which are organised vertically, with dominating states at the top and subordinated ones at the bottom.² Recent contributions pointed to a variety of hierarchies in international relations which differ based on underlying reasons (i.e. why hierarchies emerge), operational mechanisms (how they are enforced and maintained), and reactions (how they are navigated, accepted, or resisted).³ Inspired by these contributions, I explore the logic and modus operandi of post-Soviet power hierarchies, taking the case of Tajikistan's relations with Russia. In this regard, the first overarching argument which the article advances is that post-Sovietness constitutes a structural condition in international relations. Post-Soviet power hierarchies should be seen as a distinct system of stratification in world politics, whereby the economic dimension of subordination is dominant and precedes and influences political, social, and ideational subjection to Russia. In other words, the type and scale of economic dependence shape an inferior type of subjectivity, understood as a collective process of making sense of itself, or, more accurately, inter-subjectivity with Russia. Compared to other countries of the former Soviet Union, Tajikistan's economic dependence on Russia is arguably the most acute, and so are the other resulting forms of its subservience to Russia. The Baltic states, for instance, provide an opposite case to Tajikistan in that after 1991 they fully reoriented themselves towards Europe and in 2004 joined the European Union (EU). As their economies disentangled from Russia, the political, social, and ideational dimensions of post-Soviet hierarchies with Russia loosened. Such an approach, which starts from underlying structures and then analyses the resulting subjectivity, is different from emerging studies which take post-Soviet subjectivities as their starting point and unpack their forms and manifestations to then make claims about broader historical, economic, and political structures.⁴

The specific workings of post-Soviet international relations and post-Sovietness as such, as a structural condition and a type of relationality in IR as a discipline, will benefit from further conceptualisation and nuancing. This is because the 'post-Soviet argument' is often used casually, and authors tend to apply it to highlight very diverse phenomena lacking a common denominator. For instance, Soviet legacies are frequently indicated as a factor explaining continuity between Soviet and post-Soviet institutions and governance models (such as endurance of corruption and centralisation of power) which are detrimental from a liberal-democratic perspective.⁵ The post-Soviet, used as an adjective, is often used in a temporal way to designate events which took place

¹The adjective 'Tajik' is used with a civic rather than ethnic meaning. It includes other ethnicities living in Tajikistan, while excludes ethnic Tajiks living in Uzbekistan and Afghanistan.

²Janice Mattern and Ayşe Zarakol, 'Hierarchies in world politics', *International Organization*, 70:3 (2016), pp. 623–54 (p. 624).

³E.g. Alexander Cooley, *Logics of Hierarchy: The Organization of Empires, States, and Military Occupation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); David Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009); Alexander Barder, *Empire Within: International Hierarchy and Its Imperial Laboratories of Governance* (London: Routledge, 2015).

⁴Madina Tlostanova, *What Does It Mean to Be Post-Soviet? Decolonial Art from the Ruins of the Soviet Empire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018); Diana Ibañez-Tirado, "'How can I be post-Soviet if I was never Soviet?'" Rethinking categories of time and social change: A perspective from Kulob, southern Tajikistan', *Central Asian Survey*, 34:2 (2015), pp. 190–203.

⁵Alexander Libman and Anastassia Obydenkova, 'Communism or communists? Soviet legacies and corruption in transition economies', *Economics Letters*, 119:1 (2013), pp. 101–3; Vladimir Gel'man, 'Political foundations of bad governance in post-Soviet Eurasia: Towards a research agenda', *East European Politics*, 33:4 (2017), pp. 496–516; Aziz Burkhanov, 'Soviet legacy and

after 1991, but simultaneously it is commonly applied in a geographical and regional manner to group together countries which emerged after the Soviet collapse. From another perspective, post-Sovietness is increasingly dismissed as a concept that is unable to accurately summarise political developments taking place across the vast and diverse former Soviet space, and in recent years various alternative categories have emerged to replace it. One prominent concept is the notion of the Global East, proposed by Martin Müller,⁶ which aims to capture the former Soviet countries' liminal position in international politics. The Global East thus captures a feeling that – historically, politically, and economically – the former Second World does not sit comfortably either with the Global North (the former First World) or the South (the former Third World).⁷ However, precisely because of its meta orientation *beyond* the post-Soviet region, while appealing on an international scale, the notion of the Global East cannot help us understand power asymmetries which emerge at a meso- and micro-level *within* this region. Here, as I argue, the post-Soviet lens maintains its analytical potential. By exploring the ties between Tajikistan and Russia, the article shows that post-Soviet hierarchies represent a unique asymmetric system with its own distinct, nuanced patterns of authority, legitimacy, control, subordination, and also subversion.

The second argument advanced in this article, related specifically to the case of Tajikistan's relations with Russia, is that these relations are clearly postcolonial without necessarily being post-colonial. While in academic literature these two terms are commonly used interchangeably, I follow here a convention that differentiates between hyphenated 'post-colonialism', which denotes a chronological aftermath of the historical condition of colonialism, and unhyphenated 'post-colonialism', which implies a possible displacement of colonial discourses, practices, and power relations beyond colonial contexts.⁸ Post-Soviet power relations differ from 'classical' post-colonial hierarchies which came into being in the aftermath of Western colonialism, for example, in the case of European colonisation of Africa and Asia. In those cases, we observe an extension of colonial-era patterns of capitalist economic exploitation into the period of independence.⁹ But in the Soviet case, in 1991 there was a systemic rupture in economic relations between the Soviet republics. The joint command economy based on redistribution and vast welfare provision was dismantled and replaced by new, separate capitalist systems in countries that emerged from the Soviet Union. Thus, without clear-cut colonial foundations in Soviet times, new arrangements which emerged between most independent states and Russia resemble post-colonial relations without a clear-cut colonial past – which makes them postcolonial.

Empirically, the article unfolds this argument by examining three aspects of Tajikistan's relations with Russia. First, it shows that the nature of the Soviet period in Tajikistan was by no means straightforward. It was characterised by a mixture of socially colonising and economically modernising features which overall make it difficult to call the Soviet Union clear-cut colonial. In societal terms – that is, considering Moscow's attempts to eradicate local ways of knowing and living and remodel the local population across the vast Soviet state into one Soviet nation – this period carried more explicit colonial traits. Local agency was clearly subordinated to social norms and values defined in Moscow, which were imposed on Tajikistan. Moreover, despite the rhetoric

new institutions', in Michael Howlett and Jale Tosun (eds), *Policy Styles and Policy-Making: Exploring the Linkages* (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 222–41.

⁶Martin Müller, 'In search of the Global East: Thinking between North and South', *Geopolitics*, 25:3 (2020), pp. 734–55.

⁷Shairbek Dzhuraev, 'How southern is Central Asia?', *APSA-CP Newsletter (American Political Science Association)*, 31:2 (2021), pp. 97–105.

⁸Gyan Prakash, 'Who's afraid of postcoloniality?', *Social Text*, 49 (1996), pp. 187–203 (p. 188); Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 168–73.

⁹See, e.g., Matthew Lange, James Mahoney, and Matthias Vom Hau, 'Colonialism and development: A comparative analysis of Spanish and British colonies', *American Journal of Sociology*, 111:5 (2006), pp. 1412–62; Thaddeus Sunseri, 'Exploiting the Urwald: German post-colonial forestry in Poland and Central Africa, 1900–1960', *Past & Present*, 214:1 (2012), pp. 305–42; Ewout Frankema and Frans Buelens (eds), *Colonial Exploitation and Economic Development: The Belgian Congo and the Netherlands Indies Compared* (London: Routledge, 2013); Kenneth Kalu and Toyin Falola (eds), *Exploitation, Colonialism, and Postcolonial Misrule in Africa* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

of the friendship of nations, which stressed equality and solidarity of different cultures and ethnicities across the Soviet state, the Russian language was prioritised, and people of Slavic ethnicity had a higher status and enjoyed more privileges than others, in this case Tajiks. But in economic terms, the Soviet rule in Tajikistan did not rely on colonial extraction of resources and was, in fact, modernising, particularly considering infrastructure development and vast welfare provision to the population. Second, after describing the Soviet-era precedents of contemporary relations between Tajikistan and Russia, the article analyses how these relations developed after 1991 and explains why they have gained over time an explicitly postcolonial character in economic and consequently also political, social, and ideational domains.¹⁰ Rather than resulting from a continuation of Soviet-era patterns to the post-Soviet period, this postcolonialism has gradually emerged as a result of Tajikistan's and Russia's different integration into the global capitalist economy. Post-Soviet relations are constantly in the making, in that they were not determined by the Soviet collapse, once and for all, but since then they have been constantly evolving by accounting for new economic conditions and international political events (such as the war on terror or the Russo-Ukrainian war). After 1991, the two countries were reconnected through a new economic model which relies on supply and demand for cheap labour. New economic asymmetries which emerged in this way, with Tajikistan as the labour-supply country and Russia as the destination market, exacerbated Soviet-era social hierarchies between Slavic and non-Slavic people (in this case Russians and Tajiks) by reinventing them in a new, capitalist manner. By defining Tajik people as a disposable labour force serving the Russian economy, Tajik citizens became subordinated to Russian citizens in a new way. Third, having explained the determinants of postcolonialism as a key feature in Tajikistan's relations with Russia, the article analyses ideational manifestations of postcolonialism by zooming in on political and societal reactions in Tajikistan to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This event served as an amplifier of Tajikistan's post-Soviet condition in that it magnified a feeling of inferiority that the Tajik government and society developed vis-à-vis Russia and Russians.

The aim of examining Tajikistan's relations with Russia is not to offer a representative or replicable conceptualisation of post-Sovietness that would be directly applicable to other parts of the post-Soviet space – although the conclusion reflects on similarities with other Central Asian countries. The case of Tajikistan constitutes one variation of how post-Soviet power hierarchies operate, albeit a very important one considering the deepness of the two countries' historical, political, economic, and social entanglements. The analysis focuses specifically on Tajikistan's perspective: highlighting how the post-Soviet relation is navigated by the subordinated, rather than the dominating party. As a way of reasoning, the article is inductive, and it outlines empirical data to then make broader conceptual claims. Methodologically, the analysis is informed by my long-term fieldwork in Tajikistan, conducted regularly since 2013, in total amounting to over four years. It draws on observations, interviews, and informal conversations with policymakers and civil society leaders and analysis of local printed and online media. These data are complemented by a review of relevant academic literature in English, Tajik, and Russian languages.

Precedents: Tajikistan in Soviet times

Dependence and autonomy within the Soviet framework

A historical, albeit sketchy overview of Tajikistan's entanglements with Russia before and during the Soviet times allows us to contextualise post-1991 interactions between these two countries. Tajikistan's and Russia's histories have been intertwined since the second half of the 19th century, when the Russian Empire started expanding its territory to the south, gradually progressing

¹⁰ Another relevant dimension concerns security. While the empirical part of this article mentions the main security and military arrangements between Tajikistan and Russia, Scarborough explored more in depth how the integration of Tajik and Russian security services before the Soviet collapse and during the Tajik civil war created substantial limits to Tajikistan's sovereignty. See Isaac Scarborough, 'The USSR is dead: Long live the USSR? Tajikistan's inconclusive transition to security (in)dependence, 1991–1992', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 74:2 (2022), pp. 219–36.

towards south-eastern parts of Central Asia.¹¹ This relation thus started on colonial grounds. The territory of today's Tajikistan, which back then belonged to the Emirate of Bukhara, was conquered by the Russian Empire in 1886 and subsequently governed as Russian Turkestan. Russian colonisation faced resistance from local Muslim political movements, including the Basmachi (meaning bandits in Uzbek) who opposed the Russian imperial and later the Soviet rule of the region.¹²

The Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 and a subsequent revolutionary change of government in Russia resulted in the establishment of the Soviet Union, which consequently impacted on the status of the Central Asian region, including Tajikistan. The Soviet Union was a de facto successor state to the Russian Empire, but it also undertook a task of rebuilding itself a new socialist state. On the one hand, the new Soviet government aimed to ideologically break with the imperial past and create an egalitarian, just and communist society. As a result, citizenship rights were expanded to all peoples inhabiting its vast territory, making no difference between Soviet Russia and Central Asia. On the other hand, despite its decolonising attitude, the Soviet Union did not give up the lands in the South Caucasus and Central Asia that were colonised by the Russian Empire. This shows that there were, as Kandiyoti wrote, both 'continuities and discontinuities between the colonial and Soviet periods.'¹³

The borders of Tajikistan, as they appear on the map until this day, were drawn up in the 1920s by Soviet policymakers. Indeed, the beginnings of Tajikistan as a separate organised political entity date back to 1924. In the process of the national delimitation of Soviet Central Asia, this Tajikistan initially appeared as the Tajik Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic and was part of the larger Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic. In 1929, the status of Tajikistan was upgraded as a national entity for Tajik people, i.e. the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic. Until the Soviet Union's disintegration in 1991, Tajikistan was part of the federal single-party system and was governed by the Tajik branch of the Communist Party. While decision-making in Tajikistan, as in the remaining 14 Soviet republics, was structurally dependent on the Central Committee of the Communist Party based in Moscow, it was also characterised by significant levels of autonomy.

Stalin's death in 1953 opened a series of political reforms in the Soviet Union. During the so-called Khrushchev Thaw (1953–64), repression and censorship were significantly relaxed. In an attempt to breathe new life into the Soviet governance system, the terms of Soviet modernisation were renegotiated. This had several repercussions in Central Asia, ranging from enhancing cotton production and fostering industrialisation to decentralisation through bringing to power a new generation of local leaders in this region.¹⁴ The Soviet Union underwent further internal transformation when reapproaching the Third World countries during the decolonisation of Africa and Asia between 1945 and 1960. Within this process, as Kalinovsky argued, Central Asia was decolonised within the Soviet framework.¹⁵ With the Soviet Union trying to stress striking differences between the lifeworlds of Muslim and non-white people in the Soviet Union and the ways European colonial powers treated colonised nations across South America, Africa, and Asia, the autonomy of Soviet republics in Central Asia increased even more. In addition, the geographical and cultural distance of the Central Asian Soviet republics from Moscow also contributed to this region's autonomy, given that party officials in the centre were not always so well aware of

¹¹Alexander Morrison, *The Russian Conquest of Central Asia: A Study in Imperial Expansion, 1814–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

¹²Beatrice Penati, 'The reconquest of East Bukhara: The struggle against the Basmachi as a prelude to Sovietization', *Central Asian Survey*, 26:4 (2007), pp. 521–38.

¹³Deniz Kandiyoti, 'Post-colonialism compared: Potentials and limitations in the Middle East and Central Asia', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 34:2 (2002), pp. 279–97 (p. 286).

¹⁴Artemy Kalinovsky, 'Not some British colony in Africa: The politics of decolonization and modernization in Soviet Central Asia, 1955–1964', *Ab Imperio*, 213:2 (2013), pp. 191–222 (pp. 198–9).

¹⁵Artemy Kalinovsky, *Laboratory of Socialist Development: Cold War Politics and Decolonization in Soviet Tajikistan* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), p. 20.

what was happening in peripheral republics.¹⁶ These overlapping processes reveal that while governance processes in Tajikistan were subordinated to Moscow, at the same time they were also largely independent from it, both officially and in everyday practice.

Similar difficulties arise when trying to grasp the impact of Soviet ideology on the local population. The ambition to create one Soviet people, a nation that would rely on the proletariat as its main social class, demanded high degrees of social engineering. In this process, Muslim parts of the Soviet Union were subject to an intense women's emancipation campaign in the 1920s and 1930s. This process involved violent practices of eradication of Muslim identities, including through the forced unveiling of women.¹⁷ But besides such controversial practices of interference in the local normative fabric, there were other top-down interventions which were benevolent to the well-being of the population. For example, they involved investment in universal literacy, education, and public healthcare. Provision of welfare was extended to the most distant parts of the Soviet Union, including the mountainous and barely accessible area of Badakhshan in Tajikistan.¹⁸

A similar ambiguity is visible also in the case of the Soviet economy. Within the Soviet framework, which relied on a centralised command economy, Tajikistan was ascribed the role of a supplier of raw materials. This resulted in the emergence of a cotton quasi-monoculture in this region.¹⁹ But in this case, too, forced resettlement and collectivisation campaigns which were implemented to enhance cotton production were intertwined with ambitious modernisation projects.²⁰ Construction of housing for workers, social infrastructures (schools and hospitals), roads, railways, power supplies, dams, and canals completely transformed the territory of Tajikistan. As elsewhere in the Soviet Union, in Tajikistan the provision of socio-economic services to the working population, and not only the elites, was the positive side of the Soviet top-down governance. Welfare and security of state-provided jobs were an intrinsic part of the Soviet social contract. This contract, in exchange for citizens' compliance, guaranteed the durability of the system – until market-oriented reforms in the late Soviet period destabilised the bases of this contract, ultimately contributing to the Soviet collapse.²¹

A simultaneously colonial and modernising structure

There has been a long ongoing academic debate on how to 'classify' the Soviet experience in Tajikistan and other parts of Central Asia, which reflects on some of the aforementioned ambiguities.²² Some arguments point to parallels between the Soviet period in Central Asia and governance of overseas colonies of European powers such as Britain, France, and the Netherlands. Martin, for example, described the Soviet Union as an 'affirmative action empire' which was 'designed to avoid the perception of empire'.²³ Similar arguments focus on the invasive nature of Soviet establishment and consolidation in Central Asia, the de facto primacy of the Russian language and Slavic

¹⁶See, e.g., Riccardo Cucciolla, 'Legitimation through self-victimization: The Uzbek cotton affair and its repression narrative (1989–1991)', *Cahiers du monde russe*, 3 (2017), pp. 639–68; Karolina Kluczevska and Niso Hojjeva, 'Socialist in form, "national" in content? Art and ideology in Soviet Tajikistan', *Nationalities Papers*, 50:2 (2022), pp. 372–94.

¹⁷Marianne Kamp, *The New Woman in Uzbekistan: Islam, Modernity, and Unveiling under Communism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006).

¹⁸Salmaan Keshavjee, *Blind Spot: How Neoliberalism Infiltrated Global Health* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014), pp. 21–37.

¹⁹Irna Hofman, 'Cotton, control, and continuity in disguise: The political economy of agrarian transformation in lowland Tajikistan', PhD thesis, Leiden University, 2019, pp. 11–16.

²⁰Kalinovsky, 'Laboratory of socialist development'; for an overview of agricultural and industrial indicators see, e.g., D. Chumichev (ed.), *Sovetskiy Soyuz: Tadzhikistan* (Moscow: Izdatelstvo Mysl, 1968), pp. 68–90.

²¹Linda Cook, *The Soviet Social Contract and Why It Failed: Welfare Policy and Workers' Politics from Brezhnev to Yeltsin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

²²Laura Adams, 'Can we apply postcolonial theory to Central Eurasia?', *Central Eurasian Studies Review*, 7:1 (2008), pp. 2–7 (pp. 2–4).

²³Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 19.

people over other ethnicities,²⁴ and discursive representations of local cultures and knowledge as incompatible with modernity.²⁵ Opposite arguments, however, point to the fact that the Soviet Union aimed at inducing a radical social change and, unlike in the case of European colonies, all citizens of the Soviet Union shared the same rights and responsibilities. They also note that the Soviet principle of economic equalisation allowed social, economic, and political opportunities to be provided for otherwise disadvantaged social groups, whereas the command economy allowed the redistribution of goods between Soviet republics and led to a significant increase in the quality of people's lives. Accounting for these aspects, Khalid proposed viewing the Soviet Union as a 'modern mobilizational state'.²⁶ Overall, there seems to be a consensus about a need to reject the binary thinking between colonialism and modernisation and instead to recognise the 'contradictory, ambiguous and complex nature of the Soviet'.²⁷ The question of whether the Soviet Union was colonising requires the period (the early or late Soviet era) and space (in Eastern Europe or Central Asia, in urban or rural areas, etc.) to be specified, as well as exactly which social groups are meant (women or men, working class or elites).²⁸

The way in which the Soviet Union disintegrated adds further nuances to how Tajikistan's positionality within the Soviet framework can be assessed. A commonly cited argument, proposed by Olcott, states that in 1991 Central Asian republics were forcefully 'catapulted to independence'.²⁹ This formulation implies that the region became independent against its will, unlike for example the Baltics which welcomed independence from the Soviet Union. While there was no mass pro-independence movement in this region, as in the Baltics, Central Asian republics in the late Soviet period were not deprived of agency. When the Soviet reform project of *perestroika* (1985–91) was launched by Mikhail Gorbachev, several small oppositional groups with democratic, nationalist, and religious agendas became active in Central Asia. In Tajikistan, these circles demanded more autonomy for the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic and more recognition of both the Tajik language and Muslim religious values.³⁰ But these postulates were not synonymous with demands for independence. In the all-union referendum on the fate of the Soviet Union in March 1991, the population of Soviet Tajikistan overwhelmingly voted in support of the preservation of the union by a resounding 96.2%. As Suyarkulova argued, Central Asia's path to independence 'teaches us a fascinating lesson in the various meanings of the concept of "sovereignty" that different political organizations, institutions and groups negotiated over the course of Soviet history'.³¹ The oppositional groups, general population, and political elites in Soviet Tajikistan did not aspire to sovereignty understood as independence, but rather sovereignty as greater autonomy of Tajikistan within a renewed Soviet framework.³²

While it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the nuances of Soviet-era governance, the aim of the first section was to explain that, although to a large extent ambiguous, Tajikistan's

²⁴ Botakoz Kassymbekova, *Despite Cultures: Early Soviet Rule in Tajikistan* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016); Jeff Sahadeo, 'Black snouts go home! Migration and race in late Soviet Leningrad and Moscow', *The Journal of Modern History*, 88:4 (2016), pp. 797–826.

²⁵ Alima Bisenova and Kulshat Medeuova, 'Davleniye metropoliy i tikhii natsionalizm akademicheskikh praktik', *Ab Imperio*, 4 (2016), pp. 207–55.

²⁶ Ahmed Khalid, 'Backwardness and the quest for civilization: Early Soviet Central Asia in comparative perspective', *Slavic Review*, 65:2 (2006), pp. 231–51 (p. 232).

²⁷ Sergey Abashin, 'Sovetskoe = kolonial'noe? (Za i protiv)', in Georgiy Mamedov and Oksana Shatalova (eds), *Ponyatiya o sovetskom v Tsentral'noy Azii* (Bishkek: SHTAB, 2016), pp. 28–49 (p. 45).

²⁸ E.g. Kandiyoti, 'Post-colonialism compared'; Malika Bahovadinova, 'The "mobile proletariat": The production of proletariat labor on a Soviet construction site', *Labor History*, 59:3 (2018), pp. 277–94.

²⁹ Marta Olcott, 'Central Asia's catapult to independence', *Foreign Affairs*, 71:3 (1991), pp. 108–30.

³⁰ Tim Epkenhans, *The Origins of the Civil War in Tajikistan: Nationalism, Islamism, and Violent Conflict in Post-Soviet Space* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), pp. 29–96.

³¹ Mohira Suyarkulova, 'Reluctant sovereigns? Central Asian states' path to independence', in Sally Cummings and Raymond Hinnebusch (eds), *Sovereignty after Empire: Comparing the Middle East and Central Asia* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), pp. 127–50 (p. 128).

³² Suyarkulova, 'Reluctant sovereigns?', pp. 138–9.

Soviet past clearly differed from the ‘classical’ colonial experience relying on settler colonialism and capitalist extraction. Recognising that Soviet precedents of relations between Tajikistan and Russia cannot be categorised as clear-cut colonial provides an important starting point to understand that post-1991 postcolonialism does not result from Soviet-era colonialism. As the next section shows, despite some undeniable Soviet path dependence, Tajikistan’s interactions with Russia have been diametrically reshaped by the global market economy.

The making of post-Soviet hierarchies: Tajikistan’s relations with Russia after 1991

Incremental political coupling and its consequences

With the breakup of the Soviet Union, the relationship between the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic and the Communist Party’s Central Committee in Moscow, which took place within Soviet communism and the command economy framework, ceased to exist. It was replaced by a new type of relationality between Tajikistan and Russia that takes place in the context of independent statehood and the global capitalist economy. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Tajikistan was torn by an internal conflict which broke out in a post-independence power vacuum. Meanwhile, as previously explained, Russia emerged from the Soviet collapse as the main successor state. Although Russia’s independence also coincided with serious political and economic disorder, it was nevertheless better equipped than other post-Soviet states, given that it inherited much of what had previously been joint Soviet assets.

Tajikistan was the only newly independent state in Central Asia where officials from the former Communist Party did not remain in power after rebranding themselves under democratic and nationalist banners. The country’s independence started from a five-year civil war (1992–7). Most common explanations as to why the conflict erupted include Islamic resurgence and deepening cleavages and competition between various regions within the country.³³ Consequently, the fighting fractions were divided along regional and religious lines.³⁴ But, as Scarborough argued, the deeper, structural reasons behind the war are to be found in the late Soviet-era Moscow-design marketising reforms implemented by Mikhail Gorbachev in the late 1980s, which destabilised the Soviet planned economy. These reforms caused an economic breakdown in Soviet Tajikistan, which eventually led to a social disorder as well as activated regional, ideological grievances leading to a civil war.³⁵

Facing a civil war, in the early 1990s the Tajik government saw Russia as ‘a country on which the eyes of the state are fixed with hope’.³⁶ Yet this was wishful thinking rather than a reflection of reality, as in that period Russia was relatively absent from Tajikistan’s political scene. Given the challenges of its own post-socialist transformation and the first Chechen war (1994–6), Russia had a limited capacity and willingness to become engaged in the Tajik civil war.³⁷ Eventually, however, Russia reluctantly backed former communist, pro-government Tajik forces in their fight against the Islamist opposition.³⁸ This was largely because many politicians involved in pro-government forces and Russian security officials were colleagues in the strictest sense. They not only shared a similar ideological outlook but had often undergone the same training in Soviet times.³⁹ The support

³³Regional socio-political networks in Tajikistan are not kinship-based but rather draw on multiple loyalties including family ties, localism, and patron–client relationships. See İdil Tunçer-Kılavuz, ‘Political and social networks in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan: “Clan”, region and beyond’, *Central Asian Survey*, 28:3 (2009), pp. 323–34.

³⁴Shahrbano Tadjibakhsh, *National Reconciliation: The Imperfect Whim [Tajikistan]* (Washington, DC: National Council for Soviet and East European Research, 1995), pp. 3–5.

³⁵Isaac Scarborough, ‘The extremes it takes to survive: Tajikistan and the collapse of the Soviet Union, 1985–1992’, PhD thesis, London School of Economic and Political Science, 2018.

³⁶Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan, *Diplomatiya Tadjikistana (k 50-letiyu sozdaniya Ministerstva inostrannykh del Respubliki Tadjikistan* (Dushanbe, 1994), p. 13, available at: {https://mfa.tj/uploads/main/2013/03/diplomatiya_tajikistana_50.pdf}, author’s translation.

³⁷Epkenhans, *Origins of Civil War*, p. 288.

³⁸Scarborough, ‘The USSR is dead’, pp. 226–9.

³⁹Scarborough, ‘The USSR is dead’, pp. 228–9.

happened through the involvement of the 201st Soviet motor rifle division, a Soviet-era combat formation stationed in Tajikistan and after 1991 reinstated under Russia's control. Russia also supported the United Nations (UN)-sponsored armistice, and the 1997 peace agreement which ended the Tajik civil war was negotiated and signed in Moscow. The Tajik war ended with a power-sharing agreement, with 70 per cent of seats in the parliament allocated to secular, pro-government forces and 30 per cent to the opposition dominated by the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan. After the war, Russia continued to provide the government led by Emomali Rahmon, which at that time was weak, with security support in the form of training, equipment, and aid.⁴⁰

Like many other post-conflict countries, post-war Tajikistan became the subject of international peacebuilding interventions implemented by multiple, mostly Western-dominated international organisations, national development agencies, and donor-funded non-governmental organisations.⁴¹ Such peacebuilding, focusing on the rule of law and human rights as core elements of the liberal peacebuilding agenda, was accompanied by simultaneous democratisation and free market promotion, which were the two core elements of the transition paradigm promoted in post-Soviet states by Western donors.⁴² But in parallel with the Western approach, another model of post-conflict reconciliation was gaining popularity in Tajikistan. It can be described by the Russian term *mirostroytelstvo*, which denotes peace construction through enforcement, relies on notions of stability and strong authority, and implies a top-down form of governance.⁴³ This understanding of the 'right' governance did not have to be actively promoted in Tajikistan or in Russia because it was naturally shared by policymakers, who in both countries originated in former communist circles. Relying on such an understanding of peacebuilding, the post-war government of Tajikistan started centralising power, gradually sidelining the religious opposition and finally banning it in 2015. Undoubtedly, such ideological congruence between policymakers in Tajikistan and Russia, visible in a shared affinity for the concentration and personalisation of power and the tendency to suppress oppositional activities, can be seen as a direct Soviet legacy. But the legacy alone is not sufficient to explain why in the early 2000s Russia started reaching out more actively to Tajikistan.

Indeed, the reason why Russia became much more interested in retaining its influence in Tajikistan in the 2000s was related to the changing international context.⁴⁴ In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the United States started partnering with Central Asian countries in the global war on terror, which was launched through a military intervention in neighbouring Afghanistan. This attention of the United States, combined with Russia's own increasingly antagonistic relations with the United States, resulted in Russia's quest for a privileged partnership with Tajikistan.⁴⁵ Russia was also partially motivated by China's expansion into the region. Although China started developing trade relations with Tajikistan only in the mid-2000s, within just a few years it became this country's second foreign trade partner after Russia.⁴⁶ This increased international attention, and even some competition between the United States, Russia, and China, encouraged the Tajik government to conduct a more open foreign policy with the aim to increase

⁴⁰ Epkenhans, *Origins of Civil War*, p. 288.

⁴¹ John Heathershaw, *Post-Conflict Tajikistan: The Politics of Peacebuilding and the Emergence of Legitimate Order* (London: Routledge, 2009).

⁴² Thomas Carothers, 'The end of the transition paradigm', *Journal of Democracy*, 13:1 (2002), pp. 5–21.

⁴³ John Heathershaw, 'Peacebuilding as practice: Discourses from post-conflict Tajikistan', *International Peacekeeping*, 14:2 (2007), pp. 219–36 (pp. 225–8).

⁴⁴ The existing scholarship on Russia identifies two phases in its neighbourhood policies. While the first one (1992–2003) was incoherent and fragmented, the second one (from the mid-2000s onwards) was more assertive and proactive. See Elias Götz, 'Taking the longer view: A neoclassical realist account of Russia's neighbourhood policy', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 74:9 (2022), pp. 1729–63.

⁴⁵ Alexander Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules. The New Great Power Context in Central Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 51–73.

⁴⁶ Khojamahmad Umarov, 'Economic and trade relations of Tajikistan with Russia and China. A comparative analysis', in K. Warikoo and Khojamahmad Umarov (eds), *Tajikistan in the 21st Century: Society, Politics and Economy* (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2015), pp. 236–46 (p. 238).

development assistance, loans, and investment from abroad. But while expanding its relations with new partners, Tajik policymakers have never questioned the special role of Russia. Although Russia did not publicly doubt Tajikistan's loyalty, it understood that its privileged position in Tajikistan should not be taken for granted and that it required constant investment. As a result, since the early 2010s Russia has systematically projected its soft power towards Tajikistan through a combination of international development assistance, promotion of the Russian language as the lingua franca, annual allocation of several thousand stipends for Tajik youth to study at Russian universities, and strategic communication through Russian media that remain popular in Tajikistan.⁴⁷

In parallel with these events, the two countries have also become inextricably intertwined at an international level through membership in several regional organisations and initiatives, often led by Russia. These include, among others, the Commonwealth of Independent States which was created after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, which is a Russia-led counterpart of NATO, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation led by China and Russia. However, unlike several other post-Soviet countries Tajikistan did not join the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which fosters an integrated single market and is largely modelled upon the EU. This was received with surprise by analysts. On multiple occasions, Tajik policymakers justified their decision not to join (or rather their lack of decision to join) by saying that 'even without this [membership in the EAEU], we cooperate very closely in various formats with the member countries of the EAEU'.⁴⁸ Behind this careful diplomatic discourse, however, this hesitation to join the EAEU, established in 2015, can be seen as an attempt to limit excessive dependence on Moscow in domestic affairs while realising that the space for manoeuvre is already limited.

Indeed, Tajikistan's political coupling with Russia in the 2000s resulted not so much from a political will on the part of Tajik policymakers but rather from socio-economic circumstances which gradually deepened Tajikistan's dependence on Russia and, in particular, on its labour market, as explained below. At this point, the conclusion that arises from this section is that this coupling should not be viewed as a direct extension of Soviet-era relations. Rather, after the end of the Cold War these relations were redefined in a new international polycentric system of independent states. Initially, reestablishing relations was beneficial for both sides. Russia's support for pro-government forces in Tajikistan allowed these forces to win the civil war. In return, in the context of 9/11 and the war on terror, Tajikistan's loyalty allowed Russia to counterbalance, even if only symbolically, a growing influence of the United States in Central Asia. But while overall mutually beneficial in the 1990s, in the 2000s this relationship became increasingly hierarchical in the economic field, which aggravated other – i.e. political, social, and ideational – types of subordination to Russia.⁴⁹

Mass labour migration and economic dependence on Russia

Power asymmetries between Tajikistan and Russia resulted from these countries' economic disparities. Although Russia's economy sustained a prolonged recession after the shock therapy, thanks to gas exports from the mid-2000s onwards it witnessed a stable economic growth. To compensate for its shrinking labour force (due to an ageing population and declining fertility) and continue its economic upturn, Russia needed labour migrants. Tajikistan's economy, in

⁴⁷ Kirill Nourzhanov, 'Russian soft power in Central Asia: Government policy helped by resurgent Russophilia', in Kirill Nourzhanov and Sebastien Peyrouse (eds), *Soft Power in Central Asia: The Politics of Influence and Seduction* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021), pp. 57–84 (pp. 65–72).

⁴⁸ Asia Plus, 'Tadzhikistan vse eshe izuchaet vozmozhnoe prisoedinenie k EAES' (15 July 2022), available at: <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/economic/20220715/tadzhikistan-vsyo-etshyo-izuchaet-vozmozhnoe-prisoedinenie-k-eaes>].

⁴⁹ It could be argued that in the security field this relationship was hierarchical already in the early 1990s. See Scarborough, 'The USSR is dead'.

turn, was highly affected by the disintegration of Soviet centralised production and distribution networks, and its dire condition was aggravated by the destruction caused by the civil war. Given the scarcity of jobs on the Tajik labour market and a continuous demographic growth, a large part of the population has been either unable to find employment at home or was dissatisfied with the low wages which do not allow people to make a living. As a result of these push and pull factors, Tajikistan became a provider of cheap labour to Russia.

Because of a visa-free regime between these countries, Tajik labour migration to Russia continued increasing year by year. In the early 2000s, it already involved half a million people⁵⁰ and currently concerns more than 1 million people. In total, labour migrants account for over 10 per cent of Tajikistan's population. Most migrants are young men from rural areas for whom migration is the only feasible work option. While in 2022 an average monthly wage in Tajikistan amounted to 1,612 Tajik somoni (148 US dollars),⁵¹ in Russia it corresponded to 64,191 Russian rubles (789 US dollars) and thus was more than five times higher.⁵² In Russia, migrants often work in the construction sector, agriculture, and services. The difficulties they face, stemming from both systemic discrimination from Russian law enforcement bodies and negative attitudes from the general population, have been well documented.⁵³ The term 'Tajik' (in Russian *tadzhik*) is often used by the Russian public to describe a second-class, low-cultured person without any skills who can be exploited, and this notion operates as common knowledge regarding who Tajik people are.⁵⁴ In other words, economic disparities between the two countries sustain and legitimise the hierarchy of peoples. In my experience, the older generation in Tajikistan who have direct memories of Soviet times often recall that Tajiks and Russians used to be citizens of the same, powerful Soviet state and find this new social hierarchy shocking. As a retired high-level Tajik official once told me: 'I used to travel to Moscow very often, sometimes multiple times a week. Back then Russians were not like now. Now I avoid travelling to Russia because of how Tajiks are treated there. I still cannot believe it.'⁵⁵

Because of the massive scale of labour migration, Tajikistan is one of the most remittance-dependent states in the world. In 2022, remittances sent home from Russia by labour migrants corresponded to 51 per cent of the country's gross domestic product.⁵⁶ Tajik policymakers are aware of the political implications of such excessive dependence on Russia, which is sustained through labour migration. On several occasions when Russian authorities were not pleased with policy directions taken by Dushanbe, they either deported or threatened to deport a few hundred labour migrants, making Tajik policymakers quickly revoke their decisions.⁵⁷ These dynamics reveal that the power asymmetry in Tajikistan's relations with Russia often operates not so much through ideological congruence, as through implicit blackmail.

⁵⁰Saodat Olimova and Igor Bosc, *Labour Migration from Tajikistan* (Dushanbe: IOM Tajikistan, 2003), p. 23.

⁵¹Asia Plus, 'Srednyaya zarplata v Tadjikistane: gde i skol'ko poluchayut' (2 March 2022), available at: {<https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/society/20220302/srednyaya-zarplata-v-tadjikistane-gde-i-skolko-poluchayut>}.

⁵²Rosstat, 'Srednemesyachnaya nominal'naya nachislenyaya zarabotnaya plata rabotnikov v tselom po ekonomike Rossiyskoy Federatsii v 1991-2023 gg.', available at: {https://rosstat.gov.ru/labor_market_employment_salaries#}.

⁵³E.g. Jeff Sahadeo, 'Druzhiba Narodov or second-class citizenship? Soviet Asian migrants in a post-colonial world', *Central Asian Survey*, 26:4 (2007), pp. 559–79; Rakib Albulhaev, *Iz istorii trudovoy migratsii Tadjikistana v kontse XX-nachale XXI v.* (Dushanbe: Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Tajikistan, 2016), pp. 255–340; Rano Turaeva, and Izaat Amon, 'Deportation regimes in the post-Soviet space: Producing deportable migrants in the Russian Federation', in Rano Turaeva and Rustam Urinboyev (eds), *Labour, Mobility and Informal Practices in Russia, Central Asia and Eastern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 51–68.

⁵⁴Rustam Samadov, 'Tajik labor migrants and their masculinities: How migration transforms gender roles and practices in a transnational context', PhD thesis, Humboldt University of Berlin, 2023, pp. 110–11.

⁵⁵Interview with a former Tajik official, 28 September 2022, author's translation.

⁵⁶World Bank, 'Remittances remain resilient but are slowing', *Migration and Development Policy Brief* 38 (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2003), p. 2.

⁵⁷Karolina Kluczewska and Oleg Korneev, 'Engaging with labour migrants: Emigration policy in Tajikistan', *Asian Studies Review*, 46:1 (2022), pp. 130–49 (p. 142).

The attitude that most of the population in Tajikistan holds towards Russia is also complex. Because Russia offers more economic opportunities than their home country and given that for most Tajik citizens Russia is the only feasible destination abroad, Russia's political and economic superiority is commonly acknowledged and accepted on the ground. This, however, does not automatically translate into affinity for Russian society whose values and lifestyles, much more liberal than in Tajikistan, tend to be seen locally as Western and morally decadent.⁵⁸ Unlike in Soviet times when it was common, the Russian language nowadays is rarely spoken in Tajikistan beyond the urban upper middle class, but it still enjoys a special status and is officially recognised by the constitution as a language of inter-ethnic communication. This is, on the one hand, a legacy of Soviet times when fluency in Russian was a precondition for one's career growth. On the other hand, this attention paid to the Russian language reveals a pragmatic approach considering that the scale of migration to Russia that necessitates labour migrants to learn at least some Russian. Moreover, schools with instruction in Russian (and especially a dozen schools around the country that are financed by the Russian government) are often preferred by parents, as they are believed to provide better-quality education than Tajik schools.⁵⁹ Even today, in most Tajik households Russian TV channels quietly play in the background in the evening because they offer more diverse entertainment than Tajik TV channels, which broadcast mainly local dancing and singing programmes. Russia and the Russian language are thus an intrinsic part of the life of Tajik people, even of those who do not migrate.

Tajikistan is the only state in Central Asia that has an agreement on dual citizenship with Russia.⁶⁰ While the agreement dates back to the mid-1990s, only in the last decade has it started being systematically deployed by the Russian government to attract the human resources that this country lacks. Obtaining Russian citizenship is particularly easy for Tajik nationals who are fluent in Russian and either hold a university degree or have some specific skills that are lacking on the Russian market. Consequently, because of economic precarity in Tajikistan, Russian citizenship is strategically and widely aspired to among the population.⁶¹ For instance, in 2022 alone 174,000 Tajik citizens obtained their second citizenship, that of a Russian citizen.⁶² Besides, Tajik nationals are among the most active participants of Russia's resettlement programme (called *programma pereseleniya*),⁶³ which is another scheme developed by Russia to attract highly qualified people from former Soviet countries. These mechanisms show that Russia has been strategically 'recruiting' people abroad in a way which fits its demographic and labour-market needs. It does so by offering them standard Russian salaries, which are in any case much higher than the ones in their home country. The fact that every year tens of thousands of Tajik specialists move permanently to Russia has disastrous consequences for Tajikistan. For example, local newspapers regularly report about an acute lack of teachers, doctors, and nurses.⁶⁴ The emigration of specialists creates a vicious circle: an increasing unavailability of basic services in the country, caused by emigration of professionals, only motivates the next cohorts also to leave. Although this problem is widely discussed in

⁵⁸ Samadov, 'Tajik labor migrants'.

⁵⁹ Asia Plus, 'Rossiyskie shkoly v Tadzhiqistane. Kakimi oni budut i kak tuda popast?' (2 June 2022), available at: <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/society/20220602/rossiyskie-shkoli-v-tadzhikistane-kakimi-oni-budut-i-kak-tuda-popast>).

⁶⁰ Russian Federation and Republic of Tajikistan (1995). Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Tajikistan on regulating the issues of dual citizenship of 7 September 1995.

⁶¹ Elena Borisova, 'The limits of strategic citizenship: Affective engagements with Russian passports in the context of migration from Tajikistan', *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale*, 28:4 (2020), pp. 827–42.

⁶² Asia Plus, 'V 2022 godu rekordnoe chislo grazhdan Tadzhiqistana noluchili rossiyskoe grazhdanstvo' (9 February 2023), available at: <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/society/20230209/v-2022-godu-rekordnoe-chislo-grazhdan-tadzhikistana-poluchili-rossiiskoe-grazhdanstvo>).

⁶³ Vecherka, 'Tadzhiqistantsy stali liderami po programme pereseleniya sootchestvennikov v RF' (15 April 2022), available at: <https://vecherka.tj/archives/53340>).

⁶⁴ Asia Plus, 'Minobrazovaniya: V Tadzhiqistane ne hvataet 3400 uchiteley' (19 June 2022), available at: <https://asiaplustj.info/news/tajikistan/society/20220719/minobrazovaniya-v-tadzhikistane-ne-hvataet-3400-uchitelei>).

Tajik society, it is remarkable that Tajik policymakers refrain from recognising it, let alone addressing it. For instance, when asked about an acute lack of teachers at schools during a press conference in 2022, Tajikistan's minister of education replied that emigration is a common dynamic around the world and 'there is no need to make a tragedy of it'.⁶⁵ This shows that while acknowledged, Russia's policy, which actively deprives Tajikistan of its skilled human resources, is ignored by politicians.

As has emerged from this section, after 1991 Tajikistan and Russia united again under the umbrella of global capitalism. As a resource-poor, small, peripheral, post-conflict, and aid-dependent country, Tajikistan gradually became a supplier of cheap labour for the Russian market. The hierarchies between the two countries are sustained through two interrelated political and economic processes: an increasing Russian demand of loyalty from Tajik policymakers, and a constant displacement of both low- and highly skilled Tajik labour to Russia. Although Tajikistan is not fully deprived of agency in this relationship, over time its space to manoeuvre has clearly been narrowed down.

Post-Soviet hierarchies in the making

Post-Soviet power asymmetries are entangled at political, economic, and social levels. Although they undoubtedly involve Soviet-era legacies, they are mainly sustained through contemporary phenomena. Reflecting on whether the Soviet was colonial and if, consequently, the post-Soviet is post-colonial, Abashin argued that what appears as postcolonialism in relations between Central Asian countries and Russia is an 'independent phenomenon and arises, apparently, from the totality of modern conditions, and not necessarily exclusively directly from the Soviet past'.⁶⁶ The case of Tajikistan suggests that this statement should be nuanced by distinguishing between various fields where postcolonial traits become visible. Indeed, in political and especially economic fields power asymmetries to a large extent result from new capitalist relations between Tajikistan and Russia. In the social field, however, the hierarchies between Tajik and Russian citizens have their roots in Soviet times. They resemble the colonising components of Soviet governance in Tajikistan, and more specifically the informal hierarchies between Slavic and non-Slavic people. Nowadays, these hierarchies have been reframed in a new manner and are maintained and legitimised through the constant movement of the labour force.

Remarkably, the disparities between Tajikistan and Russia are not only framed around political and economic asymmetries but also carry essentialising cultural traits. In Russia, public discourse about Tajikistan stresses its civilisational backwardness. Popular narratives about Tajik people portray them as poor and primitive, in contrast with Russians who are richer and more cultured. Such type of dialectical othering is an intrinsic component of the hegemonic order of dominance, as it operates through a belief that values and morals of the dominating actor are superior to those of the subordinated one, and that the two are mutually excluding opposites.⁶⁷ However, while in post-colonial contexts differences between people have been often racialised,⁶⁸ in the post-Soviet context the differences between Russians and Tajiks are framed around ethnicities. This approach is rooted in the Soviet-era nationality policy which essentialised ethnic (rather than racial) differences between the many peoples living in the Soviet Union and institutionalised them under the banner of the 'friendship of nations', where nations corresponded to ethnicities.⁶⁹ In the Soviet Union, the concept of ethnicity was acknowledged and to some extent

⁶⁵ Asia Plus, 'Minister obrazovaniya Tadjikistana: "Ne stoit drammatizirovat' po povodu uvol'neniya uchiteley iz shkol"' (3 February 2022), available at: <https://asiaplustj.info/news/tajikistan/society/20220203/ne-tragediya-ministr-obrazovaniya-tadjikistana-ob-uvolnenii-uchitelei-iz-shkol-i-ih-uezde-v-migratsiyu?ysclid=15rqzn0oq700115833>.

⁶⁶ Abashin, 'Sovetskoe = kolonial'noe?', p. 47, author's translation.

⁶⁷ Gayatri Spivak, 'The Rani of Sirmur: An essay in reading the archives', *History and Theory*, 24:3 (1985), pp. 247–72.

⁶⁸ Jasmine Gani, 'Racial militarism and civilizational anxiety at the imperial encounter: From metropole to the postcolonial state', *Security Dialogue*, 52:6 (2021), pp. 546–66.

⁶⁹ Francine Hirsch, 'Race without the practice of racial politics', *Slavic Review*, 61:1 (2002), pp. 30–43.

constructed for governance purposes, but officially different ethnicities were not ranked hierarchically to each other – unlike in the case of the hierarchy of white and non-white races in European colonialism.

Although the Soviet governance did not officially operate through hierarchical discourses about ethnicity, hierarchy of ethnicities became a crucial component of Tajikistan's relations with Russia.⁷⁰ Consequently, Tajik labour migrants' experiences of discrimination and exclusion in present-day Russia to a large extent resemble the experience of migrants from post-colonial contexts in Europe, for example, the Maghreb migrants in France.⁷¹ This seemingly new, prominent level of postcolonialism in post-Soviet hierarchies between Tajikistan and Russia is not new at all. It draws on Soviet-era unofficial hierarchies which have transformed and intensified within the global capitalist framework and are legitimised through it.

Manifestations of postcolonialism: Tajikistan's reactions to the Russo-Ukrainian war

The Tajik government's strategic silence

Having discussed the historical precedents and post-1991 origins of hierarchical relations between Tajikistan and Russia, this article proceeds to analyse how postcolonialism, which characterises Tajikistan's post-Soviet condition, is manifested on political and social levels. It became particularly visible following the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war in February 2022. This event, albeit taking place in a different part of the former Soviet Union, served as an amplifier which brought to the fore pre-existing traits of Tajikistan's post-Sovietness. Russia's invasion of Ukraine resulted in the West suspending its relations with Russia. Consequently, Russia started demanding more attention from countries which it considered its traditional allies, such as Tajikistan. In what follows, I analyse how the Tajik government reacted to the Russo-Ukrainian war, relying on my ethnographic field research in Dushanbe, which coincided with the invasion of Ukraine.

As mentioned at the outset, when Russia invaded Ukraine an inter-parliamentary Tajik–Russian forum was taking place in Tajikistan. On this occasion, the chairwoman of the Federation Council of Russia's Federal Assembly, Valentina Matviyenko, visited Dushanbe to discuss further bilateral cooperation between the two countries. As the Russian government news agency wrote referring to the war in Ukraine, Matviyenko reportedly said to Tajikistan's president Emomali Rahmon:

Before leaving [for Tajikistan], I talked with Vladimir Vladimirovich [Putin]. He asked me to pass on his friendly greetings and best wishes, he warmly remembered your last meeting in Saint Petersburg in December last year, and he instructed me to inform you about the situation concerning Ukraine.⁷²

Striking in this statement is the focus on a personal relation between Putin and Rahmon, as well as the mention of the war in Ukraine suggesting that Tajikistan was on the same page as Russia and implying that it supported Russia's actions. The official communication of the Tajik side, however, was more ambiguous on this point. The press release of the Tajik presidential apparatus announced enigmatically that 'the two sides exchanged views on the rapidly changing political situation in the world'.⁷³ There was no mention of the war in Ukraine. It was also striking that none of the official government newspapers, which I collected in the coming days, reported on the outbreak of the war.

⁷⁰ Sahadeo, 'Druzhiba narodov'.

⁷¹ Vladimir Malakhov, 'Why Tajiks are (not) like Arabs: Central Asian migration into Russia against the background of Maghreb migration into France', *Nationalities Papers*, 47:2 (2019), pp. 310–24.

⁷² TASS, 'Matvienko proinformirovala prezidenta Tadjikistana o situatsii vokrug Ukrainy' (25 February 2022), available at: <https://tass.ru/politika/13853995>, author's translation.

⁷³ President of the Republic of Tajikistan, 'Muloqot bo Raisi Shuroi Federatsiyai Majlisi Federalii Rusiya Valentina Matvienko' (25 February 2022), available at: <http://president.tj/node/27845>, author's translation.

The Tajik government did not take any official position on Russia's war in Ukraine. Tajikistan abstained from voting on a United Nations General Assembly's resolution condemning the invasion of Ukraine on 2 March 2022. But a lack of position should not be taken for a neutral stance. Rather, it means that Tajikistan refused to acknowledge that this conflict was taking place at all. As argued by Dadabaev and Sonoda, such an approach, shared also by other states in Central Asia, should be viewed as a strategic narrative: it allowed small post-Soviet states to avoid either being punished by Russia (for not taking its side) or being isolated by the West (for taking Russia's side).⁷⁴ For Tajikistan, strategic silence was the safest choice among the two options, where each of the two would have negative consequences for the country. Silence reflected limited foreign policy options.

Besides avoiding expressing its stance internationally, the Tajik government was hesitant to even report on the war in Ukraine domestically because the sole framing of this event might have already been interpreted as an act of taking sides. Had the Tajik government described this conflict as Russia's 'special operation' (Russian *spetsoperatsiya*) in Ukraine, a framing used by the Russian government to describe its actions in Ukraine, it would mean that it supported Russia's position. Had it called it Russia's 'war' on Ukraine, it would mean that it sided with the West's account of this event. Closing its eyes to the conflict allowed Tajik policymakers to escape this dilemma. Once, when the government eventually had to mention the Russo-Ukrainian conflict on the occasion of the evacuation of Tajik citizens from the territory of Ukraine in late February and March 2022, it described it in an enigmatic way as 'the current situation in Ukraine' (Tajik: *hodisahoi kununi dar Ukraina*) and an 'imposition of martial law' (Tajik: *chori gardondani holati harbi*) in Ukraine.⁷⁵ This persistent strategic silence, however, did not mean that in private Tajik policymakers were supportive of Russia's war. As one government official told me, reflecting on the general mood in political circles:

Russia is our older brother; Russia is a big country. But now [since the Russo-Ukrainian war broke out], [Tajik] decision-makers do not think so positively about Russia anymore. They have become more reserved. They know that spheres of influences are being reshaped these days, and that in one way or another Russia's actions will have consequences for us and other post-Soviet countries.⁷⁶

This suggests that Russia's war in Ukraine triggered some changes in Tajik policymakers' attitudes towards Russia.

Although it took place in a geographically distant space, the war had an indirect, yet significant economic impact on the country. Because Tajikistan's economy is largely dependent on imports from Russia, Western sanctions against Russia led to a shortage of many products in Russia and, consequently, also in Tajikistan. As a result, in a context where most Tajik families struggle to make ends meet, in 2022 the prices of many goods skyrocketed on the local market. As compared to the previous year, on average prices of oil-based products and flour foods, which are culinary food bases in Tajik households, immediately increased by 35 per cent.⁷⁷ Walking around Dushanbe bazaars in February and March 2022, I could see agitated crowds. Within just a few weeks, the price of flour rose by 16 per cent, sugar by 20 per cent, and sunflower oil by 22 per cent. At the same time, the National Bank of Tajikistan increased the official exchange rate of the dollar against the Tajik somoni by 15 per cent. Besides these shocking changes, Tajik policymakers also realised the risk of secondary sanctions on Tajikistan, due to the fact that Central Asian countries risked becoming

⁷⁴Timur Dadabaev and Shigeto Sonoda, 'Silence is golden? Silences as strategic narratives in Central Asian states' response to the Ukrainian crisis', *International Journal of Asian Studies*, 20:1 (2023), pp. 193–215 (p. 197).

⁷⁵Jumhuriyat, 'Dar Ukraina 4 hazor shahrvandi Tojikiston qaror dorand' (1 March 2022), p. 1, author's translation.

⁷⁶Interview with a Tajik government official, 18 September 2022, author's translation. Given the sensitive political context in Tajikistan, all interviewees are anonymised for security reasons.

⁷⁷Marat Mamadshoev, 'Rossiyskiy import v Tadjikistane: rost ten i defitsit tovarov', CABAR.asia (3 March 2023), available at: <https://cabar.asia/ru/rossijskij-import-v-tadjikistane-rost-tsen-i-defitsit-tovarov>.

a re-export hub to Russia under sanctions.⁷⁸ Without mentioning the war in Ukraine, but clearly alluding to it, in April 2022 President Rahmon informed citizens in his annual Ramadan speech that ‘this year will be the most difficult and complicated for humanity in every respect, particularly when it comes to food security.’⁷⁹ By urging people to stockpile food for two years in advance, he revealed an awareness of the negative impact of the overreliance of Tajikistan’s economy on the Russian market, which was hit by Western sanctions. Rahmon also repeated similar calls to citizens in his 2023 and 2024 speeches. In sum, Russia’s war in Ukraine only deepened the economic dimension of Tajikistan’s subordination to Russia, as the struggles of Russia’s economy under the burden of Western sanctions found their reflection in Tajikistan’s economy. Moreover, contrary to predictions of many analysts, migration flows from Tajikistan to Russia did not decrease: migrants’ earnings in Russia, albeit significantly lower than before 2022, are still higher than what they could earn back home in Tajikistan.

Altogether, the Tajik government’s reaction to Russia’s war in Ukraine illustrates the difficulties that this small, peripheral state faced when navigating its international relations. This case also shows that Tajikistan’s hierarchical relations with Russia are embedded in a broader international context. If Tajikistan was dependent only on Russia through its labour migrants, perhaps it would have supported Russia’s war. In contrast, if Tajikistan depended solely on Western countries for development aid, it would have likely condemned Russia’s war. But because it relied on both, it remained silent. Tajikistan’s silence can be seen as a manifestation of a lack of agency in international politics. But strategic silence can equally be understood as a form of hidden resistance and Tajikistan’s subversive agency within its postcolonial condition. This complex mixture of subordinated and subversive agency is accompanied by another, corresponding postcolonial trait: an interiorised feeling of inferiority vis-à-vis Russia among the general population and policymakers alike, as explained below.

Societal support for Russia and Russians

In the aftermath of the invasion of Ukraine, societal perceptions of this event in Tajikistan were diverse. During my fieldwork, I encountered three main opinions on the topic.⁸⁰ The first, quite common view was a compassionate attitude towards Ukrainians. This narrative saw Ukrainian people as victims of geopolitical tensions and rivalries between Russia and the West which escalated on the Ukrainian territory. The second narrative was pro-Ukrainian, or rather pro-Western, as it was centred around the importance of democratic and liberal values that Russia contradicted by launching a war against Ukraine. This view was shared by a small group of young people from the upper-middle classes, who had often studied in the West or worked for international organisations. Yet the most common was the third stance, which was supportive of Russia’s actions.

This was largely because people in Tajikistan are active consumers of Russian media, where the official narrative of the conflict was that through its ‘special operation’ Russia aimed to save Ukrainians from their own corrupt and fascist government. As I observed, this view was not limited to a particular social class or age group. However, for older generations who have direct memories of Soviet times, support for Russia is an expression of their Soviet nostalgia, given that to this day many associate the Soviet period with the best years of their lives. These positive memories are magnified through experiences of precarity while living in independent Tajikistan. Consequently, for many, Russia is an extension of the Soviet Union and represents a symbolic continuation of their

⁷⁸Irina Osipova, ‘Vvedenie zhestkikh vtorichnykh sanktsiy Zapada protiv Tsentral’noy Azii somnitel’noe – eksperty’, CABAR.asia (12 April 2023), available at: {<https://cabar.asia/ru/vvedenie-zhestkikh-vtorichnykh-sanktsiy-zapada-protiv-tsentralnoj-azii-somnitelno-eksperty>}.

⁷⁹Avesta.tj, ‘Prezident pozdravil tadjikistantsev s nastupleniem mesyatsa Ramazan i prizval zapasat’sya prodovol’stvem’ (1 April 2022), available at: {<https://avesta.tj/2022/04/01/prezident-pozdraviltadjikistantsev-s-nastupleniem-mesyatsa-ramazan-i-prizval-zapastis-prodovol'stvem/>}.

⁸⁰Karolina Kluczevska, ‘Tajikistan has a special relationship with Russia. Could war change that?’, *openDemocracy* (6 April 2022), available at: {<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/tajikistan-russia-ukraine-war/>}.

social world that was lost. This stance was succinctly explained in the following quotation from my interviewee, a older manual labourer: ‘I grew up in Soviet times. I am a pro-Soviet person [Russian *prosovetskiy chelovek*], and I associate Russia with the Soviet Union.’⁸¹ Nonetheless, the support for Russia does not mean that Tajik people were unaware of atrocities committed by Russia in Ukraine, including shelling and killing of civilians. As a Tajik historian I interviewed told me:

Although I know that it was Russia that invaded Ukraine, I feel offended when I see Russian soldiers being shot. I cannot do anything about it, it’s because I grew up in Soviet times and Russians had a particular status back then.⁸²

Striking in this reflection is the justification of the support for Russia’s invasion due to a superior status attributed to Russian people. Similar submissive attitudes became visible in local reactions to a sudden influx of Russians in Tajikistan in the autumn of 2022. At that time, approximately 400–800,000 people had relocated abroad from Russia in an attempt to leave the country either for ideological reasons or to avoid conscription and being sent to fight in Ukraine.⁸³ In an absence of other options, for example because visa restrictions made travelling to European countries impossible for many Russians, Central Asia and the South Caucasus became their frequent destinations. After an announcement of partial mobilisation in Russia, in September and October 2022 Dushanbe witnessed the arrival of 30,000 Russians:⁸⁴ mostly single men in their 20s and 30s, sometimes accompanied by their families. It was the first time in the history of independent Tajikistan that a reverse migration process took place, with Russians moving to Tajikistan rather than the other way round.

As I observed in Dushanbe, Tajik government officials working in the airport and in the central registration office were kind to Russians in a way I have never seen them treat their fellow citizens. Local activists and volunteers have also quickly organised several initiatives to support incoming Russians. These included offering Russians free accommodation in people’s homes, giving them free travel, and paying for their grocery shopping. Several social media groups were launched to offer advice to Russians on how to find accommodation, use public transport, and order food in Tajikistan. In these groups, it was taken for granted that Tajiks should communicate with Russians using the Russian language, and there was no expectation that Russians should learn at least some words in Tajik. It is remarkable that in these groups Russians were commonly referred to with the honorific expression ‘guests of the capital’ (Russian *gosti stolitsy*). This extremely supportive attitude towards Russians stands in sharp contrast with attitudes towards potential Afghan refugees the previous summer, who were expected in Tajikistan after the Taliban takeover in August 2021.⁸⁵ Although eventually no significant influx of Afghan refugees took place at that time, the different mood concerning the arrival of Afghans and Russians was striking. Despite significant cultural similarities between Tajiks and Afghans, the fact that they speak the same language and that many Afghan nationals are ethnically Tajik, potential Afghan refugees were securitised by the government as an inherent threat.⁸⁶ Russians, in contrast, were warmly welcomed by the government and people alike.

⁸¹ Interview with a factory worker, 15 March 2022, author’s translation.

⁸² Interview with a Tajik historian, 3 March 2022, author’s translation.

⁸³ Asia Plus, ‘Potok rossiiyan v Tadzhiqistan v 2022 godu stal rekordnym za pyat’ let’ (4 February 2023), available at: <https://www.asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/society/20230204/potok-rossiiyan-v-tadzhiqistan-v-2022-godu-stal-rekordnim-za-pyat-let>.

⁸⁴ AKIpress News, ‘Rahmon – Putinu: My hotim, chtoby nas uvazhali’ (14 October 2022), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k0plRt5-eUE>.

⁸⁵ Asia Plus, ‘Za chto afganskikh bezhentsev vydvoryayut iz Tadzhiqistana?’ (2 September 2022), available at: <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/society/20220902/za-chto-afganskikh-bezhentsev-vidvoryayut-iz-tadzhiqistana>.

⁸⁶ Asia Plus, ‘Na tadhiksko-afganskoy granitse stoyat samye opasnye v mire terroristicheskie organizatsii’ (19 October 2022), available at: <https://www.asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/security/20221019/na-tadhiksko-afganskoi-granitse-stoyat-samie-opasnie-v-mire-terroristicheskie-organizatsii>.

Importantly, such kindness and generosity towards arriving Russians were embedded in a prominent postcolonial trait: an interiorised inferiority that many Tajiks feel vis-à-vis Russians. As one of the volunteers helping Russians told me: ‘for us, Russians are a better sort of human. No one makes a distinction between different political positions within Russia; that some Russians are pro-Putin and those who come here are military deserters. All of them are Russians.’⁸⁷ This statement explains a seemingly paradoxical situation in which people in Tajikistan can be supportive of the Russian government and at the same time sympathetic towards Russians who fled the country because of their anti-Russian government stance. What united both entities is the fact that they are Russians and thus are seen by many Tajiks as superior.

Notably, such interiorised inferiority towards Russians is not equivocal with perceiving fondness for Russians. On the contrary, acts of hospitality towards Russians were often accompanied by strong resentment. Many activists with whom I spoke mentioned that they felt obliged to offer support to Russians because, as they believed, Russia has been ‘giving bread and salt [Tajik *nonu namak nedihad*] to Tajikistan.’⁸⁸ By using this Tajik expression, they referred to a moral debt that Tajikistan has towards Russia, given that in an absence of work opportunities in Tajikistan it ‘provided’ jobs to over 1 million labour migrants. However, this popular narrative of indebtedness obscures the fact that Tajik migrants earn their salaries through physical work in often hazardous conditions and in an atmosphere of widespread discrimination that they face daily in Russia from society and state institutions alike. Other volunteers whom I spoke to were motivated to help Russians because they wanted to prove to them that, contrary to the negative image of Tajiks in Russia, Tajik people are generous and kind. For example, a university professor told me that many Russians ‘when they come here [to Tajikistan], expect to see a village with donkeys and uneducated people’. She was eager to assist arriving Russians primarily ‘to let them see how hospitable Tajiks are.’⁸⁹ While the genuineness and scale of support that local activists offered to Russians should not be dismissed, it is nevertheless important to recognise the high levels of performativity and resentment that accompanied acts of help. These examples show that although many people in Tajikistan perceive Russia and Russians as superior, this superiority is viewed as a matter of fact rather than preference.

In the autumn of 2022, simultaneously with the influx of Russians who were avoiding conscription, news started circulating in Tajikistan that the Russian government had launched a campaign among Tajik migrants to make them join the Russian army. In this way, migrants would fill the military quotas that were not met because of a sudden wave of Russian emigration. Independent news outlets reported that mosques in Russia, which are frequented by Tajiks, became involved in recruiting migrants to the army on behalf of the Russian government.⁹⁰ Referring to labour migrants who obtained Russian citizenship in recent years, some prominent Russian politicians advocated they should ‘prioritise sending naturalised citizens to fulfil the tasks of the special military operation.’⁹¹ There were also several documented cases of Tajik citizens who served a term in Russian prisons and were forcefully sent to the front in Ukraine, even if they did not possess Russian citizenship.⁹² In response to these events, the Tajik authorities issued a statement to Tajik nationals that joining the army of other countries will result in their prosecution in Tajikistan and

⁸⁷ Interview with a volunteer helping Russians in Dushanbe, 1 October 2022, author’s translation.

⁸⁸ Interview with a volunteer helping Russians, 28 September 2022, author’s translation.

⁸⁹ Interview with a professor involved in helping Russians, 29 September 2022, author’s translation.

⁹⁰ Radio Ozodi/Radio Free Europe, ‘Vykhodtsev iz Tsentral’noy Azii verbuyut na voynu v mechetyakh, obshchезhitiyakh i na rabochikh mestakh’ (11 April 2023), available at: {<https://rus.ozodi.org/a/32359297.html>}; Current Time, ‘Trudovykh migrantov teper’ v Rossii verbuyut na voynu v Ukraine v mechetyakh: kak eto proishodit i chto im obeshchayut?’ (13 April 2023), available at: {<https://www.currenttime.tv/a/32362277.html>}.

⁹¹ Rossiyskaya Gazeta, ‘Aleksandr Bastrykin v interv’yu “RG” – o raskrytii krazh snaryazhenita, prizyve v armiyu grazhdan RF i pol’noy konfiskatsii imushchestva korrupsionerov’ (13 January 2023), available at: {<https://rg.ru/2023/01/13/vot-takie-dela.html>}.

⁹² Asia Plus, ‘Pochemu vlasti Tsentral’noy Azii ne reagiruyut na vovlechenie ikh grazhdan v rossiysko-ukrainskuyu voynu?’ (16 February 2023), available at: {<https://www.asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/politics/20230216/pochemu-vlasti-tsentralnoi-azii-ne-reagiruyut-na-voivlechenie-ih-grazhdan-v-rossiisko-ukrainskuyu-voynu>}.

long-term imprisonment.⁹³ However, besides issuing such a warning addressed to its citizens, Tajik policymakers did not question the Russian government on multiple incidents of forced mobilisation of Tajik migrants into the Russian army. On some occasions, the Tajik authorities admitted that some Tajik prisoners held in Russian prisons joined Russia's war in Ukraine and it was their uncoerced decision – even if the families of these people claimed the contrary.⁹⁴ On a macro-level, these instances once again reveal Tajikistan's limited agency in the international arena, as Tajik officials are afraid to speak out against Russia. On a micro-level, this submissiveness towards the Russian government and a higher value being attributed to Russian rather than Tajik lives need to be seen as another manifestation of an interiorised secondary status which constitutes a prominent trait of Tajikistan's postcolonialism. As one interviewed Tajik official told me, in private many Tajik politicians did not feel bothered or alarmed by the forcible mobilisation of Tajik citizens into the Russian army:

They have this attitude: Let Russians come in and have a rest here [in Tajikistan]. And our migrants? Let them serve [in the army] for Russia. Even if each politician has some labour migrants in their families, they still think that the life of migrants does not have any meaning.⁹⁵

This shows that Tajikistan's postcolonialism operates on many interconnected levels. Tajikistan's limited political agency results from structural conditions and power imbalances in international relations. Simultaneously, this positionality is actively co-constituted from the ground up and legitimised through shared societal feelings of subordination and subservience to Russia and Russians.

Interiorisation of inferiority

Considering both the official political relations and mutual societal perceptions, the way Tajikistan and Russia relate to each other resembles relations between former European colonial powers and colonies – as described for example in Frantz Fanon's writing on Algeria's decolonisation from France in the late 1950s and early 1960s.⁹⁶ Despite these similar manifestations, there are differences between these contexts regarding the origins of interiorised inferiority. In post-colonial contexts, these origins are to be found in colonial times, as political and economic hierarchies with an implicit cultural bias have been powerful instruments of colonial-era domination. As argued by Edward Said in his seminal work, in the case of the Middle East inaccurate oriental cultural representations, which depicted the 'Orient' as primitive and violent, were accompanied by presumptions of Western superiority.⁹⁷ This was also the case in other colonial contexts, for example, India (1858–1947) and Burma (1824–1948) under British rule.⁹⁸ Overall, these images, projected by colonial powers and interiorised by locals, allowed the colonisers to maintain a prolonged rule of the colonised, during and after the colonial rule.⁹⁹ In contrast, in Tajikistan's case, which is postcolonial rather than (hyphenated) post-colonial, the ideational dimension of hierarchies with Russia stems not so much from the preceding Soviet experience, which, as discussed above, was by no means clear-cut colonial. Rather, it results from the establishment of a capitalist system which replaced the Soviet redistributive command economy and after 1991 subordinated the Tajik labour

⁹³ Facebook post of the Ministry of Labour, Migration and Employment of the Population of the Republic of Tajikistan, 'Tavajjuh! Tavajjuh! Tavajjuh!' (23 September 2022).

⁹⁴ Radio Ozodi/Radio Free Europe, 'Mintrud: Tadzhijskie zaklyuchennye rossijskikh tyurem otpravilis' na vojnu v Ukraine dobrovol'no' (13 February 2023), available at: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/32269034.html>.

⁹⁵ Interview with a Tajik government official, 28 September 2023.

⁹⁶ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004 [1961]).

⁹⁷ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

⁹⁸ Prakash, 'Who's afraid of postcoloniality?', pp. 190–3.

⁹⁹ Kalu and Falola, *Exploitation, Colonialism*.

force to the Russian market. Overall, while the post-colonial lens captures the legacies of colonialism, the postcolonial optic allows us to highlight the effects of contemporary global capitalism and resulting forms of imperialism.¹⁰⁰

At the ideational level, in Tajikistan's case Russia's dominant position is maintained through two simultaneous processes: the projection of superiority on the Russian side and a simultaneous acceptance of this superiority by the Tajik side. Tajik policymakers' strategic silence on Russia's war in Ukraine testified to their awareness of Tajikistan's subordinated position vis-à-vis Moscow and also revealed a resigned acceptance of this position. Releasing their own limited space to manoeuvre made performing ignorance about the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war the only feasible option to avoid Russia's anger. A widely interiorised societal belief in a natural advantage of Russia and Russian people, which accordingly permits them to commit acts that others are not entitled to do (such as launching an invasion of another state), is a pertinent manifestation of the same process. Nonetheless, in both cases an interiorisation of the inferior status is not to be conflated with a perceived fondness for Russia and Russians but rather represents a reluctant acceptance of their superiority, which is perceived locally as a matter of fact.

Overall, this shows that postcolonialism constitutes an important dimension of Tajikistan's post-Soviet condition, and we need to account for it to explain Tajikistan's behaviour vis-à-vis Russia in the international arena. The country's limited agency results not only from its precarious economic circumstances and dependence on the Russian market. The economic dimension of hierarchies is also accompanied and reinforced by ideational subordination, i.e. an interiorisation of inferiority by both Tajik policymakers and society at large.

Conclusion

By exploring Tajikistan's relations with Russia, this article aimed to contribute to the ongoing debate on the nature of post-Soviet legacies and what it means to be post-Soviet. Through an analysis of different aspects of Tajikistan's entanglement with Russia – Soviet precedents of current relations, origins of power asymmetries between the two countries after 1991, and manifestations of Tajikistan's subordination visible in local reactions to Russia's war in Ukraine – the article advanced an argument that Tajikistan's post-Soviet condition is explicitly postcolonial without necessarily being post-colonial. Tajikistan's Soviet past was characterised by high levels of ambiguity when it comes to relations between the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic and Moscow. In contrast to European colonialism, in Tajikistan's case high levels of decision-making autonomy from Moscow, economic modernisation without capitalist exploitation, and extensive welfare provision do not allow its Soviet experience to be defined as clear-cut colonial, despite an undeniable imposition of Soviet values on the local population. Consequently, Tajikistan's relations with Russia after the Soviet collapse were not built on explicitly colonial bases. While Soviet legacies are undoubtedly present in these relations, Tajikistan's postcolonial traits vis-à-vis Russia have other origins: they need to be traced to the establishment of the capitalist market economy in the post-Soviet region. Economic disparities subordinated Tajikistan to Russia by assigning Tajik nationals the role of cheap labour for the Russian market. In terms of broader implications, similar postcolonial dynamics can be observed in Kyrgyzstan, as this country shares with Tajikistan a similar history of relations with Russia and the number of Kyrgyz migrant workers in Russia is similar to that of Tajiks. Although Kyrgyzstan's 2015 accession to the EAEU resulted in legal simplifications for Kyrgyz migrants working in Russia, it also cemented and further formalised this country's subordination to Russia.

By scrutinising the case of Tajikistan, the article showed that international relations in the post-Soviet space provide new insights to the hierarchy scholarship in IR. I argued that from the IR perspective post-Sovietness should be seen as a structural, inter-relational, and hierarchical positionality in international politics. It relies on asymmetric economic relations which result from different patterns of integration of former Soviet states into the global capitalist economy after the

¹⁰⁰Prakash, 'Who's afraid of postcoloniality?', p. 189.

Soviet collapse. In turn, economic hierarchies and patterns of dependence between Russia, as the Soviet successor state, and other former Soviet countries which became independent impact on the scale of political, social, and ideational subordination of a specific country to Russia. Far from being static, post-Soviet power hierarchies are constantly in the making as world politics evolve. Given that post-Soviet patterns of authority, legitimacy, control, and subordination depend on economic relations, the country's subordination to Russia can also decrease as its economy improves. This is the case of Kazakhstan, where huge reserves of hydrocarbons allowed the government to diversify its foreign policy. Ultimately, even though Kazakhstan has been one of Russia's closest allies since the Soviet collapse, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine the country was able to consistently distance itself from Russia.

As this article demonstrated by analysing post-Soviet power hierarchies, the post-Soviet region, and especially its peripheral parts, provides a fertile laboratory to test and develop IR concepts.

Acknowledgements. I am indebted to several colleagues in Tajikistan for sharing with me their reflections and offering feedback on initial ideas. I particularly thank the three peer reviewers and journal editors for excellent comments and suggestions on this paper. I thank participants of the Aleksanteri conference at the University in Helsinki in October 2022, Ghent University, and the University of Tartu workshop 'Fighting a Post-Colonial War' in November 2022, and the EWIS workshop 'Postcolonial Hierarchies in World Politics' at the University of Amsterdam in July 2023, and especially Kristiina Silvan, Luca Anceschi, Fabienne Bossuyt, Neslihan Dikmen Alsancak, Katie Hudson, Laura Luciani, Jan Orbie, and Elena Stavrevska for critical and supportive comments. All errors remain my own.

Funding statement. This work was supported by the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO) fellowship funding [grant number 12B9422N] and a FWO grant for research stay abroad [grant number V430222N].

Competing interests. No potential conflict of interests was reported by the author.

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