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INTRODUCTION

International Order and the Reconfiguration of Power: Dynamics of Change in the Political Economy of Russia and China[1]

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ABSTRACT

How did the policies of Russia and China toward integration with the global economy reshape power in the international order? How do Russia's and China's policies toward integration with the global economy reshape power in their respective internal socio-political frameworks? These are the two key questions addressed by the special issue through an interdisciplinary perspective. By focusing on historical, sociological and political-economy features of the dynamics of change in Russia and China, the collection of articles focuses on hybrid processes in the political and economic sphere that have led to the emerging role of Russia and China in the international order.

KEYWORDS: Russia; China; Power; Transition; Political Economy

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[1] This special issue includes six essays by collaborators of the research team on the topic *China and Russia in the global world* - a three-year project (2015-2018) funded by the Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Forlì and coordinated by Stefano Bianchini and Antonio Fiori at the Department of Political and Social Sciences, University of Bologna.

The contemporary international order is facing profound challenges with shifting configurations of power in favor of non-Western nations. These challenges might either spell the end of the modern international order, built on Western values, or shape a new articulation of power and cultural differences. The recalibration of power in the international arena is leading to the appearance of new and important emerging actors.

The Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China undoubtedly represent two key global players in international, regional and European arenas, bringing their own cultural values and practices into the future of the modern international order. Following substantial reforms - the political economy of transition toward democracy and a market economy in Russia and the opening to foreign trade and investments in China – these two actors gained new legitimacy in the global political sphere.

The questions to be addressed in this special issue concern the dynamics of change in Russia and China in an interdisciplinary perspective, focusing on historical, sociological and political-economy features. While the Chinese political establishment embraced globalization by perceiving it as an opportunity rather than a threat, in the new-born Russian Federation of the 1990s the transition represented an abrupt critical juncture with traumatic effects.

Under the communist rule, the political and economic systems of these two countries revealed many similarities. However, in the 1990s the opening to foreign trade and investments followed different patterns of integration in the international landscape: in China power was consciously reshaped, in Russia it passed through a process of economic, social and political turmoil.

This special issue focuses on those hybrid processes in the political and economic sphere that have led to the emerging role of Russia and China in the international order. It brings together different fields of research in political science, international relations, international history as well as international economics and sociology. Its articles offer theoretical and empirical insights that help understand the evolving relationship between the new configuration of power, cultural diversity

and the future of the international order. Economic globalization was probably both the cause and consequence of the development of a multipolar world led by great powers. In the emerging multipolar world, Russia and China presented new political and economic models based on a mix of integration and coexistence of state-owned enterprises and private companies. These countries were able to carve novel paths for their international outreach, by staging themselves as unique global players. Moscow and Beijing have become distinctive global players because they emphasize the state as the legitimate institution presiding both politics and markets. In this manner, the two global players challenge the principles underpinning the liberal-democratic values traditionally adopted by Western international actors.

'How did the policies of Russia and China toward integration with the global economy reshape power in the international order?'. This is one of the questions addressed in this special issue. In recent years, both Moscow and Beijing have converged on some patterns of political-economic presence and action in world politics, a process fueled by flourishing economic exchanges and able to foster an unprecedented degree of cooperation in the global arena. By progressively broadening the scope of their strategic partnership in functional and geopolitical terms, these two global players have traced new frontlines of great power competition.

In a clear attempt at moving beyond their partnerships with Europe and the United States of America, both China and Russia expanded their presence in the Middle East and North Africa, building on the widespread perception of the Western failure to provide strategic stability to the region. Trentin in this special issue shows how Moscow and Beijing painted their engagement in the region as agents of stability, legitimacy and, significantly, non-alignment. Most notably, by supporting existing regimes, and thus by showing a higher degree of autonomy towards their local partners, if compared to the US, they indicated a more consistent respect of the principle of sovereignty. This strategy helped to assert themselves as providers of institutional stability for old and new elites, possibly inducing the latter to break free from traditional, albeit sterile Western alliances. To be sure, economic interactions between Russia, China and the MENA region were chiefly driven by the in-

creasing need of oil consumption by the two global players, with China becoming the largest importer of oil from the Gulf area. Arguably, however, what has led Moscow and Beijing into a working partnership in the Middle East and North Africa is their growing distrust of the United States, especially vis-à-vis the latter's aggressive policies in East Asia. This shared belief meant that, despite their different legacies, constraints and histories, Moscow and Beijing converged on the desirability of a multipolar world since the early 2000s.

Prospects for competition and cooperation between the two Eurasian giants are certainly not limited to the MENA region. Another hotspot of the international scenario is the Arctic region, given its unexplored and under-exploited natural resources. The article by Fiori and Passeri examines the key drivers and motives that nourish the evolving trajectories of Russia and China's political and economic interests in the area. Spurred by strategic needs to diversify energy sources and future sea routes, China is a newcomer to the area. Hoping to gain a solid foothold in the Arctic and legitimize itself as a relevant 'Arctic stakeholder', in 2013 China succeeded in obtaining the observer status in the Arctic Council. By contrast, Russia has been a long-standing player in the region. In recent years Moscow has tried to compensate Western sanctions with a more accommodating posture toward Beijing's aspirations in the Arctic area. Emblematic of this strategic partnership are the ongoing attempts to shape a shared vision for the infrastructural development of the Northern Sea Route. Yet there is an obvious geopolitical dimension to Russia's and China's investments in the Arctic. Geopolitical interests imply that future collaboration between the two global players will largely depend on their patterns of alignment in the changing international order, with imponderable effects on the delicate balance between cooperation and competition.

Perhaps the increasingly globalized nature of contemporary international relations provides the impetus for both Russia and China to redefine their role as well as their image in world politics. If China is actively engaging in the One Belt – One Road project and its Silk Road Economic Belt component, Russia is expanding its remit through the Eurasian integration process. As Yarashevich argues in this

special issue, the Eurasian Economic Union, launched in 2015, which involves Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Russia, is a geopolitical and economic arrangement where Russia is formally on equal terms with her partners. Although such formality may represent a mere façade that conceals a *de facto* hegemony of Russia in all realms, the Eurasian integration process is definitely a new regional experience. There are inevitably conflicting views about the integration process among its member states. While Russia perceives it as a geopolitical asset, the other partners appear more concerned with the economic benefits of the integration. In light of these divergent driving forces of the Eurasian Economic Union, and considering the unequal size and asymmetric power of its members, with Russia being the strongest state, it is no exaggeration to say that the solidity of the political economy of the Eurasian integration project rests on rather shaky foundations. Indeed, the Eurasian integration project testifies to Russia's renewed ambitions regarding former Soviet countries. It should be noted, however, that being an intergovernmental arrangement with supranational institutions, it shows how Russia attempts to legitimize itself by acting, at least formally, on principles based on 'an equal level playing field.'

The crucial role played by principles, beliefs and values in the international conduct is central to Fasola and Lucarelli's article in this special issue. Values, images and principles do shape both the discourse and practice of foreign policy and thus of global players' relations with friends and foes. Although scholarly work on NATO-Russia relationships has often focused on institutions, foreign policies and military equipment, nevertheless it is well canvassed in the literature that interactions among social actors, be they individuals, organizations or states, include visions, aspirations, worldviews, norms and beliefs that may significantly affect their policy design and decision-making programs. Following this line of reasoning, Fasola and Lucarelli provide a cognitivist perspective on the ups and downs of the relationship between NATO and Russia. These authors focus on these actors' 'strategic culture', defined as a broad cognitive framework that subsumes an actor's self-perception and worldview. They argue that the images of the world depicted by

Russia and NATO in their international actions cannot and should not be easily dismissed when examining their relationships. Values, principles and beliefs shape the identities of the two actors and, in so doing, they set limits to their margins of maneuver, while at the same time offer opportunities to change their interests and self-representations. In this sense, understanding the links and connections as well as the distance and diversity between a plurality of values, and the different interpretations that are given to them, is crucial to analyze how they mold plans of actions. Ultimately, Fasola and Lucarelli claim that the reason why Russia and NATO undertook certain practices is deeply embedded in their incompatible strategic cultures. Consequently, and at least in the short run, their interactions are bound to be conflictual if not adversarial.

Examining the reconfiguration of international power by exclusively focusing on the international scenario unduly neglects crucial issues of internal socio-political effects. Thus, the second question addressed in this special issue is 'How do Russia's and China's policies toward integration with the global economy reshape power in their respective internal socio-political frameworks?'. As regards Russia, the neoliberal model of post-socialist transformation adopted in the early 1990s under Boris Yeltsin has restructured the social fabric of Russian society. In this period, the emergence of Russia as a global player amplified the expectations of many in the field of gender equality. Yeltsin's political and economic reforms raised new hopes for freedom, social progress and democratic representation. Mulé and Dubrovina in this special issue ask whether these reforms produced favorable or unfavorable conditions for women to enter both parliament and the labor market. Using a political economy approach that moves beyond giving pride of place to either the economic or the political sphere, these authors explore instead *the interaction* between the politics and the economy. Their work analyses the quantity and quality of women's participation in the political process as well as of women's labor force participation, emphasizing the feedback effects between political representation and labor market participation. The authors examine how the introduction of neoliberal policies under Yeltsin ushered in hefty cuts in social spending, unleashing a new dy-

namic with significant consequences for the political economy of gender equality. In particular, a revival of a conservative call for the return of women to caregiving and housekeeping seems to be a paradoxical outcome in a country where high female education and employment rates should protect women's socio-economic and political status. The authors conclude that by neglecting the interdependence of social needs and economic activities, the Russian government may ultimately weaken the legitimacy of its regime.

Challenges to regime legitimacy of autocratic political systems may also be raised by the spread of technological innovation and its impact on government information management. Using China as a case study, Cai in this special issue is concerned with the relationship between information and the resilience of autocratic regimes. Cai examines in great details the challenges faced by a plurality of agencies and actors involved in processing, collecting and managing a vast body of information. In contrast to conventional wisdom that views information as a tool of power, thus undergirding the benefits to society as well as to government, Cai stresses the costs of obtaining and processing information. The author points out how knowledge can backfire because the lack of government responsiveness causes a decline in regime legitimacy. Cai demonstrates how new technologies yield top-down and bottom-up political effects. From a top-down perspective, the spread of technological innovation enables the Chinese governments, at both central and local level, to orchestrate sophisticated systems of monitoring the people, increasing their capacity to censor information as well as identify regime critics. Although information collection may also violate citizens' rights or privacy, from a bottom-up viewpoint, new technologies render more visible to the wide public the government's mismanagement of information. In this manner, a better flow of information can become a source of pressure for local and central governments and help enhance their accountability. More generally, Cai's detailed empirical research illustrates how in the contemporary era, technological progress may induce authoritarian governments to improve their responsiveness.

To sum up, the articles included in this special issue address the mul-

tifaceted nature of a changing international order, highlighting the complexity of political, economic, social and cultural diversity of Russia and China, two emerging new global players. The articles show that this complexity can better be understood by adopting an interdisciplinary perspective. Strategic interests, strategic cultures, political institutions and economic priorities are neither the first nor the last piece of the puzzle; rather, they are equally important to our understanding of the reconfiguration of the international order.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Gendering the Costs of the Political Economy Transition in Russia

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ABSTRACT

Russia is an important global player that has witnessed the pressures and challenges of globalization, international economic liberalization and privatization. Since the early 1990s, Russia has been charting new paths towards democracy and market-oriented institutions. How did Russia's integration with the global economy reshape its power in internal political and economic gender frameworks? To answer this question this article maps out the gender impact of political and economic reforms under Yeltsin. We argue that some of these reforms fueled a conservative turn in social attitudes that legitimized gender inequalities in the political economy of Russia, marginalizing women both as workers and as political actors. Our findings suggest that the transition to a new political economy created new social risks with far-reaching consequences for gender equality.

KEYWORDS: The political economy of transition, Yeltsin, Gender, Labor market, Russia

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1. Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought sweeping changes to various aspects of political, economic, social, and cultural life, not only in Russia, but also throughout the world. In fact, after seven decades of its existence, Russia's incarnation as both a threat and hope have disappeared – depending on one's ideological inclination in different national and international contexts. The transition toward a democratic system and a market-oriented economy generated interrelated and mutually reinforcing processes, including economic liberalization, globalization and deep institutional changes, that restructured the social fabric of Russian society.

The demise of the communist regime in 1991 represented a time of stark and rapid transformation, a critical juncture that radically altered the status quo of Russian political economy. At the same time, globalization was reshaping the world economy,[1] influencing Russia's transition to democracy and to a capitalist economy. Vorobyov and Zukov (2001 p.251) believe that 'globalization was the driving force in Russia's transition'. Although the impact of global forces on Russia is often inseparable from internal factors of socio-economic and cultural transformation, it is still possible to mark patterns of adjustment and resistance to the global world (Semenenko 2003).

In her recent review of the literature on political economy, Renate Mayntz (2019:10) identifies three types of political economic relationships: (1) political processes and actions impacting on economic phenomena; (2) economic processes and actors impacting on politics, and; (3) political and economic actors or processes that influence each other. Our work examines the third type of relationship, exploring how dismantling the command economy and Soviet social services may have impinged on the female labor force as well as political participation. As Mayntz (2019, p. 7) states, the 'political economy enquiry is not a unified discipline with a shared

The article was written by the two authors in collaboration, however Rosa Mulè is responsible for sections 1.,4., 4.1, 4.2 and Olga Dubrovina is responsible for sections 2., 3., 3.1 and 5.

[1] The term globalization has been defined in a number of ways, intersecting different fields such as political, economic, social and cultural. The etymology refers to globe, i.e., universal, worldwide. In this article we define globalization as international economic integration.

paradigm, composed of a set of core concepts and core questions asked about it'. On the contrary, political economy is an interdisciplinary research field which is addressing the need for an analytical perspective by integrating the selective disciplinary perspectives of economics and political science (Mayntz 2019, p. 5). The analytical perspective of political economy enables us to reach novel insights regarding the feedback effects between politics and economics, encouraging us to ask how policy implementation transforms the webs of relations between the political and economic spheres.

A political economy approach is particularly apt for analyzing Russia in the early 1990s, when the country underwent the twin transition of political and economic transition. This transition involved on one side the shift from a centrally planned economy, under government control, intended to develop mixed or market-based institutions; on the other side, and at the same time, the political system morphed from a totalitarian to an authoritarian regime (Gel'man, 2015). Hence Russia in the period under examination experienced a crucial political economy transition that altered the fabric of society.

What are the implications for gender equality of the huge transformations initiated by the processes of democratization and economic liberalization? We argue that in order to understand the gender impact of Russia's political economy transition we should go beyond giving pride of place to either the economic or the political sphere, but explore instead *the interaction* between the politics and the economy. Our work analyses the quantity and quality of women's participation in the political process as well as of women's labor force participation, stressing the feedback effects between political representation and labor market participation. Instead of considering the two different spheres of gender bias separately, namely the economic and the political spheres, the article brings the two spheres together offering a fresh approach on the gender costs of the political economy of the transition period.

The rise of Russia as a global player rose the expectations of many in the field of gender equality. Yeltsin's political and economic reforms raised new hopes

for freedom, social progress and democratic representation. We ask whether these reforms produced favorable or unfavorable conditions for women to enter parliament. Exploring those conditions that affect women's descriptive representation is important. Anne Phillips (1995) claims in her book entitled 'The politics of presence' that different life experiences and personal characteristics of representatives influence their view points and policy priorities. The presence or underrepresentation of women in the political arena molds the issues raised in political debates, determining the quality of democratic representation (Schwindt-Bayer 2011).

Democratization and international economic liberalization entailed a shakeup of the Russian social fabric. Like all political economy upheavals, those reforms redistributed resources and power between social groups, including between men and women. How did gender map onto Russia's transition to a new political economy? What effects did the dismantling of state sponsored socialist welfare policies have on women's agency, most notably on their opportunity to influence the political economy? Rosenbluth et al. (2006) argue that in industrialized countries the key mechanism affecting women's probability to enter parliament resides in welfare state policies. Welfare state policies free women to enter the paid workforce and provide public sector jobs that disproportionately employ women. These factors change the political interests of working women, and create incentives for parties to compete for the female vote by including more and more women in their parliamentary delegations. Rosenbluth and her co-authors (2006) find that as the size of the welfare state increases, so does female representation in parliament in the industrialized countries. Welfare services and programs enhance women's ability to have a voice in society and influence policy. Consequently, if social services and the welfare state are retrenched, political economy reforms, stemming from globalization and deregulation, may have ominous implications for gender equality. Although empirical evidence on the globalization–welfare state nexus is mixed (Meinhard & Potrafke 2012), in Russia the introduction of neoliberal policies ushered in hefty cuts in social spending. Our work indicates that a new dynamic was at work with significant consequences for the political economy of gender inequality.

The article is structured as follows. Section two examines women political representation in the Soviet era. Section three explores continuities and changes in gender representation under Yeltzin's democratization process. Section four explores women's economic conditions and opportunities in the Soviet era. Section five analyzes the gender impact of the economic transition under Yeltzin and the cutting back of public social services. Section six summarizes the results of this article. Our methodology is a case-based research that contributes to the 'return of single country studies', which allows in-depth analysis of micro-level processes (Pepinsky, 2019). The empirical findings draw on Russia's official statistical data, including Rosstat, *Russian Statistical Yearbook* and Demoscope Weekly, which is a demographic electronic journal, published by the Russian Institute of Demography, as well as government publications, legal documents and the Russian Longitudinal Monitoring Survey. Drawing on multiple economic and political data sources is a requirement of the interdisciplinary political economy approach endorsed in this article.

2. Political representation: illusion of gender equality in USSR

We begin by looking back at women's role in the political economy of Soviet Russia. In Russia, for more than 70 years of Soviet power the idea of gender equal rights was reflected in every constitution (1918, 1924, 1977). The question of women's rights together with that of gender equality was considered resolved. It was believed that equality had been achieved. It has become a myth and the embodiment of the victory of the proletariat over past times (Pushkareva 2008, p. 118). The Bolsheviks proclaimed the equality of political and civil rights of women and men already in the 1918 Constitution where it was underlined that citizens of both sexes benefited from the right to elect and be elected. Russia became one of the first five countries in the world that granted women political rights (Polenina 2000). Dispelling the myth, it should be remembered that women obtained the right to vote in the spring of 1917 through a decree of the Provisional Government. Furthermore, the concept of equal opportunities, whose absence almost rendered the

equation of political rights superficial, was not taken into consideration by the Soviet legislators.

Thanks to the quotas that existed in the USSR, women were assigned 30% of the seats of the Supreme Council of the USSR. But this number was more to guarantee a series of other, more important criteria. In 1984, 90% of female members of Parliament (MPs) belonged to the category of manual workers (weavers, milkmaids, machine operators) and only 10% of mandates were assigned to teachers, doctors and other representatives of intellectual work. Of the 492 deputies, only 66 (13%) women were re-elected, i.e. they had a real opportunity to penetrate into the work of the Supreme Soviet, to participate more assiduously in its activities, to work more efficiently than novice deputies. Most of the male MPs obtained the mandate for life, so, it was women who guaranteed the rotation of the parliamentary body (Novikova 1994, pp. 13-18).

There were only two women in the Politburo, the institution where the real power was concentrated. In the first Soviet government (1917-1922) there was only one woman, Aleksandra Kollontaj, out of 67 people's commissioners. Until 1991 only two women directed the commissariats and the ministries: Polina Zhemchuzhina, the commissioner of the fishing industry, and Ekaterina Furtseva, the Minister of Culture. Thus, among the ministers of the Soviet period women constituted 0.5% in Politburo and in other institutions of the Central Committee of the CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union) women constituted 3%. These figures, and not those that demonstrate a wide participation of women in soviets of different levels, must be considered as the real index of the political status of women in the USSR (Kochkina 1999, p. 181), because the real power was concentrated in the highest level of soviet hierarchy.

In fact, especially in the 1920s and 1930s, the Soviet authorities were very concerned about encouraging women's participation in urban and rural soviets. However, the real participation could not be significant because of pressure from the top that was applied to reach the expected figures. The stereotypes rooted in the early Soviet society of the 1920s and 1930s could not be removed through person-

nel policies. The representation of women in the traditionally male spheres of activity provoked reactions of frustration in the "stronger sex" (Shabatura 2013, p. 507). As an example, we can cite the data on southern Russia that demonstrate an extremely weak involvement of women in administrative-managerial positions of the kolkhozy[2]: in 1939 out of all kolkhozy presidents only 3% were women (Skorik & Gaditskaya 2013).

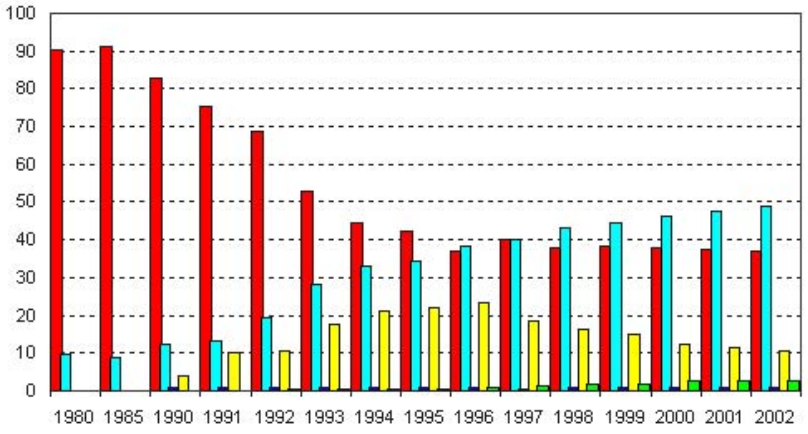
According to Russian researcher Voronina (2016), a tacit agreement was stipulated between the Soviet state and women: women were deprived of political rights in the interests of the state that exploited them to solve economic and demographic problems depending on the needs of a specific period. In return, women acquired the guarantees of political and above all economic stability. Through the system of subsidies and benefits, the State exercised the role of a true patriarch and head of families, closely intertwining the economy of the country with that of each family. Voronina (2016, 173) argues that "women ceased to be the property of their husbands as they were before the revolution and became the property of the State". As a result, in the USSR a specific type of traditional gender system was born: a Soviet patriarchy, where the main mechanism of discrimination was not men but the State. In order to more fully dominate women, to use their productive and reproductive resources for its own purposes. It is in the "resubordination" of women from husbands to the State that lies the deep meaning of Soviet emancipatory politics. Of course, such alienation of male rights to women in favor of the State does not only contribute to the reconstruction of patriarchal principles of social order, but it also strengthens them. If the material and symbolic status of the patriarch is assigned to the State, then the gender identity of real men is mixed. Therefore, in the early 1990s the paradoxical goal of feminist movement consisted not in rooting the idea of equality between men and women in public opinion, but in demolishing the myth of achieved equality that was built over 70 years (Pushkareva 2008, p. 119). The tacit agreement of which the validity lasted throughout the Soviet period left indelible traces on the political mentality of post-Soviet women.

[2] A kolkhoz was a form of collective farms in the Soviet Union.

In the years of "perestroika" the situation of representation of women in politics got worse. After holding the first alternative elections in 1989, the share of women among MPs was reduced from 33% to 15.7%. After the legislative elections to the Congress of People's Deputies of the RSFSR (Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic) in 1990, women constituted only 5.4% of parliamentarians (Kan 2007, p. 14).

Moving to inspect the labor market, it should be noted that in soviet Russia full employment policies and high levels of education amongst women meant that women occupied positions at all levels of the occupational hierarchy. According to the socialist ideology, most of the population was supposed to work in the State sector (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Distribution of workers based on the ownership type of enterprises and organizations, 1980-2002 (percentage)



Source: http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/2003/0117/barom02.php

Women's labor force participation under the socialist command economy was sustained by social programs and services, including state-sponsored childcare, which helped women to balance work and family responsibilities. State-sponsored social services enabled soviet Russia to achieve high levels of female labor force participation, contrasting Western capitalist countries, while maintaining fertility rates

close to replacement levels (on average at about two children per woman). High participation rates were encouraged to speed up economic growth by utilizing all labor resources and as a proof of equality of the sexes - an early Communist objective. Women labor force participation was facilitated by a pro-children policy as reflected in generous family allowances. Hence, state sponsored social services and maternity leave allowed women to have similar participation levels in the labor market to men. The main measures of the Soviet family policy included direct and indirect "material" support provided to citizens with family responsibilities, as well as "service" support. Material support was aimed at improving conditions of families with children through direct and indirect payments. These payments included maternity leave, child allowances, tax breaks for large families, housing programs for young and large families, as well as parenting and care through creation of a network of social welfare institutions. Service support provided by the state was intended primarily to aid socialization of family functions, such as housekeeping and raising children. This could include measures for the creation and development of public catering, pre-school and school circulation systems, such as 24-hour nursery and summer camps, day schools, boarding schools for all children, etc. (Chernova 2013, p. 101). Women were more likely to be teachers, nurses, clerical workers, sales and service employees. Men were more likely to work in the construction, mining and transport sectors. Thus, similarly to capitalist economies, women's labor force participation was characterized by occupational segregation.

3. Post-soviet era: new challenges, same problems?

With the collapse of the communist system, observers expected that the diffusion of Western values would strengthen the role of women in society and enhance their political and economic influence. What happened, then, to women representation in parliament as Russia moved in a more democratic direction? Did Yeltsin's liberal reforms favor women's participation in the political sphere? At the beginning of the transition period in Russian society, a conservative and patriarchal

attitude towards women prevailed which interfered with their political emancipation.

The very idea of female participation in politics was compromised because it was presented not only as a part of the political culture of the left, but also as a part of the Bolshevik culture. In the 1990s it was considered *mauvais ton* to talk about women's social problems, their political demands and career claims (Aivazova 1998). In addition, this habit developed over 70 years in the Soviet regime, not only to trust the central power but also to entrust important aspects of their lives to the State (family planning, maternity protection, work placement, pension treatment).

Russian women did not participate in struggles for the sharing of property and power in the country (Aivazova 1998). Indeed, the political system in Russia in the 90s was characterized by a tight intertwining of politics and economics. Wherein the elite concentrated not just on political power, but also to have the power to manage most of the goods and resources by themselves. The composition of the political elite reflected the relationships of different pressure groups in society. In the 90s, the decisive role in the process of appointing senior officials resided with the business structures that promoted "people of trust" at all levels of power. Thus, while globalization encouraged democratic and neoliberal reforms, women's lack of access to economic resources inhibited their active participation in electoral campaigns as well as in making inroads into the political establishment (Aivazova 1998).

The problem of equal rights, but above all equal opportunities, came back to the limelight in the early 1990s. During 1992, in the so-called "Brezhnevian" Constitution of 1977, an amendment was made: the provision of equal opportunities was removed from Article 33, and only the clause "men and women have equal rights and freedoms" was left. Only thanks to the active position of non-governmental women's organizations, was the new Russian Constitution of 1993 amended with the provision "men and women in Russia have equal rights and equal opportunities for their realization" (Pushkareva 2008, p. 120)[3].

[3] Translated by the authors.

During the 10-year term of Yeltsin's presidency, some decrees were issued aimed at promoting women participation in political life. Apart from national commitments, the new Russian political elite took responsibility for all international documents signed by Soviet governments. According to enforced international standards, the equalization of the positions of men and women is a mandatory element of all social strategies and programs of any country that declares to be oriented towards democratic development (Aivazova 1998).

In 1993 Yeltsin signed a decree on the "Priority objectives of national policy towards women", which focused upon conditions for effective female participation in the activities of state institutions and social organizations. In 1996 another important document was published entitled "On the increase of women's role in the system of federal government bodies and government bodies of the subjects of the RF" («*O povyshenii roli zhenschin v sisteme federal'nykh organov gosudarstvennoy vlasti i organov gosudarstvennoy vlasti sub'ektov RF*»). This act denounced weak female involvement in politics, discrimination in the workplace, worsening of health and the growth of violence against women (Polenina 2000). To these two acts must be added the decree of the Government of the RF of 26 August 1996 "On the approval of the National Action Plan to improve women's conditions and increase their role in society until the year *2000" (O Natsional'nom plane deystviy po uluchsheniyu polozhenija zhenschin i povysheniyu ikh roli v obschestve do 2000 goda).*

Following this legislative activity, the committees on women's issues, families and children were summoned to the President of Russia, the Russian government and parliament as well as to the subject administrations of the Russian and local administrations. The focus of the programs elaborated by these commissions was to develop a reality of women's rights based on the principle of equal opportunities. If these programs had been implemented there probably would have been the opportunity to change the conditions of women in Russian society by overcoming existing gender asymmetry. However, they were never implemented due to lack of funding and the early dissolution of the commissions themselves (Pushkareva 2008, p. 121).

Data on women's participation in national institutions highlight the inefficiency of state policies on equal representation of gender. In 1993 there were 13.5% women members of parliament, this figure dropped to 10.2% in 1995 and fell to 7.8% in 1999. In 2003 the situation improved slightly with the share of women in parliament rising to 10%. In some regional parliaments, women were not represented at all (the regions of Novosibirsk and Chelyabinsk). While in the Karelian Republic they constituted 32% of parliamentary members. There were multiple barriers to entry for women candidates for the legislature. Firstly, experts pointed to the mixed electoral system in the 1990s that was unfavorable to the participation of women. Only a proportional system, according to political scientists, can guarantee a conspicuous presence of women in parliament (Golder et al. 2017). 'One reason is that in a PR system with several candidates running on a list, the party can try to balance its ticket so as to appear to be equitable, by selectively and strategically placing women on the list to assuage vocal pressure groups' (Vengroff et al 2000, p. 200). However, the electoral system is not a sufficient condition for women's representation. In Russia, for example, even in the political parties' lists women were at the bottom, which obviously prevented them from entering parliament (Chirikova 2013, p. 37).

What is more, the cultural factor should not be understated. In the 1990s, public opinion found it difficult to accept women in politics, rather it viewed the role of women in society in terms of traditional values (Kan 2007, p. 15). The same situation also pertained to the administrative and executive bodies. In 1995, 44% of state apparatus members were women of which only 3.9% occupied executive positions (for example Inga Grebesheva, a vice premier for Social Policies, and Ella Pamfilova, the Minister of Social Protection). Only after approval of the decree of 1996, and therefore during the second mandate of Yeltsin, the number of women in the managerial positions slightly increased: some directed the ministries of health (Dmitrieva Tatjana), of culture (Dementieva Natalia) and also of work and social development (Dmitrieva Oxana)[4]. In this period there were no women in charge of

[4]https://rg.ru/2011/02/21/pravitelstvo-sostav.html (access date 5/6/2019).

the administrations of the federal subjects, mayors, no women in the Security Council (only Valentina Matvienko in 2003 and from 2011).

3.1. Political involvement from below

The struggle to achieve political equality and the protection of women's rights can take place through at least two channels: one official, through state institutions, and one unofficial, through self-organization and actions independent of state structures. In Russia, towards the end of the 1990s there were about 600 women organizations registered with the Ministry of Justice. However, analysts argue that the figure is much higher, around 2000, which constituted 0.5% of all non-profit organizations in Russia. Many women's councils (reconstructed during Perestroika) were transformed in the 90s into non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Women's NGOs developed mainly in the big cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg, [5]45% of all NGOs were registered in Moscow and only 9% were established in St. Petersburg (Abubikirova et al. 1998).

Regarding their activity, three fifths of female focused NGOs dealt with issues related to civil rights, social protection and rights of different categories of citizens. For example, a large number of NGOs aimed to protecting the rights of recruits, and 10% of these NGOs took care of the work and employment of women, while 11% sought to protect women who suffered from different types of violence. Other women NGOs dealt with education, including different types of schools, educational centers, professional development, etc. Still other NGOs engaged in the production, collection, storage and dissemination of information, working with journalists or practicing journalism. A large number of NGOs took care of families, gave aid to families in need or worked in the female entrepreneurial sector.

For the purpose of this article, it is important to stress that there were few female groups involved in politics. Only 10% of registered women associations participated in elections or political activities. The most famous associations are those

[5] This is the so-called effect of 'one country inside another', which reflects the huge distance in terms of both information and economic resources between the two cities and the rest of Russia.

committees of mothers of soldiers who organized protest demonstrations. Only 6% worked with MPs, female voters, candidates for elections, or with the State authorities (Abubikirova et al. 1998).

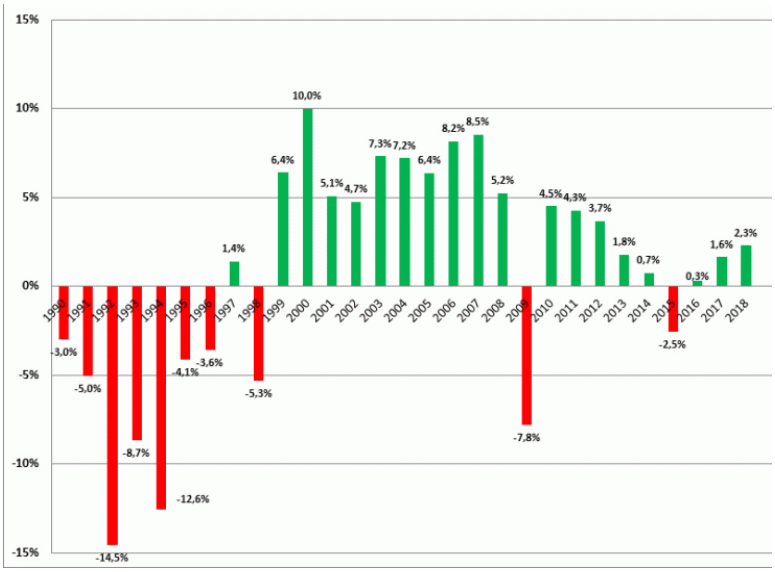
Yet the mere existence of an independent women movement born in the early 1990s was significant in its own right for the development of civil society in Russia. The female movement's political activity between 1993 and 1995 could be described as focusing upon interactions with government structures and the political party system. In the beginning, women's organizations did not participate in political debates, but by the mid-1990s female activists became increasingly involved in the political process (Abubikirova et al. 1998). One argument in favor of political participation was the need for substantive representation, that is, the need to represent the economic and social interests of women in domestic politics. In the national forums, women tried to raise awareness among the parties (in 1993 there were 40 parties) but with little or no success. As a result, the first women's party, "Women of Russia" was created and gained 8% of the votes in the legislative elections of 1993. Women of Russia appealed to the values of modern society, especially to the rights of men and women and fought for greater opportunities for women. However, during the Chechen war, Women for Russia were not vocal enough and consequently lost the 1995 elections.

4. The Wild and Evil 1990s

The demise of the command economy and the breakdown of the USSR generated mass disruption, the creation of new states and a significant drop in GDP, with huge social costs. Following Milanovic (1998) these costs can be divided at least into two categories. Firstly, the costs associated with decreased output due to systemic changes (the transition to market economy) and macroeconomic stabilization that are represented through lower incomes, greater inequality, and increased poverty. Secondly, unemployment and the loss of income costs that are associated with transition. Mass privatization of medium and large state-owned firms, meant that in 1992 only 5% of the total workforce were employed by enterprises with pri-

vate ownership, but by autumn 1995, 38% of Russians worked in privately owned enterprises (Milanovic 1998; see Figure 1 above). The transition to a market economy triggered a deep economic recession, stimulating a thorough restructuring of the labor market, including adjustments to infrastructure. The severe contraction of GDP is clearly visible in Figure 2, which shows that in the 1990s real GDP growth fell, with a contraction of -14.5% occurring in 1993.

Figure 2. Real GDP growth in Russia, year on year percentage change.



Source: Rosstat.

Several hypotheses emphasize the direct effect of economic transition on the quality and quantity of female participation in the labor force, suggesting that women become increasingly vulnerable in transitions to capitalist economies. These hypotheses ask questions regarding the extent to which gender affects access to paid work during transition from state socialism to market capitalism in Russia. Were women more or less likely than men to experience job losses, lower wages, or engage in part-time work? Short-term predictions of segmentation theory center on the different ability of men and women to hold onto jobs during periods of economic transition. In Russia, labor market restructuring combined with the decline of

state sponsored employment guarantees, led some observers to argue that women would be severely disadvantaged during the transition to a market economy. Russian researcher Yelena Mezentseva (1994) argued that in those days the status of women in the employment market was far less favorable than their male counterparts. Furthermore, not only was the gap between men and women not narrowing, but rather a number of developments indicated that it was actually widening, despite the propaganda about "non-discrimination against women", "equal opportunities", "equal pay for equal work" and so on. Where working conditions were hazardous to employees' health, a high employment rate of women in jobs existed; women's wage levels lagged considerably behind those of men; the existence of multiple obstacles for women gaining further qualifications and career promotion. These conditions testified to the unfavorable position of women. An additional factor that aggravated women's working conditions was the increasingly patriarchal ideology and direct appeals to reduce female employment and "return women to the home" (Mezentseva 1994, pp. 75, 76). Scholars suggested that the introduction of a capitalist economy and the retrenchment of State sponsored welfare policies would create new opportunities for gender discrimination as managers gained more power over their labor allocation process (Kotowska 1995).

Comparative research indicates that in periods of structural reforms, women are often more negatively affected than men because of men's position in power structures and the division of labor (Pailhé 2000). Reasons for women's special vulnerability are related to the fact that measures taken to overcome economic crises are passed on to enterprises and institutions where equality between men and women does not exist. Not only this, but inequality becomes more marked when there is a crisis.

As a consequence, during transition, significant disadvantages existed for many women, such as declining wages relative to men (Brainerd, 1998), particularly for those with young children, thus women became increasingly vulnerable in nascent capitalist labor markets (Glass 2008). Gerber and Mayorova (2006) explored dynamic gender differences in post-socialist labor markets in Russia and looked at

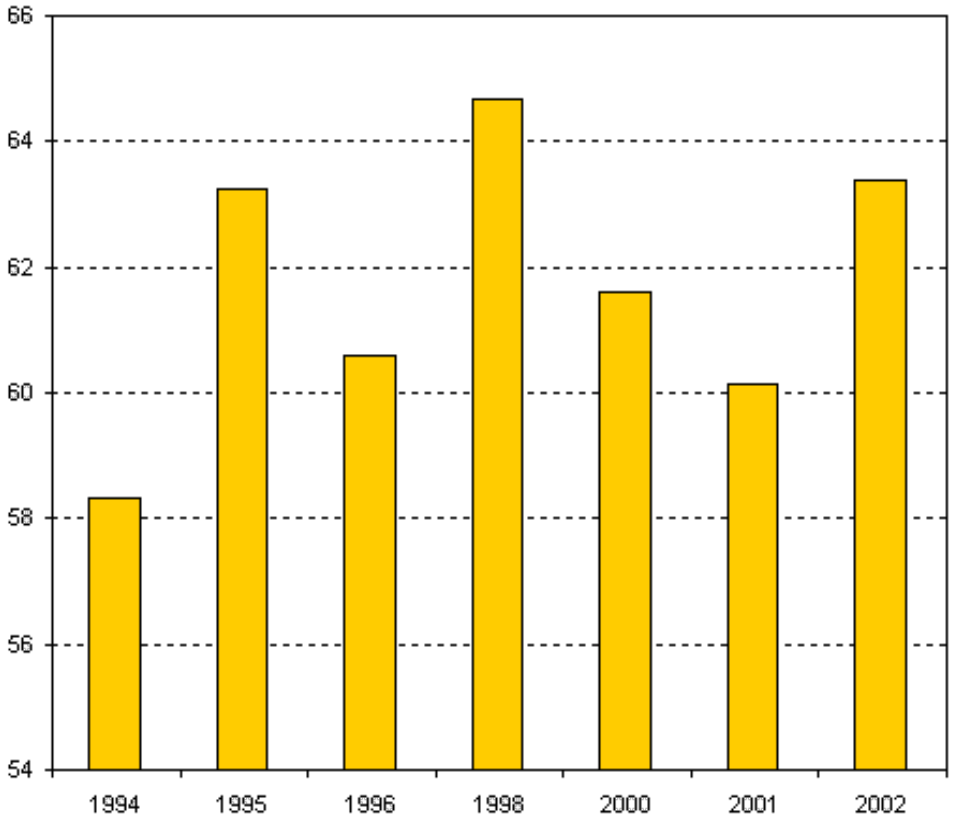
rates of labor market transitions, including levels of entry or exit from employment, job mobility and the quality of new jobs. They find that women are disadvantaged in the labor market due to higher rates of employment layoff, lower rates of employment entry and job mobility, and a greater probability that their new jobs are of a lower grade. Their research indicated that the gender gap in job quality widened. Hence, being a woman represented a new social risk generated by the restructuring process.

A significant increase in the role of the private sector in the economy contributed to a deepening of gender discrimination. The Russian case shows that changing employment conditions dovetailed with changes in ownership of enterprises and organizations. As a consequence of privatization and corporatization, private enterprises and organizations became dominant, which in 2002 accounted for 49.1% of total employment in Russia. The proportion of people employed in state and municipal enterprises stabilized at the end of the 1990s, reaching 36.9% in 2002. The proportion of people employed in mixed-type enterprises grew rapidly in the first half of the 1990s, but after 1996 it almost halved, to 13.2% in 2002 (Naselenie i obschestvo 2003).

However, another strand of literature plays down the gender implications of globalization by drawing on human capital theory. Some authors claim that the diffusion of market mechanisms would expand opportunities for women and would lead to greater equality in the labor market as a result of education and entrepreneurial experience gained by women under State socialism (Fodor 1997; Glass 2008). An additional factor is that in Russia women possessed human capital that would make them attractive to capitalist employers (Fodor 1997). Consistent with human capital theory, Fodor (1997) contends that when faced with competition and budget constraints employers will find gender discrimination more expensive and therefore be less likely to engage in such discrimination. This is particularly true in the social context where women possess more valuable human capital than men. However, the following section shows that the Russian landscape paints a rather different picture.

A third line of scholarship claims that traditional job segmentation by sex, while unfavorable to women in terms of wages and job status, turns into an advantage during transition periods (Monousova 1998). This line of thinking stresses the fact that traditional female jobs in hotel and tourism, retail and educational services, undergo disproportionate growth in transition economies—whereas the deindustrializing post-socialist economy penalizes mainly male workers. Women in Russia constitute the largest share of those employed in education, health care, social work, trade, and nonprofit sector - the least paid sectors of the Russian economy (The Russian Statistical Service 2009).

Figure 3. Ratio of women's wages to men's wages, 1994-2002 (percentages).



Source: Russian Longitudinal Monitoring Survey-HSE. http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/2005/0219/tema03.php

Gendered analysis of employment patterns demonstrates that women had higher unemployment rates than men in the 1990s (Tab. 1).

Table 1. Labor force and unemployed workers in Russia, 1992-2000 (thousands).

	1992	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Total labor force	74946	70861	69660	68079	67339	72175	71464
Men	39171	37336	36749	35925	35379	37639	37154
Women	37154	33525	32911	32154	31960	34537	34310
Unemployed	3877	6712	6732	8058	8902	9094	6999
Men	2026	3616	3662	4371	4792	4801	3781
Women	1851	3096	3070	3687	4110	4293	3219
Total unemployed registered at state employment offices	578	2327	2506	1999	1929	1263	1037
Men	161	872	930	721	682	383	322
Women	417	1455	1576	1278	1247	880	715

Source: Rosstat, 2003.

Here it is worth noting that one regular feature of the Russian labor market was a remarkably low level of registered unemployment, which throughout the entire transition period remained far lower than the total number of unemployed workers. To a large extent, this gap was associated with peculiarities of the Russian system of support for the unemployed, which, firstly, did not provide enough incentives for registration and, secondly, was focused on "cutting off" the long-term unemployed (Kapeljushnikov 2002). An equally important factor was the fact that the Russian labor market constantly generated a significant number of job vacancies, so that many unemployed workers could successfully search for work without seeking help from the state employment services (Kapeljushnikov 2002). It should be noted that fewer men than women were registered at state unemployment centers, prefer-

ring alternative channels to find work. Between 1992 and 1998, Russia saw the total size of its employed workforce decline by 11.68 million.

Table 1 shows that in the 1990s there was no substantial difference between the numbers of working men and women. However, the differences in the workplace were not so much in quantity as in quality and remuneration of labor. Women might be as likely as men to engage in economic activities, but their economic opportunities may vary greatly. Research findings indicate that women more often took up poorly paid jobs with no promotion prospects relative to men (Ashwin & Yakubovich 2005). Moreover, most unemployed men found a new job rather easily, whereas the majority of women displaced from social production lost their work for ever (Khotkina 2001, p.23). Changes in employment patterns clearly had a pronounced effect upon gender asymmetry. The process of personnel layoffs was sharply asymmetrical during the early 1990s and cannot be explained by purely economic reasons, but rather by increased discrimination against women in the Russian labor market. It was in this period that people began to talk about the phenomenon of the "feminization of poverty": the state no longer guaranteed social services support. Unemployment had the "female face", and legal protection no longer protected women from abuse at work and at home (Khotkina 1994).

4.1. Women in the informal labor market

A further point worthy of note was the unprecedented development of the informal economy, which highlighted the economic vulnerability of women during the transitional period. The term informality refers to unprotected workers, underpayment or nonpayment of taxes, and informal employment (or "in the shadows"). Scholars noted a flow of women from the formal to the informal economy and found that women were overrepresented among workers in the informal sectors (Khotkina 2001; 2006). Although by the mid-1990s the socio-economic heterogeneity of the shadow economy was identified and clearly marked, only in 2001 did the State Statistics Committee of Russia conduct their first survey assessing the scale and types of employment in the informal sector of the economy. The survey "On

employment in the informal sector of the economy in the Russian Federation in 2001" (*O zanyatosti v neformal'nom sektore ekonomiki v Rossiyskoy Federatsii v 2001 godu*) showed that in November 2001 8.2 million people were working in the informal economy, or 13-15% of the total employed population. The data revealed that women constituted 47% of those employed in this field. Among the urban population, in the industries producing goods, women only consisted 27.1% of the total, and in the sectors related to service and trade delivery it was 53.6% and 59.1% respectively. However, official statistics do not reflect the full picture. It is assumed that the number of women employed in the informal economy sector was much higher (Khotkina 2006).

Therefore, reflecting on the structuring of the shadow / informal sphere and clarifying the question of what makes women invisible in the informal economy, we can now consider the "gender pyramid of informal activities". The largest part in the base of the pyramid is women trading in markets and underground passages, in tents and from trays, working in underground workshops and at home, in various kinds of cafes and "eateries", as well as farm laborers. Occupying the lower floors in the social hierarchy, they are virtually powerless and are subject to overexploitation, for instance: hiring without contracts, irregular working hours, difficult working conditions, a lack of sick pay and poor retirement benefits (Khotkina 2006).

The feminization of the informal sector had social and personal costs. The socio-economic costs consisted of declines in GDP and tax payments while personal costs included a lack of social guarantees, deteriorating health and the devaluation of education and professional skills as well as degradation (Khotkina 2001). Gorbachev's (in)famous statement "women should go home", summarizes the conservative logic that inhibited most post-transition regulation of the labor market. Despite the conservative turn in social attitudes and the deep economic recession, rising poverty rates did not allow women to leave their jobs and become full-time homemakers. Hence privatization, economic depression and competition for scarce jobs left women underpaid and underemployed. Russian women had more limited access

to productive assets as well as services. They also faced additional constraints on their use of time that were tied to local norms and beliefs about the place of women in the family.

4. 2. Demographic crisis, social services and democracy

The economic transition had direct effects upon female labor force participation, mainly due to the widening gap in job quality, but additionally due to indirect effects derived from the dismantling of Soviet state sponsored welfare services. This combination of direct and indirect effects caused a declining fertility rate in Russia. In the 1990s, the death rate was 1.5 times higher than the birth rate. By the end of the 1990s, the rate of natural decline in the population exceeded 900,000. According to the 2002 Census, the population of Russia decreased by 1.8 million (~ 1.3%) from 1989 to 2002 (The Russian Statistical Service 2010). Table 2 shows that between 1990 and 2000 the total fertility rate fell dramatically from 1.8 to 1.1.

Table 2. Fertility rates in Russia by women age group, 1990-2000 (number of live births per 1000 women).

Years	Women's age						Total
	15-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	fertility rate
1990	55,0	156,5	93,1	48,2	19,4	4,2	1,892
1995	44,8	112,7	66,5	29,5	10,6	2,2	1,357
2000	27,4	93,6	67,3	35,2	11,8	2,4	1,195

Source: Aganbegyan 2016, p. 56.

This demographic crisis is not surprising given the strong correlation between affordable childcare, rates of female employment and fertility levels discussed in a vast body of literature (Michel & Mahon 2002; Morgan 2002). Scholarly work indicates that childcare services which support mothers' commitment to work must be extensive, accessible and affordable (Gornick & Meyers 2003; Michel & Mahon

2002; Szelewa & Polakowski 2008). Numerous comparative studies demonstrate that generous parental leave strengthens mothers long-term labor market attachment, preventing women from leaving paid work and/or full-time work (Gornick, Meyers & Ross 1997; Pylkkänen & Smith 2003; Ruhm & Teague 1997; Waldfogel et al 1999).

In Russia, the enterprise of micro-welfare supported by the Soviet system enabled 4 in every 5 children over the age of three to attend kindergarten. Meanwhile, in post-Soviet Russia only about one in every two preschool children received in-home care (Teplova 2007, p. 293). The situation changed drastically during the economic transition, where privatization and neoliberal economic policies introduced hefty cuts on spending by inefficient enterprises, causing a downsizing in their welfare responsibilities (Cook 2007). Lack of funding meant that enterprise childcare centers were closed down, or that these enterprises were no longer responsible for maintaining their childcare center network. Yet at the same time, private childcare was neither accessible nor affordable due to both the high costs of this service and the increasing poverty rate among families with children. According to the State Statistical Committee, the number of childcare institutions declined from 87.9 thousand in 1990s to 51.3 thousand in 2000. This revealed a 50 percent decline in enrollment rates for children aged three and above (Table 3).

Table 3. Number of pre-school institutions and children in Russia.

Year	Number of pre-school institutions (in thousands)	Number of pre-school children (in thousands)
1990	87.9	9,000.5
1995	87.9	5,583.6
2000	51.3	4,263.0
2005	46.5	4,530.4

Source: Russian Statistical Yearbook 2010.

This data demonstrates how structural changes were taking place as childcare systems were less available, and the federal state therefore abandoned all responsibility for childcare facilities and early years education.

Furthermore, the fertility rate fell despite the persistence of pro-natalist policies which were a legacy from the Soviet era. Welfare restructuring expanded the Soviet style pro-natalist policies in an attempt to increase women's childcare responsibilities, mainly through extended leave policies and cash transfers to women in childcaring. But since the parental leave was unpaid many women opted out (Teplova 2007). Scholars indicate that Russia's policies shaped and maintained gender inequalities in the labor market (Avdeyeva 2001). Against this background, the literature correctly identifies that focusing exclusively on market mechanisms and factors of production means that unpaid housework and the care of dependent family members is often overlooked (O'Connor, Orloff and Shaver, 1999).

A question remains over which factors, direct or indirect, were more important in explaining the respective patterns of women labor force participation and fertility rates in post-Soviet Russia. The available data does not allow us to provide a clear-cut answer. However, we can draw on the experiences of Western countries. We know that the diffusion of social services in the Scandinavian states positively correlates with women employment rates and fertility rates and, conversely, the insufficiency of social services among southern European states adversely affects female opportunities to enter the labor market and helps to explain low fertility rates (Esping- Andersen, 1990; Ferrera, 1996). These findings indicate that a solid network of social services, supporting working mothers, may be a necessary precondition for gender equality in the labor market.

The worsening socio-economic status of females in Russia may help us understand why at the end of the 1990s opinion polls showed weak female attachment to the institutional bases of democracy, including freedom of speech, political pluralism, market economies and freedom of conscience (Aivazova & Kertman 2001). The data reported in Table 4 illustrates that 43% of women were in favor of more state control compared with 38% of men.

Table 4. Attitudes toward state control of information by gender in Russia, 1998.

	Total Russians	Men	Women
I agree	40	38	43
I do not agree	49	55	45
I don't know	11	8	13

Source: Aivazova & Kertman 2001.
Question: Sometimes the opinion is expressed that the state should establish control over the press, television, radio, to determine what information should not be made public. Do you agree or disagree with such an opinion? (09/19/98).

Research findings indicate that in general, and more frequently than men, women revealed a willingness to renounce democratic values in favor of state protection and the regulation of social relations, showing a weaker inclination toward the assimilation of democratic values (Aivazova 2001). It is disturbing to learn that women gave less importance to civil rights and political freedom than men. Arguably, this weakening of democratic legitimacy may have stemmed from a widening of the gender pay gap, unequal work opportunities and from new social risks women had experienced in the post-Soviet political economy of Russia.

5. Conclusions

This article contributes to academic debates by investigating the gender implications of the Russian neoliberal political-economic model, propelled by processes of globalization, democratization and economic liberalization under Yeltsin. Russia became a new global player but the political-economic reforms revived and confronted powerful societal norms and beliefs regarding gender roles. The dismantling of Soviet state sponsored social services allowed for a conservative turn in social attitudes, legitimizing institutionalized inequalities in the legislature and in the labor market and marginalizing women both as political and economic actors.

At least three aspects of women's role in politics in the 1990s should be highlighted. Firstly, the institutional activity represented by the high-level State au-

thorities saw very low female participation rates. This legislative aspect, which reflected the will and commitment of the central state to deal with women's issues, could be defined as superficial but not actually effective. Rather, activities initiated by women to refocus attitudes in the country towards more political, economic and social rights for all women were more fruitful. Especially in terms of growth and development of the civic community. Unfortunately, such enthusiasm apparently was not shared by most Russian women, as they were too preoccupied by their daily struggle to make ends meet.

The transition toward a democratic, market oriented political economy severely hit women's economic opportunities in the labor market. Women often took up poorly paid jobs with no promotion prospects. The introduction of neoliberal policies and the cutting back of public social services increased gender discrimination in the workplace, penalizing women with children, thus contributing to a dramatic demographic crisis. As O'Connor et al (1999) maintain, the availability of public childcare services is a significant factor for mothers in employment. This is related to gender divides in the public and private sphere, and to gendered ideologies about mothering and its potential compatibility with paid employment. Against this background, in post-Soviet Russia the retrenchment of public social services represented a new social risk to women, created by the transition process to the new political economy. Although being a woman in a developing country may always be a social risk, due to dominant male power structures, the Russian transition from a command economy (where social services were free of charge and available), to a market economy, (where these services were downsized if not privatized), created a new social risk by pushing more women out of work or into part-time and temporary work.

Our analysis is focused upon Russia, but similar pressures are likely to exist in other post-communist countries. Research suggests that the advent of liberal democracy and market economies in 1989 did not challenge the underlying norms and structures of gender inequality in those countries (Galligan, Clavero, Calloni 2007). On the contrary, the growth in new forms of discrimination along with the re-

emergence of patriarchal attitudes highlight the surge in a new masculinism accompanying the process of democratization. This remasculinization of the civic, economic and political arenas is characterized by men's occupation of key positions both in politics and in the marketplace, in conjunction with a revival of a conservative discourse calling for the return of women to the private world of tending to family and household duties (Galligan, Clavero, Calloni 2007, 12). This seems to be a paradoxical outcome in countries where high female education and employment rates should protect women's socio-economic and political status. Future research comparing post-communist countries will allow us to identify continuities, similarities and differences in the gender distribution of costs and benefits in the political economy of transition toward democratic capitalism.

More generally, our work shows that an approach of political economy generates novel insights into the feedback effects produced by interactions between the economic and political spheres. It suggests that social and economic policy should not be designed and researched separately, as if there were no related feedback effects. Most notably, the Russian case indicates that overlooking the interdependence of social needs and economic activities may ultimately weaken the legitimacy of democratic values.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Ups and Downs of NATO-Russia Relations: a Cognitivist Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article explains the recursive tendency to develop inimical relations between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Russia by pointing at the incompatibility of their strategic cultures—here understood as broad cognitive frameworks subsuming an actor's self-perception, worldview, and preferred way to use force. NATO and Russia have defined their roles in world politics, decoded the other's intentions, and undertaken certain practices on the basis of divergent socio-cognitive assumptions. Incompatible strategic cultures bring about clashing grand strategies and generate conflictual relations. The two actors think differently and therefore read and react to a same situation in divergent ways. As a product of socially-embedded dynamics, NATO-Russia enmity cannot be easily overcome - if not in the long term and via sustained interaction. After presenting their theoretical framework, the authors reconstruct NATO's and Russia's strategic cultures, and then discuss the Ukraine crisis as a case study.

KEYWORDS: NATO; Russia; strategic culture; self-perception; worldviews.

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1. NATO-Russia Deteriorating Relations: Diverging Interests or Cognitive Dissonances?

The destinies of NATO and Russia have been intertwined since the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949. As NATO's first Secretary General famously put it, the Alliance aimed "to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down". The first of these tasks was the primary, constitutive *raison d'être* of NATO: it was because of the need to deter a Soviet attack on the Allies that the continued presence of the US in Europe was justifiable and the rearmament of (West) Germany legitimised. Collective territorial defence constituted the kernel of the Washington Treaty (article V) and had a clear anti-Soviet connotation,[1] just as the creation of the Warsaw Pact (1955) had clear anti-West aims.

The end of bipolarity and the dissolution of the Soviet Union represented a systemic change with huge implications. Russia lost its empire and NATO its main reason for being. This offered both actors a chance (or dictated the necessity) to transform their international roles and redraw amity-enmity lines. The process of NATO's renewal proceeded along three main strategic axes: helping stabilise the post-Soviet space; participating in conflict resolution at global level; and rethinking the deterrence posture. A similar – even more complex – process of self-redefinition occurred on Russia's side. Out of fear to be excluded from the new European security architecture, in the early 1990s shifts in Moscow's official rhetoric signalled clearly a Westward turn. Former Foreign Minister Andrey Kozyrev declared: "Values common to all mankind dominate the century. Personal freedom and prosperity, and the protection and development of the human being will be one of the cornerstones of international security" and of Russia's foreign policy (Kozyrev 1992, pp. 292-293). Words unthinkable until a couple of years before.

These changes promised to reshape East-West relations in a less hostile, more cooperative way - as the early 1990s seemed to confirm. Moscow joined the

[1] The Washington Treaty does not specify an enemy explicitly (neither did NATO's first Strategic Concepts of 1949 and 1953). However, NATO's 1957 Strategic Concept detailed the Soviet threat at length. We are grateful to Prof Mark Webber for pointing us to this document.

North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) and NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) since their inception (1991, 1994), and NATO-Russia relationship was granted a special status.[2] In 1994 Moscow also participated in the contact group for Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), sitting with the West in the attempt to grant peace in the Balkans. NATO and Russia capitalised these positive developments by establishing in 1997 the Permanent Joint Council (PJC), a shared platform for high level consultations and comprehensive bilateral cooperation in the military-strategic field.

However, the 'honeymoon' did not last long. NATO's formal invitation of Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland to join its ranks in 1997 (later realised in 1999) and the allied bombing campaign against Serbia at the turn of the millennium triggered bitter Russian reactions. Reluctant to accept NATO expansion and decisively opposing the military intervention in the Balkans, Moscow symbolically withdrew from the PJC. The Joint Council reopened shortly after but the quality of NATO-Russia relations never recovered totally. From that moment and notwithstanding a few occasions of *détente*, East-West relations followed a slippery downward slope.[3]

9/11 and the perception of Islamic terrorism as a shared global threat brought NATO and Russia together again in Afghanistan and the Mediterranean (with *Operation Active Endeavour*). This cooperative experience led to the establishment in 2002 of the NATO-Russia Council (NRC), aimed at promoting joint action in a series of critical areas - e.g., anti-terrorism, non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, crisis management. But like a will-o'-the-wisp, the momentum of cooperation was ephemeral and vanished quickly. Relations deteriorated with the US invasion of Iraq (2003), NATO's second and broader Eastward enlargement (2004), tensions around the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty (CFE - from which Russia withdrew in 2007) and eventually Russia's intervention in Georgia in

[2] Quite tellingly, the other two countries enjoying a 'Special Relationship' with NATO are Ukraine and Georgia.

[3] Some scholars note that the first real setback in NATO-Russia relations took place before 1997, since the Allies started voicing its first enlargement during the North Atlantic Council of December 1994. In addition, the PJC was born under a bad star and looked at with suspicion by many Russian and Western observers. See: Pouliot 2010; Webber et al. 2012.

2008 after G.W. Bush's call for Georgia's membership in NATO. The Lisbon edition of the NRC (2010) granted respite and led to new cooperation in Afghanistan and Syria, but as early as 2013 the unfolding of the Ukraine crisis created new divisions.

The 'reset' of NATO-Russia relations has fallen short of expectations and today many commentators even speak about a 'new Cold War' (Sakwa 2008; Legvold 2014). Whether or not one can legitimately draw such historical analogy, without any doubt we find ourselves at the lowest point in relations between NATO and Russia since 1991. Former Secretary General Rasmussen declared that "Russia's aggression to Ukraine was the gravest threat to European security in a generation" (Rasmussen 2014g), and Russian officials often reciprocate by accusing the West of being responsible of many - if not all - the crises of the last 30 years (Rosenberg 2016). Protracted sanctions regimes, the suspension of NATO-Russia cooperation below the Ambassadorial level, frequent Russian violations of the Allies' air-space and domestic processes, as well as NATO's deterrence measures along the Eastern flank (*Baltic Air Policing*, *Enhanced Forward Presence*, *Tailored Forward Presence*) contribute to the permanence of a tense international context.

How shall we read this? What are the causes of the continuous setbacks and recurrent tensions in NATO-Russia relations?

Existing literature in International Relations provides various but ultimately unsatisfactory accounts of NATO-Russia relations. Realist interpretations stress the role of objective constraints, competition for space and resources, and the 'natural desire' for power and prestige. Russia has been framed in these terms more frequently than the Alliance, if no other reason because the latter would be seen as an instrument of US hegemony, rather than an actor in itself (Friedman 2008; Mearsheimer 2014; Trenin 2014; Marshall 2015). However, the pretension to reduce international politics to a series of material dynamics ultimately linked to the goal of survival or great power status is far from satisfactory. NATO expansion cannot be linked to the realist concept of survival in any credible way, and even Russia's actions present only loose links with this ratio. Moscow aspires certainly to great pow-

er status but this cannot explain the full range of its strategic choices - included the seizure of Crimea. While the annexation granted Moscow a pivot in the Black Sea and higher contractual power vis-à-vis the West, it implied also serious backlashes in terms of economy and prestige at the expenses of the long-term generation of power. The inherent tendency of Realism to reduce international actors to "preprogrammed torpedoes" acting on the basis of a universally spread rational self-interest ignores the social, ideational, and institutional dynamics that take place within actors and define (or at least influence) their external behaviour (Katzenstein 1996a, p. 204).

If a pure material, power-oriented analysis is not satisfactory, nor it is a liberal perspective that does not qualify the way in which a liberal ontology (or the lack thereof) provides the cognitive filter through which actors perceive the world. Liberal-cosmopolitan views tend to produce ethnocentric accounts of Russia as an Evil force that triggers conflict with the only goal of undermining democracy and the liberal system of values (Snegovaya 2014; Diamond 2016). The argument is that Russia behaves the way it does because it is an autocratic regime: allegedly, no other information is needed to understand its choices. By the same token, NATO is seen as an incarnation of liberal values and thus a benign force by definition. By dividing the world in two artificial camps (the Good and the Evil) the space for critical analysis and political dialogue shrinks considerably.

In trying to dispense with both these theoretical simplifications, we side with the sociological and constructivist scholarships in International Relations (Wendt 2010; Onuf 2012). We do not deny that material forces may shape actors' behaviour, but believe that they play at best a permissive role. The material structure is not the only layer of reality. The way in which the former is interpreted and exploited depends indeed on the social structure (composed of beliefs and ideas) in which an agent is socialised. Social structure moulds an agent's mindset and ultimately underpins its behaviour. Each actor is equipped with its own peculiar perceptual lenses, which results from the interplay between previous historical experiences and bargains between relevant epistemic communities. There is no universal

rationality but a series of rather different rationalities.

Starting from these premises we explain the recursive tendency to develop inimical relations between NATO and Russia by pointing to the incompatibility of their strategic cultures. NATO and Russia have defined their roles in world politics, decoded the other's intentions, and undertaken certain practices on the basis of divergent socio-cognitive assumptions. Incompatible strategic cultures bring about clashing grand strategies and generate conflictual relations. The two actors think differently and therefore read and react to the same situation in divergent ways. Given opposite strategic cultures, the other's actions are by themselves unconceivable and are either rejected or mis-interpreted on the basis of one's own way of thinking. As a product of socially-embedded dynamics, NATO-Russia enmity cannot be easily overcome - if not in the long term and via sustained interaction.

Our attempt to unveil NATO's and Russia's strategic cultures is informed by an interpretative epistemology and accompanied by a deductive qualitative methodology (della Porta & Keating 2008). In our attempt to understand the actors' views and the meanings they attach to their own and the other's behaviour we look at both discourse and practice (Neumann & Heikka 2005). We examine a range of publicly available official documents (e.g., strategic concepts and doctrines) and speeches (in particular, those of NATO's Secretary Generals, Russian Presidents Medvedev and Putin, and Russia' Minister of Foreign Affairs Lavrov), as well as the overall strategic posturing. Addressed to both domestic and international audiences and by no means mere rhetorical exercises, documents and speeches give voice to NATO's and Russia's perceptions and reinforce their self-representations. Both types of sources are the products of bargain among Allies or within Russian security elite and as such they reflect the minimum shared views around which it is possible to organise action. Attentive and rich thematic analysis reveals these latent socio-cognitive elements (Braun & Clarke 2006) and sheds light on the strategic cultures of the two actors, helping clarify the reasons and mechanisms behind their enmity.

We firstly present the key tenets of a strategic culture (§2), then we look at the characteristics of NATO's and Russia's strategic cultures through the analysis of

discourses and practices (§3) and finally we show how the Ukraine crisis between NATO and Russia can be read as a result of cognitive dissonances (§4).

2. Strategic Culture: A Socio-cognitive Understanding of Strategic Behaviour

The role of cultural and perceptual factors in the conduction of grand strategy and war has always received some degree of attention, but far less than the more typical aspects of power, material resources, troop organisation, and sheer battle dynamics. Often disguised as 'moral forces', socio-cultural factors linger in the background of classical writings such as those of Thucydides, Clausewitz, and Sun Tzu but do not represent the core of their strategic analyses. During World War II, 'national character studies' posited a direct connection between the strategic behaviour of the Axis powers and their cultural characteristics (Desch 1998; Lantis 2006). However, these studies did not have any meaningful and durable impact on scholarship, rather providing a vaguely racist rhetorical backing of US' sense of moral superiority vis-à-vis the Axis. With the start of the Cold War, rationalist explanations of strategic behaviour almost monopolised security studies, marginalising alternative frameworks (Schelling 1960).

Attention to socio-cultural factors came back to security studies with Jack L. Snyder's "The Soviet Strategic Culture" (1977). The author reconstructed the psyche of the *homo sovieticus* in order to understand whether Moscow could have complied with the new American posture of limited nuclear deterrence. Snyder moved from the assumption that "Soviet leaders and strategists [were] not culture-free, preconception-free" (Snyder 1977, p. 4), but subjects whose decisions were guided by a peculiar way of thinking embedded in their minds as a result of socialisation. As a consequence, Washington should not have expected the Soviets to react to strategic stimuli according to the same logic of US' decision-makers. Snyder's research inspired many scholars to proceed along the same lines, giving rise to a proper scholarship on strategic culture. This scholarship comprises three so-called generations that span the 1980s and the 1990s (Johnston 1995b) and a more recent self-proclaimed fourth generation (Burns & Eltham 2014; Libel 2016, 2018).

Divergencies among the generations on the mechanisms linking culture and behaviour, the sub-components and operationalisation of strategic culture, as well as its causes (Johnston 1995a; Gray 1999; Lantis 2002, 2006; Howlett & Glenn 2005), limited the possibility to build a unified progressive theoretical model (Biehl et al. 2013).

This article does not have the ambition to tackle the inner debate among scholars employing the concept of strategic culture, nor to propose the definitive empirical application of the concept, but simply to show that a light use of the concept as a guide to identify the socio-cognitive roots of strategic behaviour proves to be useful to make sense of general and specific conflict dynamics.

To start with, how do we define the concept? In order to be analytically useful, a concept should display a good balance between its "extension" (the nature and broadness of the phenomenon), and its "intension" (the specific qualities that characterise the phenomenon) (Odgen & Richards 1985, pp. 1-23; Gerring 2001, pp. 39-41). Students of strategic culture have proposed a wide range of definitions, many of which are quite poor if assessed against the aforementioned criteria. In some cases, excessive parsimony resulted in conceptual under-determination, while in other cases the concept extended too much, at the expenses of internal and external coherence. Some (e.g. the famous Johnston's definition, 1995a, p. 36) gave priority to military issues, more than to self-perception, threat assessment, and grand strategy. Moving from these earlier works and building on literature in sociology and political science, we opt for a synthetic - yet encompassing - definition of strategic culture which points to the fact that the strategic culture of an actor is deeply intertwined with his/her self-representation and his/her worldviews and by no means is limited to a set of ideas on how to use force. More precisely, we define strategic culture as a *set of security-related beliefs subsuming an actor's self-perception, worldview, and preferred ways to use force.*[4]

[4] There are many definitions available of the concept, but we opted for this original and simple one developed by Nicolò Fasola, which has the advantage of providing a light conceptual background clear and coherent enough to employ strategic culture empirically.

On the one hand, this definition is broad enough to be adopted by all generations. On the other hand, we believe it displays a good balance between extension and intension, without being neither excessively parsimonious nor over-deterministic. Moreover, our definition provides a clear indication of the components of strategic culture, thereby supporting validity and operationalisation. We neither confine the concept to the sole military domain, nor reduce it to a mere synonym of political culture or foreign policy. Conversely, we see strategic culture as a group of cognitively engrained orientations held by a collectivity with international agency and linking an actor's identity with its security interests and the forceful means and modalities to achieve them. These components are inter-dependent and equally necessary to depict a strategic culture. Before acting, an agent must *be* - i.e., it must possess an understanding of what it is, what is not, and how the world around it looks like. Cognitive (self-)positioning is pre-condition for action, even in the field of security (Goldstein & Keohane 1993; Katzenstein 1996a, 1996b). Clausewitz hinted at such connection by pointing to a war's *Zweck* (political aim) and *Ziel* (military objective) (Clausewitz 2000, *passim*). The *Zweck* is exogenous to military strategy as such but informs the *Ziel* a priori by providing the political interests which the military effort must serve. Since interests - coherently with our ontological approach - are defined (also by) socio-cultural beliefs, then it is safe to admit that ideational factors such as self-perception and worldviews impact also on the ways to use force (Weldes 1996).

Now let us clarify some of the terms employed above. *Self-perception* indicates the existential narrative of an actor, entailing the core attributes (implicitly or explicitly) attributed to the Self and the difference with respect to the relevant Other(s). Self-perception tells the story of a (collective) actor's self-identification in terms of 'who we are' ("mirror identity") and 'who we are not' ("wall identity") (Cerutti 2008, p. 6). When the alterity between the Self and the Other is extreme, the latter assumes the character of the Schmitt's *Feind* (enemy) and the possibility to undertake violent action against it becomes cognitively acceptable (or even desirable) (Schmitt 1972, pp. 108-113). Self-perception can be observed through the analysis of self-

representation and of the logical (in-)coherence between a given course of action and a specific mirror/wall identity. *Worldviews* describe instead an actor's cosmological, ontological, and mechanical views of international politics. They tell something about how the world works, what is possible, and what is desirable for a given actor (Johnston 1995a, p. 37; Kitchen 2010, p. 129). Projected in the domain of grand strategy, self-perception and worldviews help define the legitimate and preferred instruments of (violent) action of a collective actor pursuant a self-attached role in a subjectively defined world.

Strategic culture emerges out of processes of historical stratification, social construction, and continuous reassertion of 'who we are (not)' and how we interpret the international reality. Strategic culture is neither given once and for all, nor extremely fluid, but rather characterised by "flexible rigidity" (Katzenstein 1996a, pp. 3-4). This is to say that actors are not impermeable to what happens around them; contingencies may affect their cognitive outlooks. However, given the *cultural* nature of strategic culture, long-term continuity is the rule (DiMaggio 1997). Thus, a strategic culture may experience change only in the face of seismic environmental and/or social developments that, striking at the foundations of a collective cognition, impinge upon the latter's ability to make sense of the world (Eckstein 1988; Lantis 2002, 2006). As such, these events are rare and so is cultural change. Superficial adjustments in strategic culture are foreseeable, but only if coherent with its already existing pillars.

It is very important to note that our theoretical perspective does not preclude political actors from having material interests nor that the actions may occur in response to those interests. However, we do assume that the way actors formulate their interests, choose the means of pursuing them, and the way actors interpret the interests and preferences of others are all influenced by beliefs engrained in social cognition. At the same time, the way we represent ourselves (self-representation) embeds a communicative message for the others about who we are and what we stand for - to which the others react on the basis of their own (strategic cultural) beliefs. If the beliefs informing the words and deeds of given actors

have incompatible content - i.e., if these beliefs are not similar enough -, then interaction becomes more difficult and may slide into conflict. This is the basic way of functioning of socio-cultural systems (Gat 2006, esp. pp. 40-55, 149-156). They are 'designed' to facilitate understanding and interaction among those who hold the same beliefs, in support of the in-group's survival; but, by the same token, communication and coordination of action with out-group members are hindered considerably. The grater the divergence of basic beliefs between two social agents, the more difficult to understand and rationalise what the other says and does, and thus the higher the risk of null or negative interaction.

All this, we claim, is the case both for a traditional state actor like Russia and a collective actor like NATO, to which the concept has been rarely applied.[5] The composite nature of NATO may raise some suspicions in regard to the applicability of strategic culture. Yet to consider NATO as an actor bearing a distinctive strategic culture is no more artificial than to consider Russia (or any other state) in the same way. States do not exist as such: they are juridical and discursive expedients that convey the decisions of restricted groups of decision-makers (Krasner 1999). Therefore, what we call the 'strategic culture of Russia' is the sum total of the ideational points of convergence of the Russian security elite; and the same is true for NATO, whose self-perception, worldview, and approach to security can be conceptualised as the minimum common denominators among the ideational preferences of the Allied elite. In this sense, there is no a huge analytical difference between Russia and NATO.[6]

[5] The concept of strategic culture has been traditionally applied to states, seldom to collective institutions (mainly the European Union - e.g., Rynning 2003) and even more rarely to NATO (mostly to study the different strategic cultures of the Allies - e.g., Biehl et al. 2013).

[6] As in the case of states one may ask to what extend specific elite sub-groups manage to influence state policy, so in the case of NATO one may ask what is the net contribution of a given state to the aggregate NATO policy. Or, to put it differently, does the strategic culture of the Alliance reflect the ideational preferences of one specific Member more than others'? This important question can be answered only after having determined the strategic cultures of the Allies *and* of NATO. While there are studies regarding the strategic cultures of individual NATO members, literature on NATO's strategic culture is scarce and thus we are lacking one of the terms of comparison necessary to answer the question above. This essay, by providing a first picture of NATO's strategic culture, will support further research in that direction.

3. Comparing NATO's and Russia's Strategic Cultures

In the following paragraphs we reconstruct and contrast NATO's and Russia's strategic cultures as they emerge from the analysis of selected documents, speeches, and actual behaviour. We do so by following the theoretical script laid down above. Hence our analysis will consist of three comparative blocs, focused respectively on self-perceptions, worldviews, and concepts of security and the use of force. This sub-division is clearly artificial, since these three levels intermingle and mutually support each other, constituting a coherent strategic culture. Still, our practice is functionally useful, since it allows a certain degree of order and clarity in the exploration of such a wide and complex subject as strategic culture. Table 1 summarises our findings.

The sources used in this section span the entire existence of both NATO and Russia. This is coherent with the empirical aim of this section - i.e., reconstructing NATO's and Russia's strategic cultures *as such* -, as well as our theoretical lens - which posits the long-term persistence of strategic culture. Hence for NATO we have considered the Washington Treaty (1949) – as it is the founding document, still adopted today and recursively recalled in NATO's documents today – and documents and statements issued since the end of the Cold War (1990-2019). For Russia the reference period is shorter: 2000-2019. Before 1991 the Russian Federation did not exist as such and the 1990s can be excluded given their transitioning character and heterogeneity with the political course chosen and consolidated under Putin (and Medvedev) (Mankoff 2012). During the 1990s, Russia risked disintegration, as the Soviet Union did before. Given the context of deep institutional, social, and economic distress, Russia had to focus its attention on domestic problems, away from grand strategy and military planning. The formulation and implementation of military policy went through considerable hurdles (Erickson 1993) and attempts at reforming the defence sector failed in both 1992-1993 and 1997 (Zysk 2018). This coupled with a drastic reduction of the Russia's international agency, direct consequence of the many internal problems - including the breakdown of identity. The fragile elite in power tried to find an anchor in liberalism but, while initially it played

well in the relations with the West, this recipe ended up being a blind alley for the country's rebirth. Overall, then, the 1990s represent for Russia a chaotic parenthesis of uncertainty and transformation. In that period we would find a fluid - rather than fixed and consolidated - strategic culture. And while this is highly interesting from a general academic perspective, it is not strictly relevant to the aim of this essay.[7] We could have imposed shorter timeframes for both NATO and Russia without risking necessarily to invalidate our findings. Yet in this way we are able to appreciate a wider range of sources, in support of the validity and rigour of our qualitative methodology.

3.1 Self-perceptions

NATO has conjugated different functions since its inception in 1949. As noted in the introduction to this article, the Alliance did not have only a defensive role. *Inter alia*, it concretised the transatlantic bond between the US and Western Europe, and was the first institutional setting for the reintegration of post-war Germany into the European political system. These and other facets of NATO's original essence come down to two self-representations: NATO as a *Defensive Alliance* institution and NATO as a *Community of values*.

The *Defensive Alliance* represents formally the security guarantee of all member States against a possible attack from an external enemy:

> "The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered *an attack against them* all and consequently they *agree* that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognised by Article 51 of the *Charter of the United Nations*, will assist

[7] Such topic would deserve individual attention, given its relevance not only in political and historical terms but also from a theoretical perspective. In fact, it may help test speculations about how strategic culture undergoes change. Relatedly, it would be interesting to assess if and to what extent Soviet and contemporary Russian strategic cultures are compatible. This may help test theoretical assumptions about both change and continuity of strategic cultural beliefs. However, as in the case of 1990s' Russia, the issue exceeds by far the constraints in time and space of this essay, as well as its primary aim.

> the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, *including* the use of armed force, *to restore and maintain* the security of the North Atlantic area" (NATO 1949, §5; emphasis added).

Collective defence is in the first place an act of solidarity among the members of the Alliance, a promise of mutual (military) assistance (Colombo 2001). As such, it creates and extends into the future a bond of reciprocity that unites the Allies against a hostile external force - cementing the in-group vis-à-vis the out-group. The latter is not defined in restrictive terms and is tantamount to any potential source of politico-military threat. At the same time, it appears clear that for the Allies an "[a]ggression can only emanate from the outside; while NATO itself does by definition pose no threat to any actor" (Behnke 2013**,** p. 81).

This subtext is in line with the image of NATO as a *Community of values* - i.e., a community in which peoples and countries would not feel threatened by each other anymore, having agreed on norms (and practices) of peaceful resolution of conflict (NATO 1949, §1) and being bound by a sense of belonging, mutual sympathy and trust: a form of "Security Community" based on shared values and sense of we-ness (Deutsch 1957). As a matter of fact, a common set of fundamental political values underpins NATO:

> "The Parties […] are determined to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilisation of their peoples, *founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law*" (NATO 1949, preamble; emphasis added).

These liberal principles are the natural language of the Alliance and the core of its political subjectivity. If the reference to the shared value of democracy was for some time not matched with fully fledged democratic institutions within some of the member states, the attention to the democratic characteristics of NATO's nations rose over time. NATO Strategic concept since (NATO 1991, §I.1, II.15; NATO

1999, §I.6; NATO 2010, §2, 38) reiterated NATO's core liberal values and NATO played an important role in the democratic transition of Central and Eastern European states after the end of the Cold War. Since NATO's "mirror identity" has been built on the tripartite equation liberal principles-peace-friendship, the resulting "wall identity" links the absence of liberal-democratic values with war and hostility.

It is worth noticing that this ontological self-representation makes membership in the Alliance independent from any natural, material, structurally given characteristic of a candidate. Membership is dependent instead on a vocational choice: the subscription to liberal-democratic values. NATO's "open door policy" (always reiterated in NATO's documents), pre- and post-Cold War waves of enlargement, as well as the Partnerships established with third countries since 1994 prove both the membership's fluidity across time and space and its subordination to the acquisition by the candidate of certain 'best practices' derived from liberal democracy (NATO 1994, §2; NATO 1995). The metaphors used to portray the first post-1989 enlargements are quite telling in this sense (Fierke 1995, p. 150; Klein 1990). Reference to the notion of "family" or "home" recreated a clear distinction between Self and Other (in-group and out-group), between the realm of shared values and that of external challengers. As a result, we may define NATO as a *non-ascriptive community* - i.e., a community where the in-group status is not based on a predetermined fixed factor such as age, sex, language, or ethnicity, but rather on individual achievement. The sole requirement for membership is the adherence to a set of liberal values (and the willingness to contribute to European defence).[8]

The end of the Cold War had the potential to disrupt such core identities, but they proved to be highly resistant to change. Instead of being rejected, they were re-affirmed in accordance with new environmental conditions. NATO shifted from "the practice of talking" to "the practice of doing" (Flockhart 2012), acquiring

[8] Art. 10 of the Washington Treaty specifies that only a "European State" can be invited to further NATO's principles and this could be tantamount to a structurally imposed criterion for membership. Indeed, as the open door policy, NATO enlargements, and the partnerships show, the concept of "European State" could be interpreted loosely as 'State willing to partake in NATO principles and mission'. The presence of the criterions of Europeanness is linked mainly to the historical context in which the Treaty was drafted.

new functions and enriching its self-representation with two new (sub-)identities: NATO as a *Collective security agent* and *Global NATO*. These have not substituted the core images of *Defensive Alliance* and *Community of values*, but rather stemmed from and reinforced them. NATO's role in the UN System of Collective Security started in the 1990s with its involvement in the war in Bosnia. NATO's actions in the context of the UN System of Collective Security unfold over time and saw for the first time NATO engaged into combat operations (Bosnia, Libya) and playing a relevant role in post-conflict stabilisations (Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq). Developing a self-defining narrative out of a repeated practice, the 2010 Strategic Concept introduced the core task of "crisis management" (next to Collective Defence and Cooperative Security – i.e. Partnerships).

At the same time, a "Global NATO" was developing. Since liberal-democratic values are by definition universal (in time and space), also NATO's community and outreach are perceived to be potentially universal. In the words of Secretary General Rasmussen: "we must take NATO's transformation to a new level - by connecting the Alliance with the broader international system in entirely new ways […] *Security today is about active engagement, possibly very far from our own borders*" (Rasmussen 2011b, emphasis added). Free from the constrains of bipolarism and without the USSR as the existential Other, the Alliance become a "liberal Leviathan"[9] and started to implement more pro-active actions outside of the European region also with the aim of defending or exporting liberal values as such. NATO's partnerships broadened to include "partners across the globe" (including Afghanistan, Australia, Colombia, Iraq, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Mongolia, New Zealand and Pakistan), with whom NATO aimed at developing "support for operations, security cooperation, and enhanced common understanding to advance shared security interests and democratic values" (NATO 2008, §35).

The connection among these several facets of NATO's self-perception emerges evidently from the final *communiqués* of the latest two Summits:

[9] We borrowed the term by John Ikenberry (2011) who coined the term of refer to the US's role in the construction of a liberal world order.

> "NATO Allies form a unique community of values committed to the principles of individual liberty, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. The Alliance is convinced that these shared values and our security are strengthened when we work with our wide network of partners around the globe" (NATO 2014d, §80).

And also:

> "The greatest responsibility of the Alliance is to protect and defend our territory and our populations against attack […] At the same time, NATO must retain its ability to respond to crises beyond its borders, and remain actively engaged in projecting stability and enhancing international security through working with partners and other international organisations" (NATO 2016, §6).

Russia's "mirror image" is radically different from NATO's. The first element of the Russian self-perception is the so called "*Greatpowerness*" (*velikoderzhavnost'*): Russia's feeling of superiority vis-à-vis other countries and its consequent aspiration to be recognised as a great power (Urnov 2014). All strategic documents reflect such self-representation, declining it in very similar terms. *Inter alia*, the National Security Strategy (NSS) of 2009 clearly states that Russia has "sufficient potential to [grant] its entrenchment among global leaders" in economic and political terms (Strategii 2009, §9), in order to achieve a role that—according to the Foreign Policy Concept (FPC) of 2008—is "well-deserved" (Kotseptsiia 2008, section II). NSS 2015 stresses "the Russian Federation's role in resolving the most important international problems, settling military conflicts, and ensuring strategic stability" (Strategii 2015, §8),

thereby reflecting interests that are clearly greater in scope than those of a small or medium power.[10]

Russia communicates its sense of greatpowerness not only in these positive self-referential terms, but also with a negative outward-oriented language. Moscow has voiced many times its deep discontent with an international status quo perceived as inherently inadequate and unjust for it is dominated by the West and not open to Russia (Lavrov 2007, 2008 as quoted in Svarin 2016, p. 133).[11] The alleged refusal by other actors to recognise Russia's *velikoderzhavnost'* frustrates the Kremlin. Even if with some stylistic differences, such rhetoric cuts across the whole political spectrum (Clunan 2009, p. 114; Mankoff 2012, ch. 1, 2; White & Feklyunina 2014, pp. 101-128; Nalbandov 2016, pp. 4-5). Both Medvedev and Putin have shown considerable resentment for post-1991 political developments, stressing the need to avenge Russia's legitimate place in global affairs. Politicians belonging to liberal, nationalist, and Eurasianist traditions all support the need to carve out a relevant space for Russia in the world - even if by employing different means.

Russia's self-entitlement to greatness brings about two complementary types of behaviour. On the one hand, Moscow applies a sort of "copycat behaviour" (Skak 2013, pp. 8-10), designing its grand strategy along the lines of that of the great power par excellence: the US. But while the grandeur of Russia's strategic design formally resembles that of the US', the two strategies have divergent content and aims. Russia's policy in Syria is a case in point. In so doing, Moscow satisfies at once both its image as a mighty power and its sense of moral superiority vis-à-vis Washington. The same reasoning backs Moscow's self-appointment as "a counterbalance in international affairs and the development of the global civilisation" (Kontseptsiia 2013, §25; Kontseptsiia 2016, §22). Russia presents itself as resisting socio-economic contaminations from the outside and as a withholder of moral decay and

[10] See also: Strategii 2009, §21-24; Strategii 2015, §30-31; FPC RF 2000, sections I-III; Kontseptsiia 2008, sections II, IV; Kontseptsiia 2013, §4, 42-94; Kontseptsiia 2016, §3, 49-99.

[11] See also: Strategii 2009, §8, 17; Strategii 2015, §15-18, 106; Kontseptsiia 2008, sections I, II; Kontseptsiia 2013, §4, 14; Kontseptsiia 2016, §5, 61, 70. Coherently, both versions of the Military Doctrine mention NATO as a danger for Russia (see references in following sub-sections).

physical destruction - conditions allegedly thriving beyond the borders of the Russian civilisational space (Engström 2014; see Putin, quoted in Remnik 2014).

The second component of Russia's self-perception deals with the sources of such (un-attained) greatness, which does not originate from materialistic considerations but from a perceived sense of representing a *Unique civilisation* with civilisational might, often backed by historical references (Lavrov 2016; Putin 2003, 2007). Traditions and values appear as the fundamental underpinnings of the country's interests and identity (Strategii 2009, §80-84; Strategii 2015, §76-79, 82). As Putin stressed, these transcendent elements "[make] up the spiritual and moral foundation of [the Russian] civilisation" and have prominence over the material domain (Putin 2013; for a similar view by Medvedev, see: Der Spiegel 2009). The *file rouge* connecting "greatpowerness" and traditions is Christian Orthodoxy, which offers a pre-constituted cultural-cognitive layer cutting across faith, political action, and moral ends (Kontseptsiia 2008, sections II, III.3; Kontseptsiia 2013, §21, 32; Kontseptsiia 2016, §19, 38; see also: Engström 2014). Orthodoxy elevates Russia above other civilisations and transforms Moscow into a global peacemaker (Nalbandov 2016, p. 31). To drop these values would mean to lose Russia's uniqueness and, with it, the right and duty to participate in the settlement of global affairs. Hence, Russian nature and aspirations are necessary and non-negotiable.

It is worth noticing that, differently from NATO, the constitutive elements of 'Russiannes' are not linked to free choice but rather super-imposed as transcendent entitlements. This makes the Russian community an *ascriptive community*. At the same time, the constitutive elements of 'Russiannes' are not limited to the sole Russian Federation, but thrive beyond its formal borders constituting the so-called *russkij mir*: a unique civilisational space of which Moscow is the moral centre.[12] Superficially, it is not too dissimilar from NATO's image as a "liberal Leviathan". However, no universalist tension is implied in here. Russia's 'duty' to defend the su-

[12] *Russkij mir* is a term used by the Russian political and cultural elites to designate the unity of all Russian peoples. The concept transcends formal borders, uniting all ethnic Russians and Russian speakers within the same civilisational space. Geographically, the *russkij mir* broadly overlaps with the former Soviet space.

per-ethos allegedly unifying the *russkij mir* does give rise to a paternalistic approach towards this area. Yet such prerogative is constricted within defined cultural borders and therefore Russian behaviour acquires a conservative nature, not an expansionist one. The Medvedev doctrine is a good example of such view (Vesti 2008).

3.2 Worldviews

It follows clearly from the previous discussion that NATO filters the world through the interpretative lens of a *liberal political culture* based on principles of natural law that prescribe universal standards of righteousness (Lawson 2015, ch. 4, 5). Every rational agent should act accordingly and if an actor does not abide to the liberal playbook, then it comes to be seen as irrational by definition. A liberal worldview always implies the possibility to differentiate between right and wrong - and so does the Alliance. In NATO's eyes the world tends to be seen in black-and-white: on the one side there are liberal democracies, which NATO represents and defends; on the other side the illiberal powers. In-between one may posit the existence of a grey area, constituted by those countries transitioning towards liberalism (i.e., towards the Alliance), but *de facto* they still remain outsiders until the end of their transition.

NATO's worldview upholds many tenets of *Wilsonianism* and resonates quite well with Fukuyama's ideas about the "end of history" (Fukuyama 1989; Mead 2002). Force will become obsolete only in the event of the universal achievement of human progress. Moreover, NATO self-represents itself as a source of stability. A recent statement of Secretary General Stoltenberg is quite telling in this sense. After presenting a detailed list of the threats NATO has faced in the recent past, he concludes that "[w]e need a strategy to deal with uncertainty. We have one. That strategy is NATO" (Stoltenberg 2019). By re-iterating the image of NATO as a source of success and stability, the Secretary General also conveys the image of a chaotic and unequal world extending beyond the Alliance's borders. More precisely, his discourse systematically pairs wars and tensions with the lack of freedom and prosperity; conversely, liberal democracy results a necessary and sufficient condition for

peace. As a logical consequence, the active promotion of liberal-democratic values and practices will bring peace to the world, contributing to collective defence and security: "real security is much more than just the military defence of one's territory […] the Alliance [will keep on] looking beyond the borders of its member nations to seek means to project stability and enhance security" (NATO 1998).

NATO's involvement in the wars in Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya all mirror this kind of reasoning.[13] The rhetoric of "peace enforcement" was frequently used to depict and legitimate the operations in the Balkans, and the case was similar in the Middle East with the rhetoric of the "war on terror". In all these cases, post-conflict stabilisation by means of political/military institution-building played a prominent role. Libya was a partial exception, since NATO took part in combat operations but has not contributed to post-conflict reconstruction; yet the logic of the fight against authoritarianism applied to Libya too. As declared by the Secretary General in May 2011: "NATO stands for the values of freedom, democracy and humanity that Osama bin Laden wanted to defeat. We will continue to stand for those values - from Afghanistan to Libya" (Rasmussen 2011a).

Russia's strategic culture differs from NATO's also in terms of worldviews. Overall, Russia's worldview is mechanistic and holistic (Skak 2013, 2016). It is characterised by two main features. Firstly, international relations are conceived of as an organic whole, whose components are tightly interwoven and whereby cause-effect dynamics cut across internal and external domains. Secondly, this thick social web is regulated by Hobbesian zero-sum dynamics and consequently assumes an inherently conflictual nature. It is possible to find a trace of this reasoning in the emphasis put on the "competition for resources" and shifts in the "balance of power", as well as the acknowledgement that "problems may be resolved using military force", according to "a rational and pragmatic foreign policy" (Strategii 2009, §12-13; Strategii

[13] At the time of writing, approximately 20,000 military personnel are engaged in NATO missions, with operations of several types (from military post-conflict stabilisation to anti-smuggling operations and disaster relief operations) in several parts of the world (Afghanistan, Kosovo, the Mediterranean, support to the African Union, etc.). This, plus the extension of NATO's partnership web show quite clearly that the Alliance has growingly engaged in activities far beyond its traditional thematic and geographic area of concern. For a detailed overview of NATO's military operations, see Sperling & Webber (2018).

2015, §13-14). This Realist-alike thinking is no surprise, given that the Russian intellectual elites filled in the doctrinal vacuum left by the disintegration of the Socialist ideology by fetishising Geopolitics (Sergunin 2004; Solovyev 2004).

Nevertheless, Moscow's worldview refutes a purely material focus and thus resembles Realism only superficially. In line with its self-perception, Russia perceives competition mainly in cultural terms, with civilisations as the ultimate units of international politics. Moral principles, rather than objective interests, are at the engines of the world. All FPCs present this view, highlighting the "civilisational dimension" of contemporary global dynamics and the continuous "attempts to impose values on others" in the face of the fact that "cultural and civilisational diversity […] and multiple development models have been emerging" (Kontseptsiia 2016, §4-5; see also: Kontseptsiia 2008, sections II, III.3; Kontseptsiia 2013, §13-14). This view brings about a simplification of global affairs in a way not too dissimilar from NATO's, but here Good and Evil are substituted by oppressor and oppressed. Once more, however, no trace of universalism emerges from Moscow's rhetoric, since its mechanistic worldview better supports *mnogopoliarnost'* (Medvedev 2011; Putin 2014c; see also: Clunan 2009, pp. 54-60, 91-92, 128-130; Mankoff 2012, ch. 1). In such context, the self-representation as civilisational hub plus the aforementioned worldview lead Russia to assume that conflict with the universalist liberal West is almost unavoidable.[14]

3.3. Concepts of Security and the Use of Force

Concepts and practices of security are strictly dependent on self-perception and worldview. The unavoidably community-based approach of NATO, together with its liberal worldview leads to a *sharp differentiation between internal and external threats*. Whatever the operational nature of the danger, in the eyes of the Allies it necessarily comes from outside NATO's 'area of peace' - geographically and ontologically. The rise of terrorism did not fundamentally challenge such dichotomy, in as much as terrorism was and still is perceived as something external (in terms of

[14] *Caveat*! Conflict does not mean war. It may be tantamount to simple disagreement.

provenience) and extraneous (in terms of existential nature) to the Alliance (Stoltenberg 2019). Even when a terrorist attack happens on European soil, the root cause of it is seen far away, in the Middle East-based militant islamism. The problem of terrorism rather stemmed from its non-State, un-conventional character - a condition that challenged the Alliance's military doctrine.

On the other hand, NATO conceives of it as a means of last resort and a reactive tool, in accordance with article 51 of the United Nations Charter. This doesn't mean that NATO's actions have always been *de facto* irreproachable from the standpoint of international law; what it does mean is that, in NATO's eyes, allied military operations are inherently just because undertaken in response to a commensurate threat (external) to the Alliance. We could debate whether or not, e.g., instability in the Middle East constitutes objectively a danger of such magnitude for the Alliance to respond militarily. But here it is not a matter of objectivity: it is a matter of perceptions, ultimately decided by the self-representation of NATO as a "liberal Leviathan". NATO's deployment could in principle be admissible and legitimate non only in the event of a direct military threat in Europe, but also when liberal values as such are threatened somewhere in the world. The argument has been used for the intervention in Kosovo, legitimate yet not legally authorised by the UN. Being NATO an alliance of States *and* a community of values, feelings of insecurity are triggered by both direct threats to the members' sovereignty *and* indirect threats to the founding values of the Alliance. We could say that NATO has developed a concept of 'positive security', whereby safety is granted by the lack of physical threats as well as by the presence of fundamental rights.

NATO's ideal-typical use of force is both collective and multilateral in nature (Carati 2010). - i.e., it is supported by the United Nations and carried out by a group of States sharing the same goal. This goal is usually inspired by the protection of human rights or, more in general, democratic values and typically emerges in relation to fragile/failed States. Institution-building is an essential feature of this type of intervention, and regime change its capstone. Be it in the Balkans, Middle East or

elsewhere, all NATO operations but one (Kosovo, which was not authorised by the UN) seem to respond to a similar understanding of the legitimate use of force.

Yet NATO's reaction to perceived (existential or ideational) threats does not necessarily imply the resort to military force. As said, it is a means of last resort. Alternative ways to achieve security have always been part of the Alliance's playbook. Since 1949 NATO has fulfilled multiple roles, conjugating deterrence, *détente*, and a fundamental role as security community (NATO 1967, especially §5; Lucarelli 2005). NATO's understanding of security has broadened even more in response to the post-bipolar turmoil. The "multi-faceted" and "multi-directional" nature of emerging threats has called for a multi-level action coupling deterrence and defence with the support for "the growth of democratic institutions and commitment to the peaceful resolution of disputes" (NATO 1991, §20). This translated into the practices of partnership, enlargement, and peace-support operations - all falling within the aforementioned framework of 'positive security' (Locatelli 2015; Sperling & Webber 2018).[15] Yet the modern worldview and Defence-oriented nature of NATO make it difficult to integrate military and non-military instruments of action. The slow-going, partial results of NATO's adaptation in terms of hybrid and cyber capabilities are a case in point, just as the Afghan quagmire in which the Alliance is stuck.

Now let's turn to Russia, recalling the holistic, mechanistic, and highly conflictual worldview ingrained in its strategic culture. This condition sustains a well-known existential anxiety that is voiced especially in the Military Doctrines (MDs). A constant feeling of precariousness afflicts Russia, as if adverse forces were continuously attempting to undermine its existence and inner constitution, generating perils that could strike at all levels both within and outside of Moscow's civilisational space. The very *difference between internal and external sources of harm is blurred* and they all share the same non-Russian origin (Doktrina 2010, §8-10; Doktrina 2014, §12-14). Even classically domestic threats such as subversion and

[15] Sperling & Webber (2018) mention a number of relevant directives on non-article 5 operations issued by NATO's Military Committee. *Inter alia*, see: MC 327 (1995), MC 400/1 (1996), MC 400/2 (2000), MC 411/1 (2002), MC 472 (2002).

revolution necessarily have an external source. As the rhetoric of foreign-led colour revolutions exemplifies, Moscow tends to externalise domestic problems (Putin 2014b; Skak 2016).

The intermingling of external and internal domains also impacts on the very use of force. It shines through the overall phrasing of the MDs that Russia conceives of force as one of the many ordinary instruments to deal with problems. MDs state that "[…] the Russian Federation uses political, diplomatic, legal, economic, environmental, informational, military and other instruments for the protection of national interests" (Doktrina 2010, §4; Doktrina 2014, §5). Military means rank at the same level as other tools more or less coercive in nature, reflecting Russia's broad conception of (military) security (Doktrina 2010, §6; Doktrina 2014, §8). The restrictions applied to the deployment of armed forces do not ensure that Moscow will not use them, because - coherently with what has been discussed so far - the terms 'aggression' and 'existential threat' may have a different meaning for Russia (Doktrina 2010, §20-22; Doktrina 2014, §22-27). Consequently, we should expect Russia to resort to coercive means and displays of force in times and under conditions incompatible with Western standards (Galeotti 2016). In Moscow, the empowerment of the Ministry of Defence is not a foreign policy failure: it is just another way to deal with other States, an alternative to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

This disposition is enriched by an *extensive interpretation of conflict*. As for competition in general, conflict falls outside of the purely military(-conventional) domain, inextricably intertwined with the social dimension of politics (Doktrina 2010, §12-14; Doktrina 2014, §15). For Russia, conflict is everywhere and everything could be an object of conflict (Covington 2016, pp. 26-38). On the theoretical-political side, this means that in Moscow's eyes the barrier between peace and war blur, generating a grey zone in which the conversion between peaceful and conflictual conduct is very rapid and commands a sort of latent, permanent mobilisation (Covington 2016; Fasola 2017). On the practical-military side, asymmetric and non-conventional means of conflict and the so-called hybrid warfare find their

cognitive underpinning (Kipp 2014; Thornton 2017). NSSs, FPCs, and MDs mention soft-power, information warfare, and other non-military means as sources of peril *and* operational opportunities to ensure security.[16] Unlike NATO, Moscow's track-record in these domains is longer and more solid (e.g., see Thomas 2004).

Table 1 - Key components of NATO's and Russia's strategic cultures.

Strategic Culture	**N**ATO	**Russia**
Self-perception	*Primary*: Defensive alliance & Community of values *Secondary*: Collective security agent & Global NATO	Greatpowerness Unique civilisation
Worldview	Liberal Wilsonian	Mechanistic Holistic
Security and force	Internal domain/threats ≠ external domain/threats Use of force as mean of last resort	Blurring of internal and external domains/threats Extensive interpretation of conflict

Source: compiled by the authors.

3. The Activation of NATO's and Russia's Strategic Cultures During the Ukraine Crisis

In the previous section of this paper we have reconstructed the strategic cultures of NATO and Russia by looking at a range of sources and practices produced and deployed by the two actors over a considerable period of time. Given our theoretical framework, we expect these strategic cultural orientations to inform the thoughts and actions of the two actors within the considered timeframe (and potentially beyond), irrespective of contextual conditions. What we want to do now is to see how

[16] Strategii 2009, §27, 30, 93; Strategii 2015, §12, 21, 41, 43; Kontseptsiia 2008, sections II, III.6; Kontseptsiia 2013, §9-10, 20; Kontseptsiia 2016, §6-9, 17-18; Doktrina 2010, §12-14, 31-34, 41, 46-47; Doktrina 2014, §15, 36-42.

strategic culture has played a role in NATO-Russia relations during the 2014 Ukraine crisis. By using the same methodology employed above, we will try to understand whether the discourse and practices deployed by the two actors at the outbreak of the crisis match their wider strategic cultures. In other words, is the behaviour of NATO and Russia in the context of the Ukraine crisis coherent with our strategic cultural model? We conduct this case study focussing on 2014 - the crucial year for the crisis itself.

The Ukraine crisis began in November 2013, when protests erupted against President Viktor Yanukovich's decision to reject greater economic integration with the EU. The violent repression of these demonstrations led to a further escalation of the situation - with more people participating and more violence being used. A month later, this critical situation offered Crimea the opportunity to transform popular discontent with the central government into a claim of secession. Via a blend of direct and indirect political and military support, Putin's Russia helped Crimea to secede from Ukraine and eventually annexed it to the Federation, coherently with the results of a controversial local referendum. Following these events, ethnic tensions grew further in all of Ukraine. Specifically, in the Eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk pro-Russian separatists wanted to replicate the Crimean scenario and called for independence from Ukraine. This caused new violence and direct clashes between Russia-backed separatists and the Ukrainian armed forces - which later on began to be supported by the West, namely NATO. Passing through a series of ups and downs and while mutating its character, the conflict in Eastern Ukraine has not stopped yet. Both NATO and Russia continue playing a crucial role in this crisis.[17]

All the fundamental components of NATO's strategic culture find correspondence in how the Alliance faced the crisis - despite diverging views among the Allies and the different communicative styles of Secretary Generals Rasmussen and Stoltenberg (Böller 2018). Especially since the Russian annexation of Crimea, the

[17] For a timeline of events, we re-direct readers elsewhere. See for example: http://ukraine.csis.org; https://www.cfr.org/interactive/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-ukraine.

image of the *Defensive Alliance* emerged as the key self-representation, yet always with reference to shared values (NATO as a *Community of values*). In the Secretary General's communication there has been a constant attempt to emphasise that collective defence has always been and continues to be at NATO's core. The Wales Declaration stated:

> "Based on solidarity, Alliance cohesion, and the indivisibility of our security, NATO remains the transatlantic framework for strong collective defence and the essential forum for security consultations and decisions among Allies. The greatest responsibility of the Alliance is to protect and defend our territories and our populations against attack, as set out in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty." (NATO 2014d, §2)

The renewed emphasis on collective defence has scaled down the role of the ancillary self-representations as *Collective security agent* and *Global NATO*. Yet they have not disappeared. NATO still has global responsibilities, which once again link with the defence of liberal democracy (*ibidem*).

Shared values emerge as key to NATO's identity also in the Ukraine context. These values were implicitly or explicitly presented as foundations of Allied "solidarity" and "cohesion" (see above), and they were also used as benchmarks for the assessment of out-group dynamics. Both Ukraine's domestic distress and Russia's behaviour were linked to the absence of liberal-democratic values. Any official press release or declaration of 2014 can be quoted as an example of this.[18] Especially in the early stages of the crisis, NATO insisted that only "inclusive political processes based on democratic values, respect for human rights, minorities and the rule of law" could lead to peace (NATO 2014c). While in the specific context of Ukraine such assertion may be reasonable, socio-institutional processes are by no means the sole cause of the crisis. Hence NATO's focus on regime type to account for patterns of peace and war reflects a subjective view, rather than an objective as-

[18] Find a list at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/events_107755.htm.

sessment. This 'selection bias' appears even more evidently in a later speech by Rasmussen: "We want to improve the climate, but to do that Russia must show that it is prepared to play by the same rules as everybody else" (Rasmussen 2014f). This statement is unintelligible if not assuming NATO's ideational perspective: as a liberal-democratic community, the Alliance enjoys the moral standing necessary to dictate the terms of peace; and being equipped with a *liberal worldview*, NATO assumes that everyone else should play by the same rules - the universal rules of liberal-democracy. If someone does not abide by them - then it becomes an "adversary" (Rasmussen 2014a). We see here a confirmation of the role of liberal values as the discriminating factor between mirror and wall identity. The following excerpt is an additional case in point:

> "Freedom. Democracy. The rule of international law. The inviolability of borders. And the right of nations to decide their own security arrangements. These values and these norms are essential for our way of life. […] But now, Russia is violating these very values. […] I deeply regret that Russia currently seems to view NATO as an adversary rather than as a partner. This is not an approach we favour. But we are ready to meet the challenge." (Rasmussen 2014b).

A corollary of this whole reasoning is that NATO - as a Defensive alliance *and* a Community of values - cannot pose any harm to anybody, by definition (Boulegue 2017). NATO underestimated the role played by Russia's fear of a possible NATO's enlargement to Ukraine. In the years prior to 2014, instead of reassuring Russia of no intention to admit Ukraine as a member, NATO had kept the door opened to the country rising Russia's concerns. After the eruption of the crisis, analogously the Secretary General affirmed: "All the measures that NATO is taking [as a response to the crisis] are defensive, moderate, proportionate, transparent, and fully compliant with our international commitments […]. They are not a threat to Russia - and NATO is not a threat to Russia" (Rasmussen 2014f). In other words,

NATO could even conceive of being framed as a threat by Russia - or any other actor, for that matters. The enhancement of military exercises and deployments along the Eastern borders, as well as the development of the Readiness Action Plan (RAP) appeared in NATO's eyes as due, legitimate, and reactive measures (NATO 2014a,b; Rasmussen 2014c). Once again, a 'selection bias' intervened to rule out alternative perceptions of the Alliance's course of action.

Once the war had erupted, NATO did not intervene militarily in Ukraine and has continuously called for the suspension of armed hostilities. This is coherent with both the Alliance's self-representation and its view of the use of force. Given the *Wilsonian component* of NATO's approach to security, the possibility of direct military intervention by the Alliance could not be ruled out *tout court*. In the case of Ukraine, a military intervention may have been a credible option in the early stages of the crisis, when the main concern was with the stability and nature of the country's regime (e.g., Rasmussen 2014d,e). Then, however, the consolidation of a liberal-friendly government in Ukraine shifted NATO's perception of the crisis. Rather than being the result of internal instability per se, the crisis started to be seen as the consequence of Russian meddling. NATO decided to contrast Russia's nefarious action by a two-front compartmentalised strategy: on the one hand, non-military support to Ukrainian institutions (NATO 2018); on the other hand, military deterrence of Russia at the international level - as per above. Such separation (and the nature) of the Allied (counter-)measures somehow reflects the *differentiation between internal and external domains* proper of NATO's outlook.

On the other side, the way Moscow framed and reacted to the crisis in Ukraine reflects first of all a deep *dissatisfaction with the international status quo* and a *feeling of 'unattained greatness'*. Russia accused the West of applying double moral and political standards and piloting externally the Ukraine crisis "for the benefit of personal geopolitical interests" (MFA RF 2014b; see also: Lavrov 2014a; MFA RF 2014a). In Russia's eyes, NATO is not the liberal guardian of the international order, but the instrument of a tyrant - the US - to impose "universal recipes" onto others

(Putin 2014f). As underlined by a press release of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs:

> "We again state that the United States, hiding behind appeals not to prevent the Ukrainian people from making a free choice, are in fact attempting to impose a 'Western vector' on their development, dictating to the authorities of a sovereign country, what they should do" (MFA RF 2014e).

The Ukraine crisis has been seen by Russia as a particular manifestation of two sets of problems lying at different levels. Firstly, it reflects a problem of global nature - namely the inadequacy of the contemporary international order. "These developments were the logical consequence of serious, system-wide problems that have accumulated since the end of the Cold War" - Lavrov told Interfax (Lavrov 2014c). Secondly, Russia perceives the crisis as a consequence of Ukraine's own internal dynamics - political extremism, corruption, and the dis-regard for minority rights (MFA RF 2014c). At the same time, the crisis is not merely the result of pre-existing conditions, but also a cause of the further deterioration of East-West strategic relations *and* of the socio-political situation within Ukraine (*ibidem***;** Putin 2014e). Overall, the complex Russian rhetoric on the Ukraine crisis reflects the *mechanistic and holistic worldview* of the country, which perceives reality as the complex product of intermingling levels influencing each other reciprocally.

Moscow believes that the assertion of equal relations among all stakeholders is essential for the restoration of peace. This means, on the one hand, to recognise Russia's legitimate role as a *great power*. As Putin declared in October 2014: "we simply want for our own interests to be taken into account and for our position to be respected […] We are ready to respect the interests of our partners, but we expect the same respect for our interests" (Putin 2014f). On the other hand, Russia asks to involve those (Russian-speaking) regional political forces who do not side with the centre of Ukrainian power - i.e., the separatists, in Western terms (MFA RF

2014d). These two levels once again intermingle with each other in as much as the assertion of Moscow's international role passes through the defence of the rights of the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine. This connection is made possible and legitimised by Russia's role as the *warrantor of the russkij mir* - within which Ukraine falls at least in part (Putin 2014e; Putin 2014a; Lavrov 2014b). Putin expressed this with a quite telling metaphor during 2014's meeting of the Valdai International Club:

> " […] the bear will not even bother to ask for permission. Here we consider it the master of the taiga, and I know for sure that it does not intend to move to any other climatic zones - it will not be comfortable there. However, it will not let anyone have its taiga either. I believe it is clear." (Putin 2014f)

These words convey a conservative message. Russia aims at preserving the status quo of its civilisational area from the chaos spread by the West via colour revolutions. "Revolutions are bad" - Putin said plainly (*ibidem*).

While denying to be responsible for military escalation, Russia presents itself as the only actor really attempting to do something to settle the crisis (MFA RF 2014c; Lavrov 2014c). To do so, Russia has deployed "the entire arsenal of political, diplomatic and legal methods" at its disposal (Lavrov 2014b). The evolution of Russia's moves within the early phases of the Ukraine conflict has been described by Cimbala (2014) as an example of "military persuasion". By supporting its political claims with military actions - and vice versa -, Russia has been able to control conflict escalation and dictate the rhythm of the crisis, in favour of its own position vis-à-vis the other parties (Freedman 2014). In addition, military and political moves have been supported by non-conventional means - the so-called informational operations. Far from constituting a revolutionary type of (hybrid) warfare (Charap 2015; Renz 2016), these measures aim at achieving set goals with minimum effort by hitting the enemy at multiple levels contemporarily. They also reflect Russia's

stated objective to avoid a "costly arms race" while securing the country's interests (Putin 2014d). Overall, Russia's *modus operandi* in Crimea and Donbass confirms our strategic cultural analysis, which underlined the *blurring of domains* and the *extensive interpretation of conflict* in Russia's security outlook.

Overall, the words and deeds of NATO and Russia during the first phase of the Ukraine crisis follow the strategic cultural script that we reconstructed in the previous section of this essay. The behaviour displayed by the two actors in that context is coherent with our general strategic cultural model. The specific traits of the two actor's strategic cultures manifest themselves in opposite readings of the context, divergent attributions of faults, and different approaches to the crisis. As previously said, given opposite strategic cultures, the other's actions are by themselves unconceivable and are either rejected or mis-interpreted. Therefore today's persisting disagreement between NATO and Russia over Ukraine should come as no surprise. On the basis of this empirical confirmation, our model could be applied to other scenarios in order to attempt to retroactively understand or even forecast NATO's and Russia's behaviours.

4. Conclusion: Cognitive Dissonance and Political Disagreement Between NATO and Russia

The concept of strategic culture provides researchers with an analytical lens to understand the socio-cognitive roots of amity-enmity patterns and international behaviour. In this article, we have applied strategic culture to the case of NATO-Russia relations. Our aim was to give a constructionist explanation of the hostilities emerging recursively between these two actors.

Our analysis shows that the strategic cultures of NATO and Russia differ significantly in many respects (Table 1). These two actors construe their in-groups, roles, and the boundaries of what is legitimate and appropriate in opposite terms. NATO's identity is based on a set of shared political and civic values with no immediate connection to religious beliefs or ethno-cultural roots. The liberal values on which the NATO community is founded (liberty, democracy, rule of law) are by

definition non-ascriptive and can be made one's own through a process of socialisation (and civilisation). In this sense, NATO is a cosmopolitan agent, in as much as it perceives moral, ethical, and political standards as universally valid. Achievement, transformation, and socialisation make the broadening of the value-based community possible, and the Alliance acts as a promoter of such transformative process. Conversely, Russia's core values are those of an ascriptive community in which the borders of the referent in-group (the *russkij mir*) are defined by language and historically shaped cultural features. Russia is a communitarian agent according to which standards of appropriateness are culture-specific and do not apply necessarily outside of given civilisational borders. As a consequence, Russia's community has a fixed, static composition and the role of Moscow in respect to it is conservative, rather than expansive. Although both NATO and Russia have been engaged in a process of 're-actualisation of the past' through which they have decoded the other side's practices in light of previous experiences, NATO's cognition is *modern* (progress oriented, evolutionary, state-based), while Russia's is *pre-modern* (conservative, static, community-based).[19] Such dissonance also extends to the domain of security proper. While NATO applies a 'modern cut' also in security affairs - sharply differentiating between internal and external domains/threats -, Russia's holistic worldview conceives of threats and counter-measures in a more fluid way. This is accompanied by a higher proclivity to the use of force and/or conflictual means for crisis-management than the West, which is restrained by a legalistic use of force (democratic military intervention is no exception).

These findings have been confirmed by our case study. The analysis of NATO's and Russia's discourse and behaviour during the first year of the Ukraine crisis (2014) have highlighted the presence of all the major features of the actors' strategic cultures, reaffirming the concept's utility as a tool for understanding. While across-case observations would have strengthened our research design, a single-shot case is still sufficient for a theory-confirming aim and coherent with the broader

[19] Neither of the two actors is *quasi post-modern* (progress oriented, evolutionary, but with a re-defined concept of sovereignty), as is the European Union.

theoretical nature of this article (Lijphart 1971; Gerring 2001, ch. 8; Seawright & Gerring 2008). We are confident that other researchers will take up the challenge to further prove or disprove our claims on empirical grounds.

NATO and Russia move from considerably different strategic cultural assumptions. The two actors perceive their roles, entitlements, and reality at large in quite incompatible ways and this raises considerably the likelihood of conflictual relations and incommunicability. Do these differences necessarily imply conflict? Not necessarily, but they can. They represent an ever-present layer of perceptual dissonance that is ready to be activated by each and every environmental condition. In particular, the transformative and expansive nature of NATO easily clashes with Russia's 'existential anxiety' and 'civilisational protectionism'. At the same time, Russia's provocative behaviour in areas of its Cold War sphere of influence, its unrestrained attitude towards the possibility of using force, and the blurring distinction between peace and war, are all perceived as a direct threat to the Alliance. The threat is both to the safety of NATO's nations and to the internal solidarity among the Allies - put under strain by Russia's mix of conventional and un-conventional means of pressure.

Overall, this state of things bears the risk to transform the relations between NATO and Russia into a question of reciprocal ontological (in)security.[20] Either the two actors will be able to deconstruct such images by means of real confidence building measures, or hostilities will continue to emerge recursively, whit the risk to pass from a 'new Cold War', to a hot peace, to conflict *tout court*.

[20] On the concept of ontological security see: Giddens 1991; Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Different in Economics, Coordinated in Politics. Russia and China in the MENA region in the XXI century

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ABSTRACT

The article reviews Russia and China's engagement with the Middle East and North Africa since the 1990s and assesses the scale and depth of their cooperation and competition in the region. The article argues for the development of a de facto convergence between the two states, with Russia at the forefront of diplomatic and military initiatives, and China supporting the latter's actions in bi-lateral and multilateral relations with MENA partners. The regional crisis unleashed by Arab Uprisings have boosted such a cooperation between Moscow and Beijing, both in respect to their regional partners and Western rivals. And yet, they have also highlighted the different relevance that the region deserves in their respective international relations. On the background of the existing literature, the analysis of official statistics as well as of historical precedents, the two countries are analysed and compared along the topics of economy and politics-diplomacy.

KEYWORDS: China; Russia; Middle East; North Africa; International Relations

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1. A Historical Outline

As soon as both Russia and China re-engaged massively in the Middle East and North Africa in the late 1990s, they increasingly found common ground to co-ordinate in order to secure and expand their economic and political investments. The immediate reason for such convergence lays in their perception of Western, and particularly US, policies as counterproductive for the political stability of the region, if not clearly opposed to Russian and Chinese presence. However, by analysing both differences and commonalities in their respective patterns of engagement, the article argues for other factors being relevant for such convergence, and likely to sustain further coordination: namely, the promotion of state-centred politics and economics as a viable framework for the development prospects of MENA countries and, of course, their relations with Russia and China.

The historical relevance of the Middle East and North Africa in modern economy lays in their strategic location at the crossroads of major trading routes, their artisanship before industrial revolutions and, since early XX century, the presence of energy commodities for global industrial growth, namely oil and natural gas and, last but not least, for its major share in the world consumption of military technology[1] (Owen & Pamuk 1998; Findlay & O'Rourke 2007). However, it represents also a difficult area to engage with: the political and institutional fragmentation of the region into small-to-middle states, often competing one against the other has long disrupted the opportunities provided by those commonalities in languages, religions, political cultures, migration flows and natural resources that would make them cohesive and effective as for inner governance and foreign relations. Balance of power, anti-hegemonic alliances and bandawagoning with external powers are some of the most salient features of regional and international politics in MENA (Hinnebusch 2003). On the one hand, the Middle East and North Africa host some of the longest armed conflicts since WWII, like the Arab-Israeli one or the ever-

[1] The Middle and North Africa accounts for some of the highest military spending both as percentage of government spending (between 10 and 20%, except for lower figures in Egypt and Turkey) and share of GDP (between 4 and 6 per cent); Saudi Arabia and Israel rank among the first countries spending on military items. Values are expressed at constant 1990 US$ prices (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, SIPRI 2018).

ending crisis in Iraq and Lebanon, whose complexity has both enhanced and exhausted the diplomacy or hegemonic ambitions of world powers. On the other hand, the economy of the Middle East and North Africa ranks among the less integrated within a regional framework, and one of the most outward-oriented of the world (Mustapha 2010; WB 2010). The globalization waves of late XX and early XXI centuries have underlined existing cleavages, fostering a differential integration of highly-selected centres, like the Arab Gulf and Mediterranean coasts, against the marginalisation of peripheries, notably the rural, inland territories (Romagnoli & Mengoni 2014, p. 73, 122). Most leaders in MENA opt for negotiated trade-deals rather than to all-out liberalization policies, which grant them the control over the flows of goods as well as the domestics beneficiaries of such deals, and would fit well into the framework of a "statist globalization" (Hartwell 2019, pp. 103-104).

Differences in the presence of China and Russia were minimal during the 1990s, because they all suffered from a virtual absence. In fact, the end of the Cold War roughly coincided with the minor presence of Russia and China from the economy and politics of the MENA region: Moscow had already scaled down its presence in the late 1980s and since then focused primarily on the consequences of socialist collapse and relations with Western countries and former Soviet republics. The only, notable exception was establishing fresh, new relations with Israel in parallel with mass migration to the Middle East country (Vasiliev 2018, p. 276; Cherif 2019, pp. 14-16). Only since 1996, with the advent of former Soviet officer and MENA expert, Evgeniy Primakov, Moscow re-engaged with the long-run Arab partners in Egypt, Syria and Iraq in order to re-cover its status in international politics along the principles of "Great Powers Balancing" (Vasiliev 2018, p. 303; Milosevich 2019, p. 33). China was still fully engaged in adjusting to an export-led pattern of growth, and focused on integration within Asian and Western markets, whereas the Middle East, and more precisely the Gulf, was valued for energy imports for the oil-thirsty industrial development (Degang & Zoubir 2014). If the 1990s were the heydays of Western-led neoliberal principles and institutions, ruling and opposition forces in the region were left with no major alternative partner

abroad, or at least any partner that could counter-balance Western pressure. Indeed, after the mighty show of strength of the Gulf War in 1990–1991 against Iraq, the United States of America were hold as the regional power-broker: the "dual containment" strategy against Iraq and Iran, as well as the brokering of the Arab-Israeli conflict in mid-1990s were the pillars of the US "moment" (Fawaz 2012). Europe still acted as the main economic partner of the region, and the European Communities' initiatives (later European Union), like the grand Euro-Mediterranean Partnership in 1995 or the more stringent European Neighbourhood Policy in 2003 were cautiously accepted by MENA states in their neoliberal economic provisions but were rejected in their advocacy for political liberalization (Teti & Abbott 2017; Trentin 2018; Görgülü & Kahyaoğlu 2019).

During the 2000s, both China and Russia expanded their presence along their specific and very different paths of domestic development: Russia as a partner for energy and military technology, China as a major industrial power. However, it was their common contempt for US policies in the region that fostered their convergence, and later cooperation: accordingly, since 2003 Washington proved to be both unable and unwilling to provide strategic stability to the region, and because neither Moscow nor Beijing could replace the US as the economic and strategic power-broker they would coordinate their strategies to secure their investments and interests, notably the containment of transnational, political Islamic movements (Milosevich 2019). In this perspective, crucial events were the US refusal of cooperation against transnational jihadi groups after 9/11 in Central Asia and Caucasus as well as the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, with the consequent political failure to enforce any semblance of institutional stability. Coupled with NATO enlargement to Eastern Europe and crisis in Ukraine, such events fed suspicion against or just outright rejection of Western-based liberalism. Thus, Russia and China converged to support "stability" under the banners of "state legitimacy and sovereignty", which translated into supporting the embattled existing regimes, whatever their foundations and features, against mass mobilization and liberalism (Akl 2019). Such development accelerated since the Arab Uprising of 2011 and was welcomed by

MENA elites in their struggle to survive social upheavals and political crisis across the region, as well as to counter the uncertainties of Western policies as outlined in Egypt, Libya and Syria.

2. Factors for Convergence: Networks, Investments, Strategy and Common Rivals

Both Moscow and Beijing conceive the Middle East as an integral part of Asia, thus accepting the United Nations notion of the area as "Western Asia". Nevertheless, the main differences between their approaches to the Middle East and North Africa originate from their geographical and historical proximity, which heavily condition interests and perceptions of security. For Russia, the Middle East is a "proxy" area: the immediate neighbourhood is still represented by former Soviet republics of the Caucasus, so that Turkey and Iran represent their "second tier" and the Arab countries the "third tier" of their near abroad. The region is linked to its own citizens by transnational ties, like Orthodox Christianity, Islam and remnants of socialist and nationalist networks. For China, instead, the Middle East is a distant space, located in the "third" circle of Beijing's foreign policy (PRC 2016; Vasiliev 2018). However, such distance is differentiated according to the economic investments made by China: if the Gulf has been providing oil and natural gas to the East Asian country, Iran and Turkey are now pivotal in the "New Silk Road" project that would connect Eastern China with Central and Western Asia. Hence, for different reasons and trajectories, both Russia and China have been upgrading their relations with Turkey and Iran (RIAC 2016a; RIAC 2016b; Milosevich 2019, pp. 44-45).

As for economics, Russia and China entered the MENA markets as long as these have been trying to diversify their international economic relations beyond their traditional partnerships with European countries and the United States of America (Trentin 2014).[2] Energy is the commodity that has provided the basis for

[2] The recent oil shock during the "long 2000s" (2001–2014) sustained the diversification and increase of trade relations between MENA and Asia regions, as well as within the MENA region, in

economic interaction with the MENA region. Since mid-2000s most of the energy flows from the Gulf moved to the consumption markets of Eastern and South Asia: since 2013, China has become the largest importer of oil from the Gulf area. Though being at the opposite sides of production and consumption, both Russia and China have agreed so far to the principle of stability in energy markets, and not of maximisation of short-term gains through prices hikes and downs. In order to balance imports, Asian manufacturing, industrial and financial products poured into the area massively, now framed in the Beijing's "One Belt, One Road (OBOR)" project, while Russia has expanded the supply of energy-production technology. This process has developed into a wide and deep web of economic relations that was duly described as "structural interdependencies" (Davidson 2010). Differently from Central Asia, Russia and China have never really entered in direct competition for the time being. Investment in energy infrastructures might be the only sector where both countries would compete for contracts, but the primacy of bilateral co-ordination on political issues has so far prevented major frictions (Carlsson et al. 2015, pp. 59, 65).

Since the late 1990s, Moscow and Beijing have converged on some basic principles and patterns of political action in world politics, which then translated into the specifics of the MENA region: the development of multipolar world led by great powers, that preside over an economic globalization built on the integration of state-owned enterprises (SOE) and private companies (Onnis 2011; Hartwell 2019, pp. 93-101; Milosevich 2019, pp. 42-44); the primacy of state institutions as the pillar of domestic and international legitimacy, and therein the prominence of armed forces as their guarantors; the primacy of bilateral negotiations and deals on defence and conflict-resolution as prerequisite for successive multilateral agreements, and opposed to unilateralism; the rejection of any kind of regime-change strategy and, after NATO attacks in Kosovo (1999), Iraq (2003) and Libya (2011), heavy caution towards humanitarian interventions; the aversion against militant Political Islam,

contrast to the previous shocks of the "long 1970s" (1969–1986), which favoured mostly Western partners (WB 2018).

which might boost dissent within their own territories (PRC 2016; Presidency of the Russian Federation 2016).

Such a convergence was first tested in Central Asia during the 1990s and institutionalized in the Shanghai Cooperation Council. Later on, as long as both Moscow and Beijing deepened their involvement in the region and conceived US and Western policies as increasingly inimical, they began to act along a *de facto* division of labour: on the one hand, Russia is at the forefront of diplomatic and security initiatives, with the deployment of "hard power" and intelligence in Syria, Libya and Iraq since 2011, and diplomatic pragmatism throughout the rest of the region. On the other hand, China has largely supported Russian initiatives in MENA countries and thus contributed to build a minimal consensus upon which to develop political and institutional stability.

Last but not least, another factor for Russian and Chinese convergence in the Middle East and North Africa has been provided by policies of the United States. If Russia was the first to conceive the MENA as a possible battleground for the development of a multipolar world in the late 1990s, against to US-led "liberal order" (Primakov 2009; Vasiliev 2018), China still banked on the US acting as the regional power-broker to develop its investments throughout the 2000s. Transnational jihadi movements provided the chance for both Moscow and Beijing to offer their cooperation to Washington and NATO after 9/11. However, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and Western support for "coloured revolutions" in Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia, led Russia and China to develop a more confrontational postures against the US (RIAC & Fudan 2018). In particular since the Arab Uprisings of 2011, both Moscow and Beijing shared the idea that the United States would not provide anymore political stability to the Middle East and North Africa, like it has been the case during the US "moment" in the 1990s. Quite the contrary, they suggested that social upheavals were ignited by Western liberal doctrines, and regional rivalries have been left escalating into the so called "New Middle East Cold War" in order to prevent the emergence of inimical forces to the US, like Iran or the AKP-led Turkey, as well as to disrupt the expansion of Russian and Chinese in-

vestments overseas (Santini 2017; Milosevich 2019, p. 35). As a response, Moscow and Beijing presented themselves as agents of stability, legitimacy and pragmatism, which actually ran counter the tide of political change during the Uprisings, but was praised by the conservative counter-attacks in 2013 (Hokayem & Wesser 2014; Akl 2019).

MENA elites played at full length in the Russian and Chinese engagement in order to contain those Western policies that might ran against their own interests. However, MENA leaders found difficult to drag Moscow and Beijing into regional rivalries, like the Arab-Israeli conflict or the Saudi-Iranian struggle, because Russia and China resisted against endorsing their local partners' interests as their own (Charap 2014, p. 193). Compared to Western countries, and the US in particular, both Russia and China have shown so far a higher degree of autonomy towards their local partners. Upgrading cooperation with Teheran in Syria went in parallel with Russian and Chinese engagement with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Turkey (Milosevich 2019, p. 44).

3. The Economics of Russia and China in the MENA region

3.1 Russia's Specialization on Strategic Sectors

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia withdrew from MENA markets and resorted to minimal trade relations with long-standing allies, like Syria and Algeria, or neighbours, like Turkey and Iran: for instance, Arab countries in early 1990s amounted to less than 1% of total Russian foreign trade, against the 20-25% during the 1970s and early 1980s (Poti 2018). However, in concomitance with the oil price hikes of 2001, Russia returned the MENA region as a relevant economic actor in four specific fields: energy (oil, coal and LNG), raw materials, weaponry, tourism and food industry (Hartwell 2019). Though exporting grain to the region, Russia is as a net importer of food products, particularly from Turkey and Iran, whereas it is a major exporter of commodities in all three other sectors. Its exports to MENA countries increased from 1.19 billions US$ in 1992 to 3.31 billions in 2002 and 13.7 billions US$ in 2015, with constant surpluses in its balance of

trade, from 147 millions US$ in 1992 to 3 billions in 2002 and 12 billions in 2015. Trade value with the Middle East is six times higher than with North Africa (IMF 2018).

Among the most important trade partners of Russia one might figure out a first ring of countries, including Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Israel and the United Arab Emirates, followed by a second ring composed by Syria, Egypt, Algeria and Saudi Arabia. As the major trade partner in the region, Turkish imports from Russia in 2015 reached over 20 US$ billions compared to the 13 US$ billions for the rest of MENA countries, while Turkish exports to Russia accounted for nearly 4 US$ billions compared to only 2 US$ billions for Arab countries, Israel and Iran. Nevertheless, their trade is still a fraction of their overall trade balance: Russian exports to MENA countries (excluding Turkey) amounted to 6% while imports to just 1.4% of overall Russia trade volume (RIAC 2016a, p. 7; RIAC 2017; Simsek et al. 2017; IMF 2018).

Russia-MENA trade relationships remain pretty marginal for most partners involved, as for volume and monetary value. According to economic analysis, one of the main causes lay in the extreme concentration on few commodities and products (energy, arms and food), highly dependent on the instability of international markets and regional politics. (Hartwell 2019). This reflects the limits of Russian economy, however such commodities and products are of utmost strategic importance for both Moscow and MENA elites, which explains the reason why both sides attach such relevance and caution to their bilateral relations. Not surprisingly, Moscow integrated its engagements in the region within the framework of "national interests" in 2014 (Kozhanov 2018).

As a major world producer and exporter of hydrocarbons, Russia has returned the MENA markets with its own technology for exploration, refining and transport facilities. Again, previous relations during the USSR represent the bulk of Russian market position, like in Syria and Algeria, as well as in Libya until Qadhafy's death. In late 1990s, Moscow was back to Iraq, arguing for the removal of the UN sanctions. A fresh, new start occurred instead with the Arab Gulf Monarchies: here,

Russian export of energy technology was balanced by the GCC investments in the booming Russian real estate sector.

Between 2005 and 2007, a whole range of permanent institutions have been set up in order to facilitate trade with the Arab Gulf states: the Russian-UAE Business Council in 2005, which presides over trade and the Emirates' investments in transport facilities in Russia; the Russian-Kuwaiti Business Council and the Russian-Bahraini Business Council in 2007. In 2008 Russia, Kuwait and Qatar signed a memorandum on the peaceful use of nuclear energy in order to defuse tensions concerning its cooperation with Iran. Between 2008 and 2012, dozens of agreements were signed between Gulf and Russian energy companies in Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Oman. In November 2011, Moscow inaugurated the GCC-Russian Strategic Dialogue, which would enhance political dialogue on strategic issues like trade, investment, technology and culture. In fact, Gulf investments in Russia increased since 2015 whereas Russian ones slow-downed since the global financial crisis hit the country in 2008 (Hartwell 2019). In line with the pattern of bilateral, state-led relations, the Sovereign Wealth Funds of the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia participated to the Russian Direct Investment Fund, established in 2011, with the aim of gaining political influence in Moscow. By the way, this warranted high returns as well because of the risks connected to Western sanctions against Russia (Nakhle 2018; Hartwell 2019, pp. 99-100).

Relations with Teheran have improved steadily since 1991, with cooperation on nuclear energy being the hallmark of such partnership. However, Moscow has proven cautious on Iranian projects to deliver its natural gas straight to Europe through Iraq, Syria and the Mediterranean, because this might compete with its own supplies to the European Union.[3] Similar dynamics apply to relations with Algeria and Qatar, some of the largest producers of Liquified Natural Gas (LNG): these have increased exports to European countries, which in turn work to diversify their imports out of Russia's prominence. Moscow's response has been the proposal to

[3] Moscow stood firm in its political and military presence in Syria just at the end-point of the planned Iranian pipeline, exerting several times its leverage on the Iranian partner (author's anonymous interviews in Moscow, 19-27 April 2017).

coordinate policies and investments, stabilize prices and market shares. However, Russian efforts, like the Gas Exporting Countries Forum, have reached mixed results: though they agree on stabilizing prices, Qatar and Iran are reluctant to let Moscow oversee any coordination policy that would hamper their market shares (Cherif 2019, p. 23). Similar difficulties have featured Russian engagement with Gulf oil producers. The price collapse unleashed by Saudi Arabia in spring 2014, hugely reduced Russian revenues, and Moscow's efforts to strike a deal with OPEC failed because of rivalry between Ryad and Teheran. However, as soon as Saudi Arabia faced recession in 2016, they all resorted to minimal cooperation to stabilize oil prices back at profitable levels. Here again, Moscow tried to engage MENA producers on a common framework that would balance competition with the stability of the markets that cooperation might provide; the state would act as a legitimate player in shaping the "market" in accordance to its development goals (Mammadov 2018).

The primacy of politics in Russian foreign economics, however, proved vulnerable to the political changes both in the region and in Moscow: the Arab uprisings in 2011, regional rivalry concerning Syria and the Gulf, and the fall of oil prices in 2014 were all factors that led to a significant decline in trade exchange, and in all cases business relations resumed only once state guarantees were provided in 2017 (IMF 2018). Moreover, following the crisis in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the US and UE sanctions against Russia deterred MENA companies to engage with Moscow out of fear of retaliation on their assets in North America and Europe. As a counteroffensive, the Kremlin has tried to foster bilateral trade-deals with major state guarantees, both to support domestic companies and to demonstrate its capacity to withstand Western attempts at isolation (Hartwell 2019).

On the whole, Russia still represents a minor economic partner for the Middle East and North African countries. Mainly focused on energy, military technology and food products, as well as because of their preference for bilateral trade-deals and state-owned companies (SOE), Russia and MENA countries do not contribute much to the diversification of their production and consumption patterns.

However, in an energy-rich and conflict-ridden region, where political elites often base their survival on rent-distribution and the widespread use of armed forces to deter and contain social mobilization, Russia has two major assets to play with.

3.2 China's Investments and Provision of Diversification

The core of Chinese engagement with the MENA region revolves around economic business: in particular energy and logistical infrastructures. The 2004 China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) and the 2010 "strategic dialogue" between Beijing and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) would provide the suitable avenues to stabilize energy flows and increase Beijing's investments in the region (Brown 2014, p. 2; Ezzat 2016; Scobell 2016, p. 5). Oil is the major factor impacting on trade exchange: since 1993 China has become a net importer of oil, and in 2014 half of its oil imports came from the Middle East and North Africa, while since 2013 Beijing ranks as the largest importer of oil from the Gulf area (Kazemi & Chen 2014, p. 40). When oil prices declined in the 1990s, Beijing scored trade surplus between 1 and 2 US$ billions with MENA countries whereas, as oil prices increased between 2000 and 2014, China registered trade deficits between 3.4 US$ billions and 2.6 US$ trillions respectively. When oil prices halved in 2015, Beijing returned to a stunning surplus of 29.9 US$ billions which shows the depth of Chinese penetration in MENA markets over the decade (IMF 2018).[4]

Among the main economic partners of China, Saudi Arabia and Iran rank first and second because of the energy trade with Beijing. However, Iran is a major asset because it is an obliged passage for the "New Silk Road" initiative. Saudi Arabia is the main energy and political stakeholder within the GCC, while the United Arab Emirates represents the latter's logistical hub. Egypt is worth for its large consumption market and the logistical gateway of the Suez Canal towards Europe, which had been included within the maritime side of the OBOR project. Similarly, Turkey is valued for the large and expanding consumption market and location to-

[4] Since almost all its energy imports originate from the Gulf area, China has always registered large surpluses with North African partners: from the tiny 183 millions US$ in 1992 to the 14.5 billions in 2015 (IMF 2018).

wards Europe, still along the "New Silk Road". Iraq and Libya are worth mentioning because they proved Chinese capacities in the energy market: in Iraq, Beijing profited from the presence of both US forces and Iranian proxies in the south in order to secure sub-contracts in the energy sector, which led finally Iraq to be included into the OBOR initiative in 2019. Beijing scored mix results in Libya: despite importing more the 10% of its oil and ranking second among foreign suppliers of infrastructural and industrial goods in 2010, China failed to make a massive entry into the core of Libyan production: Chinese oil companies failed to exploit offshore fields, and in 2009 former ruler Mu'ammar Qadhafy denied them to purchase the assets of Canadian company to the benefit of the state-owned Libyan National Oil Company (Sotloff 2012; Feng 2015, p. 3).

Since 2001, when China entered the World Trade Organisation, its exports and investments helped stabilizing the balance of payments between the Asian country and the region. Beijing invested heavily in the energy sector through the state-owned Sinopec, Petrochina, Chinese Offshore Overseas Oil Corporation. In 2010, Saudi Arabia was the main recipient of Chinese FDI with 9.19 US$ billions, compared to the 774 millions in the UAE, 715 in Iran, 483 in Iraq, 337 millions in Egypt, 185 in Yemen and 189 millions US$ in Israel (OECD 2010, p. 4).[5] Though most of the FDI to the region still originate from the European Union, the Gulf states and the US, up to 2016 China has invested 29.5 US$ billions in the MENA region, while the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), namely a multilateral bank established in 2015 and largely funded and led by Beijing, has pledged 20 US$ billions in loans, and 106 US$ millions in financial aid to ten MENA countries, namely Egypt, Bahrein, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman, Egypt, Lebanon and Israel (Dusek & Kairouz 2017).

Beijing supplied capital investments in infrastructural projects connected to energy and logistics: in particular, the renewal of maritime ports in the Gulf and the Mediterranean, and railroads connecting the main productive and consumption

[5] Chinese investments in Israel concern high-technology programmes connected to military and civilian security.

centres of the region (Neill 2014). China contributed to increase by one-third ports' activities in Egypt, Algeria, Morocco and Turkey between 2008 and 2014, which would combine with Chinese shares in the ports in Greece and Italy (UnctadStats 2017). In Egypt, China focused on the construction of the Chinese-led Suez Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone (SEZ) in 2009, and the high-speed railway connecting the urban centres of Cairo and Alexandria in 2012. The OBOR project, announced in 2013 would consolidate further the penetration of Chinese products and services in the region, whose stability and development are not just instrumental to trade with Europe but worth for themselves (Scobell 2016, pp. 8-11). In fact, Beijing developed an area-fit approach, which would supposedly combine local resources with their strategic location for global trade: by sub-contracting final productive segments to the area, it hopes exploiting cheap but professional local labour as well as preferential access to regional markets and the EU. MENA governments highly welcomed Chinese investments because they think these would create the much-needed job opportunities (Alessandrini 2012, pp. 3-4). As for economics, the China's Arab Policy Paper of January 2016 adopted the "1+2+3" formula: 'to take energy cooperation as the core, infrastructure construction and trade and investment facilitation as the two wings, and three high and new tech fields of nuclear energy, space satellite and new energy as the three breakthroughs' (PRC 2016).

Last but not least, both ruling elites and public opinions in MENA countries view China as an effective partner for development. During the last two decades ruling elites grew wary of Western pressure to link economic liberalizations to political reforms, which could disrupt existing state-business networks. In parallel, social movements criticized Western powers for supporting those neoliberal and austerity reforms that impacted heavily on popular and middle classes. On the search for new points of reference, China has been depicted as a different model, conjugating a market-based economy with a strong developmentalist state: by retaining the ultimate control over the "commanding heights" of the economy, such system would benefit popular and middle classes, too (Abdel-Malek 2004; Zambelis & Gentry 2008; Degang & Zoubir 2015; Adly 2018). Such views often neglect the

complexity and hardship of Chinese development, but they actually legitimize Beijing as a sovereign, independent power in world economy as well as those MENA elites struggling to retain command over state power and profit-making sources (Onnis 2011; Samarani 2017).

4. Russia and China in MENA Politics: Supporting Stability for Legitimacy

4.1 Russia's Display of Hard Power and Diplomatic Brokerage

Despite all confrontational rhetoric between the US, the EU and Russia, which is reminiscent of imperial and Cold War rivalries, and still proves useful to mobilize domestic constituencies, today's Russian leadership thinks and acts as a great power within an "unstable" world, whose "legitimate" return at the top of hierarchy is first instrumental to domestic development, and second profitable to other rising powers in terms of diversification and defence of sovereignty. As outlined by Evgeniy Primakov in mid-1990s and later on by Foreign Minister Lavrov in 2016 (Lavrov 2016; Milosevich 2019, pp. 31-33), the strategic location and endowments of the Middle East, and the concomitant political fragmentation, provide a major arena where great powers can assert their role: Russia's initiatives in the region are a function of its international prestige and legitimacy which, coupled with the acknowledgment of its own limits, have translated into the exploitation of all opportunities set by political crisis to assert itself as mediator and provider of institutional stability for contested elites (Akl 2019, p. 59; Talbot & Lovotti 2019, pp. 13-17). In the MENA region, such an approach has translated into the defence of existing political orders against transnational, radical or liberal forces; the conquest of profitable market shares in energy and military sectors; the assertion of Russia as a reliable partner against Western interventions (Dannreuther 2012). This was tested in the direct, massive intervention in Syria since 2015, by supporting with military force the official state, its ruling regime and armed forces against any unconstitutional reversal; by engaging with and balancing regional powers through a minimal, common framework for negotiations, like the Astana process in 2017 (RIAC 2017; Alami 2018). With due differences, it moved along similar lines in Egypt as well as

in Libya since 2011 (Akl 2019, pp. 59-63). Despite liberal and Western criticism, the Kremlin substantially achieved its goal of being treated as a major, international power operating in the region (Cherif 2019, p. 26).

Russian elites and society conceive the region as the "Near Abroad" whose development has direct impacts on their own territories: over a quarter of Tsarist Russia, then the Soviet Union and today's Russia is composed of Muslim people, largely Sunni; with the formal exception of the USSR, Moscow has claimed for the "protection" of Orthodox Christianity in the region; after 1991, it has forged strong ties with Jewish citizens of Russian origins in Israel, paving the way to dense bilateral partnerships (Kreutz 2007, pp. 52-53; Vasiliev 2018, p. 11). Such transnational networks provided Russia with multiple channels for influence, but processes like Islamic radicalization quickly spilled over to Russia, as witnessed by the Islamic insurgencies in the Caucasus in the 2000s (Hegghammer 2006; Charap 2014, pp. 187-191). In order to offset criticism against military campaigns, Moscow appealed to Muslim citizens by embedding Islamic authorities within the nationalist discourse, where Islamic principles have their own historical and legitimate role to play in the development of Russia (Dannreuther & March 2010). A major breakthrough in Islamic legitimacy came with the admission of Russia to the Organization of the Islamic Conference with an observer status in 2005, which marked the apex of relations with Saudi Arabia.

The scale and depth of Russian engagement in the region developed along territorial proximity to its borders. The relations between Russia and its two direct neighbours, Turkey and Iran, follow the long history of cooperation and confrontation: geographical and social proximity forged wary partnerships between states that all share imperial legacies, top-down modernizations, and revolutionary experiences. After the end of the Cold War, relations improved on the basis of respect for political sovereignty and of mutual interests on market interdependency (Freedman 2000, p. 2, 4; Akturk 2006; Dannreuther 2014; Frappi 2018), according to the Treaty on Principles of Relations and Principles of Cooperation' signed by Russia and Iran on March 2001. The new pattern of relations endured different, serious crisis. In par-

ticular, the war in Syria (2011–2019) showed how a major conflict prompted cooperation with Iran and confrontation with Turkey, and yet it has neither developed into a full-fledged Russian-Iranian alliance, nor a full-fledged armed conflict between Russia and Turkey. In all cases, bilateral cooperation deepened as long as their relations with the US and the EU worsened: this reminds to how the Kremlin has moved in and gained results with those regimes at odds with Western partners as well as, from a MENA perspective, how Russia has often being held valuable as a counter-force to balance Western powers (RIAC 2017; Akl 2019).

Moving south to the Arab world, Russia's current posture is rooted in the Soviet pragmatic realism which was born out of the disillusionment towards the Arab nationalist regimes since the early 1970s: this meant supporting Non-alignment; diplomatic resolution of conflicts led by international powers and then framed within multilateral fora; securing ties with military leaderships through the export of military technology and training. The withdrawal of the 1990s maintained a minimal presence in those countries with long-standing ties, like Syria, Algeria or, partially, Libya. Since early 2000s, partnership was renewed with Iraq and Egypt, whereas fresh new starts began with the Gulf States. Moscow's regional standing was valued as a viable supplier of advanced military and energy technology, and as a consistent supporter of state legitimacy which, in patrimonial regimes, meant securing the rule of existing elites whatever their political features (Primakov 2009; Vasiliev 2018, p. 363; Akl 2019).

In a relative departure from the Soviet era, when barter or clearing agreements were widely used, today the export of military technology has been conducted on commercial basis and along financial transactions. Especially after Western sanctions and the collapse of oil prices in 2014, the need for hard currency was a major factor for Moscow to increase the export of expensive weaponry abroad, like air-defence systems, aircrafts, tanks and transport vehicles (Borshchevskaya 2017; Hartwell 2019, p. 97). From 1992 to 2015, Algeria ranked first as for purchase of military technology with 8.27 US$ billions, followed at distance by Iran with 3.4 US$ billions, the United Arab Emirates with 1.7 billions, Egypt with 1.65 billions,

Syria with 1.5 billions, Iraq with 1.13 billions and Yemen with 1.18 US$ billions (SIPRI 2017b). However, no deal was struck without a kind of political agreement, as proven by the synchronization between diplomacy and business. For example, all major deals were accompanied by debt-relief negotiations accumulated by MENA with the USSR, as it was the case for the 13.4 US$ billions debt of Syria in 2005, 4.7 US$ billions debt of Algeria in 2006, 12.9 US$ billions debt of Iraq between 2004 and 2008, and eventually 4.5 US$ billions of Libya in 2008 (Cherif 2019, pp. 21-23). Russian exports to Iran increased after signing the cooperation treaty in 2001, and later on, after the Israeli war against Hizballah in Lebanon in 2006; export to Baghdad increased following the US-led invasion of Iraq, where Iraqi military still opted for some Russian equipment. Since 2008, then, new deals were struck with MENA governments out of fear for the US "Pivot to Asia" or, after 2011, frustration against Western responses to the Arab Uprisings and the war in Syria (Dodge & Hokayem 2014). In this sense, military export represents the nexus between the economics and the international relations of Russia (Borshchevskaya 2017; Connolly & Sendstad, 2017; Hartwell 2019, p. 94).

If continuities between late USSR and current Russia's posture in the Middle East are easy to detect, there are also major differences. For example, once the Cold War was over, the massive flow of Russian Jews to Israel allowed Russia to re-establish relations with Israel, whose rupture was a major obstacle for the Soviet Middle East policy. Either out of conviction or effective capacities Russia has abstained so far from promoting any universal patterns for development, which let Moscow overcome previous suspicion by conservative elites against the official socialist internationalism of the USSR (Dannreuther 2012, p. 557; Teti 2015; Lovotti & Tafuro Ambrosetti 2019). In an effort to complement its "hard power" in the region, Moscow has also appealed to a broader, conservative public by conveying an image of muscular masculinity, benevolent patriarchy and strong connection between national and religious identities: this would distance Russia from the "moral decay of the West" caused by liberalism, and set Moscow in tune with nationalist, conservative forces in the region, both secular and religious-oriented (Zvjagel'skaja

2016, p. 75). However, once engaged directly in Syria, Libya and Iraq after the Arab Uprisings of 2011, Moscow began to clarify its preference for certain institutional settings: namely, a strong central government that would concentrate the decision-making process into one single, legitimate authority; such leadership, either a presidential republic or monarchy, would preside over fragmented societies through the provision of state services and patronage, and would represent the unique, legitimate interlocutor for foreign partners. In the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings in 2011, such institutional preference was valued also for containing "open institutional democracy, collective action and civil society" (Akl 2019, p. 58). That means opposing Islamist as well as pro-Western, liberal forces, which is a major common ground between the Kremlin and ruling elites in MENA. Such a preference would not depart much from those hold by the Soviet Union since the late 1970s (Kreutz 2007, p. 149; Kalinovsky & Radchenko 2011). However, given the complexity of social fabrics in the area as well as the disruption of state institutions by fiscal crisis and armed conflicts, Moscow has also been arguing for robust local autonomy: by preventing secession or exhausting guerrillas, decentralization would give a stake to those sub-state forces that retain effective control over territories and would co-opt them into the new state-building process (Harb & Atallah 2015, pp. 229-234; Sputnik International 2016). The recognition of sub-national forces as legitimate actors represents quite of a novelty for Russian policy in the region and if the primacy of the central state and territorial integrity are fundamental principles for the Kremlin, the domestic articulation of the state can be negotiated case by case.[6]

4.2 China's Diplomacy through Investments

Despite being a major economic actor in the Middle East and North Africa, the People's Republic of China (PRC) is still a minor in its capacity to intervene in the international politics of the region. While forging partnerships with all MENA countries, Beijing still continues to rely on external forces to guarantee its investments: once the US, more recently Russia.

[6] Interviews with Russian academics and analysts, Moscow, April 2017, February 2019.

Chinese engagement in the region starts with the domestic priorities set by the Chinese Communist Party: namely, economic development and political stability. The respect of sovereignty, non-alignment and developmentalism, namely the basics of postcolonial politics, are the pillars of Chinese relations with the Middle East and North Africa. Yet, far from the militant revolutionary zeal of early, Chinese communists, its growing presence is now framed within the restoration of ancient, profitable interconnections among Chinese, Persian, Islamic and Arab "civilizations" (Shichor 1979; PRC 2016).

Since the 1980s, Chinese politics and diplomacy were to develop trade relations and secure energy flows from the Gulf area; non-interference in domestic politics, neutrality on regional disputes, and support for the political status quo were the guiding principles of Chinese engagement. In exchange, Beijing required support for the "One China Policy", that is the non-recognition of Taiwan's sovereignty (Brown 2014, p. 5-6). Since the 1990s, a new factor connected China to the region: the fight against political Islamic movements, whose transnational connections, according to Beijing, would spark unrest among restive communities in Western China, and hamper the inland trade routes connecting Chinese coasts to Central and Western Asia. Such concern prompted Beijing to converge first with the US on the War on Terror in 2001, then in 2006 with Russia in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization policy against 'terrorism, separatism, extremism', and last in 2014 with both the US and Russia against the Organisation of the Islamic State. The massive hard security measures enforced by Beijing against Muslim Uighur communities since 2018 has attracted considerable concern and criticism among MENA countries, and yet without major consequences.

During the 1980s and the 1990s, China accepted and worked within the security framework brokered by the US in the Middle East, which guaranteed Chinese economic presence without bearing the costs of political or military engagement. Within the uncertainty unleashed by US partial disengagement under the Obama administration, the Arab Uprisings and the struggle for leadership among Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia, Beijing tried to stay neutral as long as possible, and

backed Moscow's efforts to broker region-based, negotiated solutions (Feng 2015, pp. 6-8). The new assertive leadership of President Xi Jinping began advocating for political engagement in the Middle East and North Africa. In December 2015, Beijing established the Middle East Foundation for Peace and Development (MEFPD); in January 2016 it released the "China's Arab policy Paper", which provides the official framework for Chinese partnership under the keywords of "peace" and "development"; in May 2006, Beijing and the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum founded the Middle East Peace Forum (PRC 2016). Yet, the MENA region lays in the "third circle" of Chinese foreign policy, where Beijing abstains from binding treaty alliances, opts for bilateral agreements in economics whereas multilateral fora are used to debate economic development issues (Onnis 2011).

As for arms trade, China is a minor partner for Middle East and North Africa embattled countries. The total amount of Chinese exports to MENA countries from 1950 to 2015 amounts to only 13 billions US$, which is just a percentage of the 121 billions US$ of Russian exports (SIPRI 2017a). Since the 1990s, Iran and Algeria have become steady importers of Chinese military technology. Conversely, China imported military technology, in particular for unmanned-vehicles, from Israel between 1990 and 2001, for a total amount of 350 millions US$ (Zambelis & Gentry 2008, pp. 68-69; SIPRI 2017b). While this angered Washington, Arab states and Iran downplayed the dossier as long as Beijing continued to support Arab stances on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Pang 1997, pp. 35-40).[7]

5. Conclusions

The convergence on general principles between Moscow and Beijing, like the promotion of a hierarchical multipolar world, has being in the making since early 2000s. However, the growing distrust against the United States, whose policies have been conceived both as damaging and aggressive in their neighbourhood of Europe and East Asia, has urged Moscow and Beijing to develop a working part-

[7] The visit by Taiwanese President to Arab countries in 1994 was a largely symbolic, occasional retaliation for Sino-Israeli military partnership.

nership in the area of the Middle East and North Africa, where major world powers have been trying to assert their leadership by way of direct interventions since the late XIX century. As a matter of fact, Moscow and Beijing have converged on some basic principles, such as the primacy of the state institutions as the pillar of political legitimacy and markets, and the containment of political Islamic movements. What they think have been US attempts to disrupt such principles in the MENA region since the 2000s has led Russia and China to upgrade their political convergence into a viable coordination of their strategies: Russia being at the forefront of diplomatic and military interventions on defence of embattled ruling elites, while China promoting state-led, bilateral deals with the same partners.

Differences in the patterns of economic engagement of Russia and China in the region are enormous and stem from their own processes of development. Russia has been specializing in the Middle East and North Africa on the two sectors that drive its international relations since the 2000s, if not actually the 1970s, that is, technology and capabilities for the development of energy and military sectors. The relevance of Russia for the region lays on the fact that such specialization concerns the very core sectors of MENA economics and politics. China has focused in the energy sector but, in order to balance large imports from the MENA region, it has been investing massively on the supply of industrial and infrastructural facilities, too: Beijing has delivered MENA states with transport and port facilities, like railroad and railways networks as well as container ship terminals, to such an extent and speed that any other foreign investors, namely members of the European Union, the US or Russia, ever did so far. Moreover, Beijing is now becoming the first provider of Information Technology in the region, effectively challenging European and US presence in such strategic as well as mass consumption markets. Hence, the extension and diversification of China's economic engagement in the Middle East and North Africa has moved well beyond Russia. Recently, concerns have raised in Moscow about Chinese supplies of advanced military equipment, like drones and surveillance systems, to Egypt and Iraq. Together with Chinese investments in the energy sector, such presence does effectively challenge Russia's core business.

However, any of these issues have led so far to public, official confrontation between the two states. At worst, they have been downplayed by public officials and analysts to matters of normal, business competition.

Last but not least is the impact of Russia and China in the international relations of the MENA region. If their public support for "stability" after the Arab Uprisings in 2011 has meant opting for a conservative status quo, it also contributes to the revision of the international relations of the Middle East and North Africa: that is, the provision of new, additional partnerships beyond the two century-old prominence of Western powers. Though the Russian and the Chinese engagements are yet to provide any major change in international alliances or economic and political development, their stress on the state as the ultimate institution presiding over politics and markets has already had a double impact. First, to dispute the Western-led narratives about the superiority of "free markets" and liberal-democratic orders to provide safety, freedom and justice for all. Second, to re-ignite foreign competition in the Middle East and North Africa along patterns that are reminiscent of the mercantilist and imperial, great power politics of XIX century, whose plurality and fluidity in ideational references was not yet constrained in the more rigid ideologies and geopolitics of the Cold War, or the US "moment" in the 1990s.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Political Economy of the Eurasian Integration

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ABSTRACT

The Eurasian Economic Union, launched in 2015, is often seen with suspicion for ostensible domination by the Kremlin over those former Soviet republics that seek various benefits from reestablishing close links with Russia. Yet the very idea of intergovernmental integration implies that Russian influence can no longer be applied directly but has to be channeled through supranational institutions. In the context of globalization the Eurasian project can also be seen as an attempt to boost economic competitiveness of its members by reorienting the region from inherently unstable resource-based models into more sustainable ones, based on vibrant domestic industries. In practice, however, the EAEU has not yet demonstrated much economically, especially as far as mutual trade and investment are concerned, and after the recent resignation of the Kazakhstan's president Nursultan Nazarbaev as one of its earliest and most influential enthusiasts, there may also be political challenges to the very survival of the project.

KEYWORDS: EAEU; Postsocialism; Regional economic integration

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1. Introduction

When the Soviet Union was disintegrating hardly anyone envisaged that rather soon the region will witness a reverse process that would eventually culminate not just into anything consequential but in an organization modeled at nothing less than the European Union (EU). That is what the proponents of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) tend to enthuse about it, naturally supported by the evolving class of Eurasian bureaucrats. "The legal base of the EAEU […] seeks to incorporate the best global practices, including those of the European Union. There is no other example of such a deep integration", said Victor Khristenko, the chairman of the Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC) board in mid-2015 (Pivovar 2015). The critics, though, typically see in it either another vehicle of Russian hegemony (Dragneva & Wolczuk 2013) or Putin's "response to neoliberal globalization" (Lane & Samokhvalov 2015). Propaganda and ideological biases aside, the Eurasian integration is a reality (see Table 1 for some of its quantitative features), and its meaningful analysis should first seek to uncover its driving forces and assess their current dynamics in order to make well-grounded suppositions about its prospects.

Table 1 - EAEU key figures, 2018.

Indicator	**Armenia**	**Belarus**	**Kazakhstan**	**Kyrgyz Rep.**	**Russia**	***EAEU***	***EU***
Population, million	3.0	9.5	18.3	6.3	144.5	*181.6*	*513.2*
GDP, bn current USD	12.4	59.7	170.5	8.1	1657.6	*1908.3*	*18756.1*
GDP at PPP, bn current international dollars	28.3	179.1	476.8	23.1	3817.2	*4524.5*	*21109.3*
GDP per capita at PPP, current int. dollars	10325	19960	27831	3878	27147	*26452*	*43715*
Territory, thsd sq km	29.7	207.6	2724.9	200.0	17098.3	*20060.5*	*4384.3*

Source: World Bank 2019.

Having mentioned the issue of driving forces, it is impediment to specify them, and the notion of political economy appears particularly helpful here. Whereas in general its modern discourse has been preoccupied with various aspects of generating and distributing welfare, i.e. its "powertrain", analyzing driving forces can be constructed in terms of class or its derivatives. However, such views, despite their residual magnetism in the postsocialist context, would necessitate engagement in political debates that properly belong to national power arenas rather than workings of international public organizations (EU being, perhaps, the only viable exception). Since the present article seeks to review the Eurasian integration as a political economy phenomenon of its own significance rather than a mere sum of national political landscapes of its member states, driving forces here would have a somewhat different meaning. On the one hand they can be seen as sectors that stand to benefit or lose from regional economic integration. As the latter is typically about exchange of merchandise rather than anything else, the following analysis will focus on non-service sectors. On the other hand, though, very much like in physics, the ultimate driving force for much of human activity is gravity, and in the context of political economy it arguably means existing economic and social structures and their institutional underpinnings. As such, the Eurasian integration can and should be seen through the prism of current and potential complementarity of its constituent national economic systems. For any project in economic integration, be it a preferential trade agreement or a customs union, is essentially an attempt to bring together different production capacities to develop welfare synergies that would be not only big enough to compensate inevitable economic, political and social tradeoffs, but also provide for a more or less fair distribution of concurrent benefits, i.e. in line with realistic expectations of integrating partners (Mattli 1999; Laursen 2010).

Some economists, particularly those favoring classic Riccardian views, put it more bluntly, that is, integration works out if there is more trade creation than trade diversion (Viner 1950; McKay et al. 2005). As argued in a World Bank analysis of early postsocialist trade developments, "trade creation results in improved wel-

fare … for much the same reasons as increased trade improves a country's welfare … [while] trade diversion is typically (but not necessarily) welfare reducing" as members of an integration bloc must pay more for imports by suppliers from less efficient partners (Michalopolous & Tarr 1997, p. 5). This argument echoes earlier assumptions by Balassa (1974) with regard to European integration that "welfare effects of the increased exchange of consumer goods take largely the form of improvements in the efficiency of exchange […] while horizontal and vertical specialization permits the exploitation of economies of scale" (p. 123). One can expect then that successful integration projects lead to increasing volumes and shares of mutual trade among their members, which should also be true for other key economic variables, notably investment, labor and technology exchange. This idea will stem through the first, economic, part of the article: it will start with scrutiny of mutual trade data for the EAEU, which will then be brought together in a single driving-force framework with data on mutual investment, labor and output across three broad sectors: agriculture, commodities and manufacturing. In response to a popular association of the Eurasian integration with Russia, the second part of the article will focus on geopolitical considerations, notably the argument that the EAEU may be a vehicle of external activism to divert attention from internal issues generated largely by neoliberal ways of postsocialist transformation.

Finally, as important as it may be for the postsocialist discourse, the EAEU is only one among a plethora of multi-national organizations around the world, and its political economy analysis would undoubtedly benefit from the use of a comparative framework. The choice of the European Union here is determined not only by some official allegiances (see Pivovar 2015 above, for example), immense common borders and history, but also by increasingly obvious geopolitical rivalry in the region, most evident in case of Ukraine. Given the importance and unique nature of postsocialist context for the EAEU, as well as its relative "youngness", the choice of EU may not be the optimal one. Nevertheless, it appears worth of a serious consideration as the Eurasian project is already based on substantial Soviet institutional legacy and has succeeded in establishing some new intergovern-

mental structures that at least formally place it in the special category of a regional integration, as most of its other attempts either lack similar ambitions or fail to develop into projects with "substance" (mostly economic).

2. Economic considerations

2.1. Trends in the EAEU mutual trade

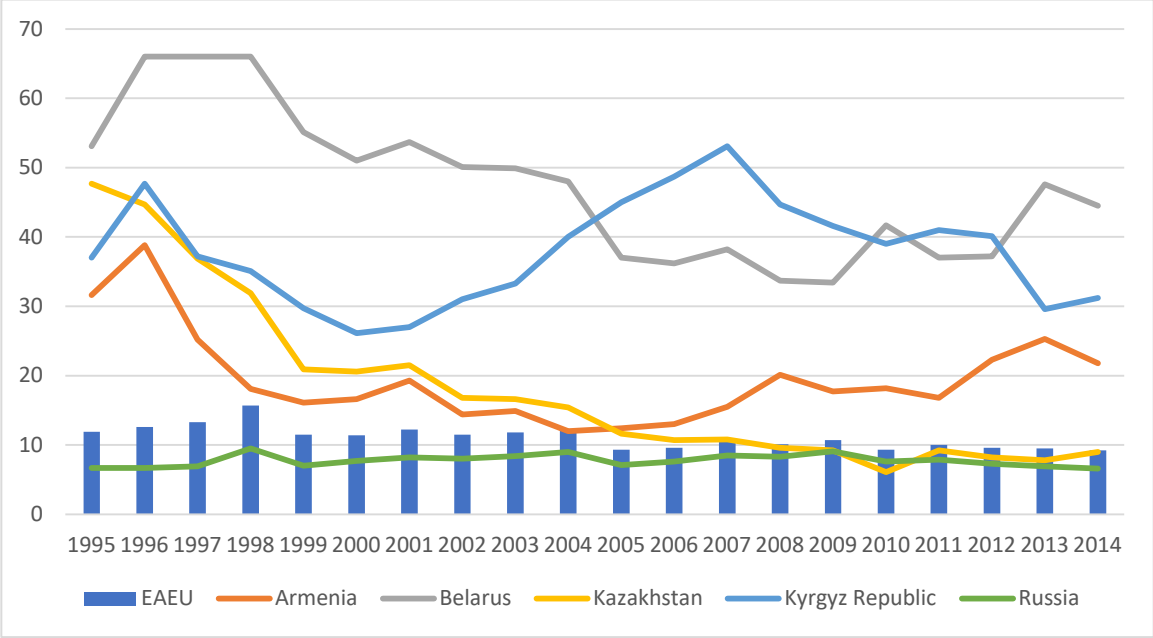
An obvious starting point for investigation of economic aspects of any modern integration project from a political economy perspective relates to a profile of mutual merchandise exchange. Hereto integrating partners are expected to have quite intense trade links, reflected not just in high shares of mutual merchandise exchange, but also in its complimentary and/or diversified nature. Usually, such patterns evolve historically and, geography aside, involve many other commonalities, i.e. cultural, ideological, religious, etc. At the onset of European integration, for instance, the level of mutual trade among its founding members (Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands) stood at about one third of total (for Benelux it was close to a half) and progressing more actively than trade with the outside world (UNDESA 1960, p. 161). These countries "traded chiefly with each other" and mostly "exchanged manufactured goods", also exporting them to "agricultural countries of Europe" while importing "primary products from them" (UNDESA 1949, p. 174). And the strength of historical European trade patterns was best exemplified by Germany: "one of the chief trading partners of the western European and Scandinavian countries" before the World War II, it saw its role greatly diminished in the immediate postwar period (to just a few percentage points in exports of its future European Economic Community partners), yet promptly recovered in the decade preceding the conclusion of the Treaty of Rome in 1957 (UNDESA 1948, p. 176; OECD 1963, p. 35). When the EEC Customs Union was launched in 1968, the share of internal exports was as much as 62.5% for France, 38.3% for Germany, and 55.4% for the Netherlands (OECD 1969a, p. 67; OECD 1969b, p. 67; OECD 1969c, p. 58).

If the Eurasian Union is indeed modeled at its European neighbor, then one would expect a substantial degree of mutual trade at least among its three founding members: Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia. It would be particularly natural given their common Soviet background and very high level of mutual merchandise exchange shortly after the break-up of USSR, i.e. in the early 1990s. Notably, according to Michalopoulos and Tarr (1997), in 1992 the share of intra-regional (i.e. among all 15 ex-Soviet republics) exchange for Belarus stood at 79% on the export side and 76% on the import one, for Kazakhstan it was 96% and 100%, and for Russia 72% and 86% per cent respectively (p. 28).[1] On average for these three countries and for the period between 1992 and 1995 mutual merchandise exports constituted 55.5% of respective total, while imports were 60.8%, well in line with corresponding EU figures if not for its early period, than at least for a similar chronological period (1993-1995): 63.3% for exports and 62.6% for imports (ECs 2003, pp. 18, 20, 92). These were also considerably larger than corresponding shares for the whole of the ex-USSR: 43% and 50% respectively.[2] By the start of the global financial crisis and towards the formation of the EAEU, though, mutual trade among its members has substantially decreased in relative terms. Measured by the cumulative export share (i.e. the ratio of exports of the future EAEU members to themselves against their total exports), it fell from a peak of nearly 16% in 1998 to just over 9% in 2014, the year preceding the formal launch of the EAEU. However, these dynamics accrue mostly to Russia, while for its smaller Eurasian partners the respective decreases were much more substantial (see Figure 1), despite a fivefold absolute increase of mutual trade between the late 1990s and 2007-08, from around 10 to 50 bn USD.

[1] For Kazakhstan the actual import figure is 110.1%, which may be caused by highly volatile macroeconomic conditions in the period that affected the accuracy of trade statistics.

[2] Here one must not fail to note an early deviation of two smallest Eurasian partners, Armenia and Kyrgyz Republic, from trade patterns typical of their bigger peers: already in 1992 their intra-regional exports stood at 58% and imports at just 46%, while the corresponding figures for the whole period were about only 30% on both sides, i.e. twice as low as for their three future Eurasian partners.

Figure 1. Mutual exports in the EAEU, 1995-2014.



Source: UNCTAD 2019.

These regressive mutual trade trends are particularly remarkable given the fact that just as its European counterpart, the Eurasian block is based on a customs union[3] which historically implies rather high and progressive mutual trade trends. Yet by the (re-)launch of the Customs Union of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia, their mutual trade measured by exports stood at just 12% of total external merchandise exchange, which compares quite unfavorably with respective figures for the EU both in 1968 (when the Customs Union of the European Communities "opened for business") and in the concurrent period, as well as with the aforementioned early 1990s data (EC 2018; EEC 2019). Not much has changed a decade later: in 2018 mutual trade in the EAEU stood at just 11%, or nearly six times less than a respective figure for the EU in 2017 (see Table 2).

[3] There were several attempts to create it in the former USSR, and the current one dates to 2009-2010, as the corresponding treaty establishing the Union was signed by presidents of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia on 19 December 2009 in Astana, while its common customs tariff took in the following two years, partially on 1 January 2010 and fully on 1 July 2011 (Vinokurov 2018, p. 6).

Table 2 - Mutual exports in the EAEU, 2009-2018.

Country/bloc	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Armenia	17.7	18.2	16.8	22.3	25.3	21.8	15.6	21.7	24.9	27.1
Belarus	33.4	41.7	37.0	37.2	47.6	44.5	40.9	48.2	46.4	41.3
Kazakhstan	9.2	6.1	9.2	8.2	7.8	9.0	11.1	10.7	10.6	9.7
Kyrgyz Republic	41.6	39.0	41.0	40.1	29.6	31.2	25.4	31.8	30.7	31.2
Russia	9.1	7.6	7.9	7.3	6.9	6.6	7.1	8.9	8.3	8.6
EAEU	10.7	9.3	10.0	9.6	9.5	9.2	9.8	11.9	11.2	10.8
EU	66.9	65.4	64.5	62.8	62.0	63.2	63.2	64.1	64.1	-

Sources: Eurostat 2019, UNCTAD 2019.

Equally if not more problematic looks the composition of mutual merchandise trade in the EAEU: for the large part it is formed by natural resources, whereas in the EU both originally and at present it has been dominated by manufactured goods. Such a domination is important because it reflects transcending nature of value creation in an integration project, whereby in search of better returns on their surplus capital companies from members with more sophisticated economic structures tend to engage in cooperative arrangements with counterparts from economically less sophisticated and/or smaller partner states, particularly neighboring ones. A clear example of such a cross-border arrangement in the EU is its "new industrial core", according to the IMF experts comprising Austria and Germany on the one hand, and Czechia, Hungary, Poland (notably its south-western region of Silesia) and Slovakia on the other hand (IMF 2013). Ultimately, cross-border value creation process can be seen as a "sticking substance" for sustainable integration projects, which otherwise fail to live up to their typically inflated original expectations.

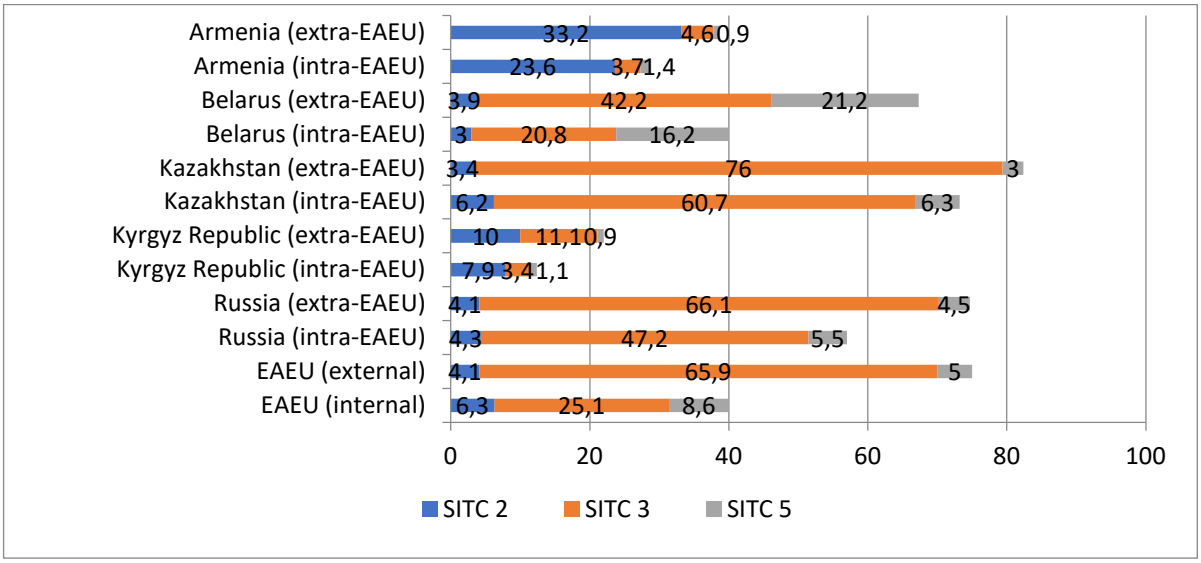
There is certainly not enough of such a "substance" in the EAEU, at least as suggested by the current profile of its mutual trade. Indeed, in 2018 as much as 40% of the latter consisted of commodities, including 25.1% of coal, gas, and oil (SITC 3)[4] (EEC 2019). Manufactured goods (SITC 6, 7, 8) accounted for 43.3% of total mutual merchandise trade among five Eurasian partners, including just 18% of

[4] SITC – Standard International Trade Classification, in its current 4th version was accepted by the United Nations Statistical Commission at its thirty-seventh session in March 2006 (UNSTAT 2008).

machinery and transport equipment (SITC 7). By contrast, in the EU the latter occupied as much as 37.2% of the total mutual merchandise exchange, while the combined share of manufactured exports in 2017 stood at 64.4% (Eurostat 2019). Moreover, among all 28 EU members, the latter stood for less than half of respective mutual totals only in Belgium (49.4%), Lithuania (47.3%), Cyprus (40.1%) and Greece (39.5%), while among 5 EAEU partners they were predominant only in Belarus, at 56.5% in 2018. Yet even this relatively high share compared quite feebly to respective figures of the EU "champions" in mutual trade by manufactures (SITC 6, 7, 8): Czechia (84.6%), Slovakia (84.3%) and Romania (83.3%) in 2017 (Eurostat 2019). Likewise, if one took Germany and Russia as the largest members of their integration blocs, the figures would similarly speak for themselves, especially as far as mutual machinery exports (SITC 7) are concerned. Notably, in 2018 manufactured goods accounted for 39.9% of Russia's intra-EU exports and for 71.1% of Germany's intra-EU ones, while the shares of machinery and transport equipment were 16.8% and 45.5% respectively, or nearly three times in favor of Germany (EEC 2019; Eurostat 2019).

By all means this comparatively and inherently unfavorable for the EAEU trade structure stems foremost from the specifics of Russia's merchandise trade, as it stood for as much as 84 per cent of the block's external trade and 65 per cent of its internal trade in 2018 (EEC 2019). Since the mid-1990s, they have been characterized by increasing commodity exports overshadowed by dwindling shares of manufactures in total exports. As a result, Russia developed a trade profile typical of most developing countries and was often depicted as a modern case of the so-called "Dutch disease" (Welfens & Kauffmann 2005, pp. 10-11; Economist 2011, p. 76). Very similar patterns are true for Kazakhstan and seem to be developing in smaller EAEU members (with an exception of Kyrgyz Republic, where most of external trade is unclassified), at least if one judges by the shares of merchandise groups usually associated with commodities (SITC 2: inedible crude materials; SITC 3: mineral fuels and related materials; SITC 5: chemicals and related products) (see Figure 2).

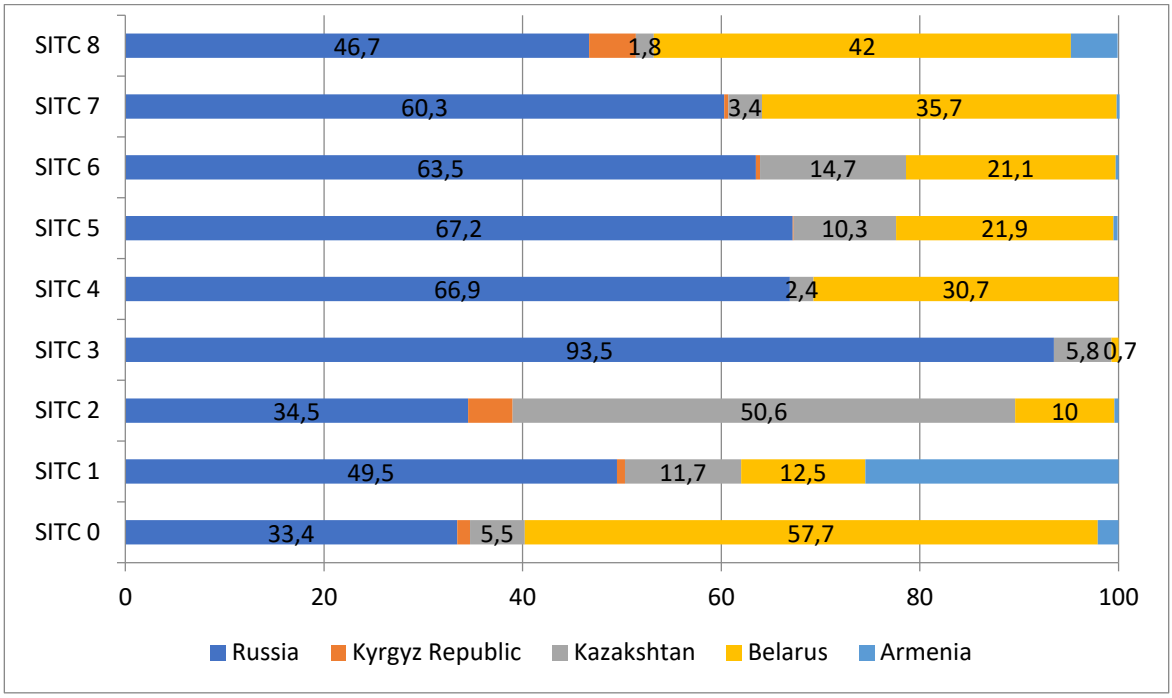
Figure 2. Domination of commodities in the EAEU exports, 2018.



Source: EEC 2019b.

To be sure, in absolute terms Russia's manufactured exports (SITC 7) have dominated the mutual merchandise exchange of the EAEU before and since its creation, yet their share has been comparable to that of Belarus, a much smaller economy (see Table 1). In fact, despite its minor proportions vis-à-vis two other founding members of the EAEU and the Customs Union, in intra-EAEU exports Belarus comes second by most SITC categories, leaving even Russia far behind in mutual food exports (SITC 0). There is also a visible ascending trend in Belarus' shares of mutual trade in the upper SITC categories (5-8) related to manufacturing, reflecting the country's industrial expertise inherited from the Soviet Union and upheld during the transformation (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Domination of Russia in the EAEU mutual exports by SITC categories, 2018.



Source: EEC 2019b.

2.2. Trends in the EAEU mutual investment

The dynamics and sector-specific structure of cross-border investment in the EAEU have generally resembled those of the mutual merchandise exchange in the bloc. Thus, according to the Center of Integration Studies of the Eurasian Development Bank, which between 2011 and 2017 conducted the monitoring[5] of mutual investment in the non-Baltic former Soviet republics, in 2016 (the latest available period) the total stock of mutual FDI in the EAEU stood at 26.7 bn USD, which was less than a similar figure for 2012, further confirming stagnancy of mutual economic intercourse in the region (see Table 3). Just as with mutual trade,

[5] Methodologically, it is based on open-source media analysis of reports on cross-border FDI with further expert verification (EDB 2017). This approach, despite some reservations about its reliability, is similar to the one used by UNCTAD as the ultimate source of internationally comparable FDI data.

Russia was the source of 21 bn USD, or nearly 80% of total mutual FDI in the EAEU, and the recipient of just 5 bn USD, or 19% of the respective total (EDB 2017, p. 42). Yet as far as Russia's outward investment in the EAEU is concerned, it was just a fraction of its total outward FDI stock for the period, and mostly related to commodity sector.

Table 3 - Trends in mutual FDI in the EAEU, 2012-2016.

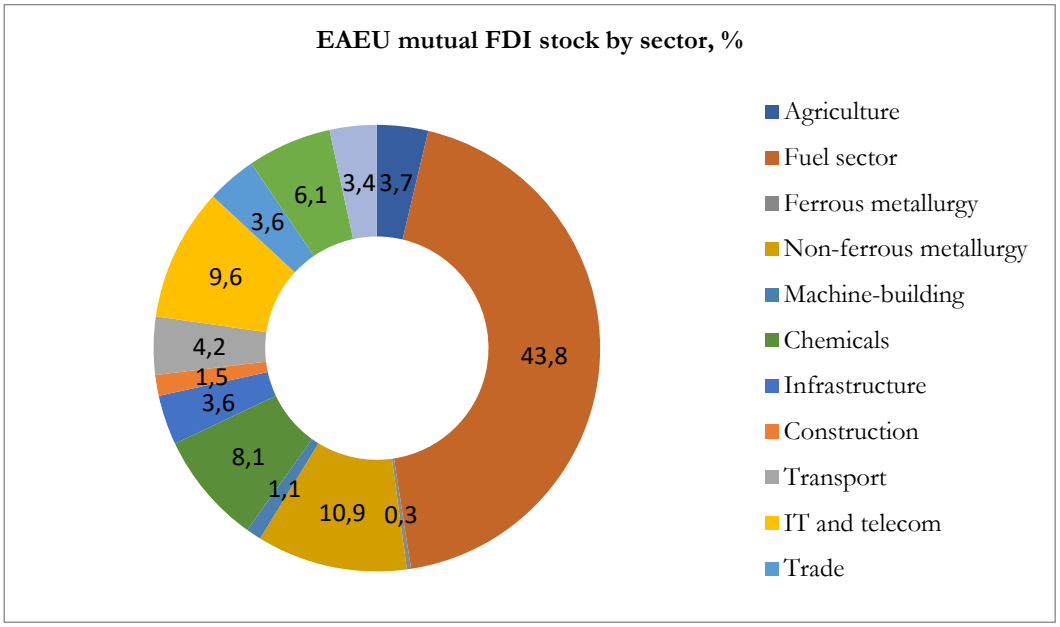
Country	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Inward stocks	*Billions of USD*				
Armenia	1.94	2.21	3.06	3.06	3.44
Belarus	7.55	7.92	8.31	8.36	8.60
Kazakhstan	10.91	9.32	9.12	7.13	8.25
Kyrgyz Republic	1.10	1.14	1.33	1.51	1.47
Russia	4.70	3.35	3.24	3.57	5.01
EAEU total mutual FDI stock	26.20	23.94	25.06	23.63	26.76
Russia's EAEU outward FDI stocks	21.06	20.01	21.06	19.26	21.03
In % of total EAEU mutual FDI stock	80.38	83.58	84.04	81.51	78.59
In % of total outward FDI stock (below)	6.33	5.19	6.39	6.81	6.29
Russia's total outward FDI stock	332.83	385.32	329.82	282.65	334.27
Kazakhstan's total outward FDI stock	22.93	23.37	25.56	26.75	23.47
Total outward FDI stock of Armenia, Belarus and Kyrgyz Republic	0.81	1.02	0.95	1.20	1.34

Sources: EDB 2017, UNCTAD 2019.

It should come as no surprise, then, that in the aggregate intra-EAEU FDI stock the share of machine-building, a manufacturing sector with arguably the highest value-added potential beneficial both for development of the Eurasian partners and internal cohesion of their integration project, stood at miniscule 1.1% in 2016 – the lowest among all 13 sectors identified by the experts from the Eurasian Development Bank. Overall, commodities were responsible for as much as 55% of mutual FDI stock in the block, and nearly two thirds (63%) if taken together with a closely related chemical sector (see Figure 4). The remaining third related to services, mostly telecommunications, finance and retail (these three sectors accounted for one fifth of total intra-EAEU stock). Agriculture accommodated just 3.7%, or one billion USD, which was on par with corresponding figures for such sectors as

utilities, retail and tourism. In turn, the absolute amount of mutual FDI in machine-building for the whole period covered by the EDB monitoring was just 300 million USD, or one fifth of a German carmaker VW investment in just one plant in Russia over 13 months between October 2006 and November 2007 (Busvine 2007).

Figure 4. Structure of mutual FDI in the Eurasian Economic Union, 2016.



Source: EDB 2017.

2.3. The EAEU current and potential driving forces

From a classical political economy perspective, the economic fundamentals of the Eurasian integration specified above are important mostly because of their welfare implications stemming from potential synergies in value creation. They are also instrumental for identifying the scope of implicit support for the EAEU by those who have direct stakes in its progress, i.e. employed in sectors with the highest shares of mutual exchange, both merchandise- and capital-related. For the bloc in general, such sectors are related to commodities, especially hydrocarbons (oil and gas) and metals. On the individual level, though, it is true only for Russia and Kazakhstan, but not for the smaller members. Because of their scale problems the lat-

ter are also likely to have a generally higher interest in the Eurasian integration project as it promises them easier access to the large, vibrant, but foremost geographically, culturally and historically close Russian consumer market.

Bringing together data on trade, investment, employment and output requires a certain extent of discretionary generalization. Notably, given the specifics of the Eurasian mutual exchange, both merchandise and capital, it seems justified to identify three broad economic sectors that may not strictly coincide with criteria of existing classifications, i.e. those by the United Nations. The first such a sector is agriculture, and as far as foreign trade is concerned, it mostly falls into SITC 0, 1 and 4 categories. The next sector covers primary and semi-finished products as found in SITC 2, 3 and 5 categories, and may be referred to as "commodities". Finally, the third sector is manufacturing, represented by SITC 6, 7 and 8 categories.[6] Using statistical data provided by the Eurasian Economic Commission, which claims to adhere to the UN trade statistics standards revised in 2010 (EEC 2018), one can draw a table showing relative importance of the identified three sectors for the EAEU and its individual members in particular (see Table 4).

Table 4 - Relative importance of agriculture, commodities and manufacturing sectors in the EAEU merchandise exchange, 2015/2018.

Bloc/country	**Agriculture (SITC 0, 1, 4)**		**Commodities (SITC 2, 3, 5)**		**Manufacturing (SITC 6, 7, 8)**	
	2015	*2018*	*2015*	*2018*	*2015*	*2018*
Armenia	72.1	51.9	4.6	4.9	19.5	36.1
Belarus	35.0	31.3	13.1	11.6	51.0	56.6
Kazakhstan	8.8	8.3	64.7	55.4	22.3	36.1
Kyrgyz Republic	25.8	18.1	18.0	30.5	52.6	49.0
Russia	8.2	7.7	52.7	49.1	36.2	39.8
EAEU mutual exports	15.3	13.9	43.9	40.3	38.3	43.4
EAEU external exports	*4.2*	*4.9*	*74.5*	*75.3*	*15.1*	*14.5*

Source: EEC 2019b.

[6] One of the obvious shortcomings of this approach is that SITC 6 includes goods that may have closer association with commodities than with manufacturing, e.g. metals.

Although marginally, still for the EAEU as a whole mutual trade in manufactures in 2018 exceeded that in commodities. It also grew by 13% over the first three years of the EAEU existence, and was three times larger than the volume of mutual trade by agriculture products. However, on the country level mutual manufacturing trade was dominant only in Belarus,[7] which also had the lowest share of commodities in the EAEU merchandise exchange, and the second largest share of agriculture products. Commodities were predominant in the EAEU-bound exports of Kazakhstan and Russia, which also had roughly similar shares of agriculture and manufacturing products. In the EAEU external exports the latter stood at just 15% in 2018, implying that the bloc's internal trade has been much more progressive than its external one.

Table 5 - Relative importance of agriculture, commodities and manufacturing sectors in the EAEU mutual investment exchange, 2016.

Bloc/country	Agriculture	Commodities	Manufacturing
	% of respective total FDI stocks		
Armenia	0.1	38.6	1.7
Belarus	0.8	73.0	0.9
Kazakhstan	1.6	75.2	1.6
Kyrgyz Republic	0.0	26.0	0.9
Russia	15.8	47.6	0.5
EAEU	3.7	63.1	1.1
	% of respective non-service FDI stocks		
Armenia	0.2	95.5	4.2
Belarus	1.1	97.7	1.2
Kazakhstan	2.0	95.9	2.0
Kyrgyz Republic	0.0	96.7	3.3
Russia	24.7	74.5	0.8
EAEU	5.4	92.9	1.6

Source: EDB 2017.

[7] A relatively high share of manufacturing in case of Kyrgyz Republic should be viewed with caution as on average 45% of this country's merchandise exports between 2015 and 2018 were unclassified (see p. 9).

According to the data from the latest available monitoring report on mutual FDI in the Commonwealth of Independent States by the Center of Integration Studies of the Eurasian Development Bank (EDB 2017), there are no grounds for a similar assessment of mutual FDI stocks in the EAEU. Notably, the share of commodities in the latter stood at as high as 93% if services are excluded from total stocks, while manufacturing took a mere 1.6%. The absolute domination of commodities here is not affected even with the inclusion of services in the estimate of the EAEU mutual FDI stocks (see Table 5).

However, when it comes to employment either on aggregate or national levels, the role of commodities in the EAEU is insignificant. According to the relevant data from the statistical database of the International Labor Organization (ILO), labor markets of all Eurasian partners are dominated by services (ILO 2019). When they are excluded, agriculture comes on top in three out of five members – Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyz Republic, while in Belarus and Russia it is manufacturing that plays a leading role. Commodities are relatively more important for non-service employment in Kazakhstan and Russia, but even in these two countries their share in registered employment lags far behind that of manufacturing, especially in Russia. It hovers around a few percentage points in other three members, well in line with arguments about low employment potential of this sector and hence its political economy impact on regional economic integration. For the EAEU as a whole, commodities provided just 1.9 million jobs in the ILO-reported total labor force of 87 million in 2017, or just 2% (9% of the non-service total of 20.5 million). In the same period manufacturing jobs totaled 11.7 million, or more than six times more, taking the highest share in the non-service employment with 57% of the respective total, followed by agriculture with 7 million jobs and one third in this total (see Table 6).

Table 6 - Relative importance of agriculture, commodities and manufacturing sectors in the EAEU employment, 2017.

Bloc/country	Agriculture	Commodities	Manufacturing
	% of respective total labor forces		
Armenia	33.4	0.9	8.2
Belarus	10.7	0.6	18.4
Kazakhstan	15.1	3.4	6.5
Kyrgyz Republic	26.7	0.4	7.6
Russia	5.9	2.2	14.2
EAEU	8.0	2.1	13.4
	% of respective non-service labor forces		
Armenia	79.3	2.1	18.7
Belarus	35.1	1.8	63.1
Kazakhstan	64.6	12.1	23.2
Kyrgyz Republic	76.7	1.1	22.1
Russia	28.8	9.4	61.8
EAEU	34.0	8.9	57.0
		Thousand jobs	
EAEU (total including services - 87293)	6998	1869	11674

Source: ILO 2019.

A political economy profile of the EAEU gets more controversial if key output characteristics are included in the analysis. Notably, commodities do not seem to play dominant roles suggested by their shares in mutual (as well as external) merchandise and investment exchange. Indeed, even for Kazakhstan and Russia their importance in terms of GDP seems relatively minor. Nevertheless, when services are excluded commodity shares become more crystallized, closely resembling the ones observed in mutual merchandise trade profiles both on the EAEU and national levels (see Table 7).

Table 7 - Relative importance of agriculture, commodities and manufacturing sectors in the EAEU output, 2017.

Bloc/country	Agriculture	Commodities*	Manufacturing
		% of respective GDP	
Armenia	16.3	8.4	11.2
Belarus	9.0	5.4	25.6
Kazakhstan	4.7	16.3	11.9
Kyrgyz Republic	13.8	3.5	16.9
Russia	4.5	12.6	13.2
EAEU	4.3	11.5	12.2
		% of respective non-service GDP	
Armenia	45.4	23.4	31.2
Belarus	22.5	13.5	64.0
Kazakhstan	14.3	49.5	36.2
Kyrgyz Republic	40.4	10.2	49.4
Russia	14.9	41.6	43.6
EAEU	15.4	41.1	43.6

Note: refers to mining and utilities which stand undivided in the source
Source: UNCTAD 2019.

In an attempt to summarize the political economy profile of the Eurasian integration project, one can draft a matrix that would juxtapose the findings on mutual merchandise trade and non-service investment with those on non-service employment and output using the tripartite sector approach (see Table 8). On the one hand, a very close observable correlation between mutual trade and non-service output here is an obvious sign of the EAEU relative fundamental strength, reinforced by the leading role of manufacturing, particularly in employment (on the aggregate level, and for Belarus and Russia on the country level). On the other hand, a similarly strong position of commodities in mutual trade and especially investment indicates that EAEU is still struggling to maintain its positive momentum as surplus capital raised through commodity exports of its leading partners is not used for establishing robust regional value chains in agriculture and manufacturing but is instead channeled abroad.

Table 8 - Political economy profile of the EAEU: mutual merchandise trade, mutual FDI stocks, non-service employment and output in agriculture, commodities and manufacturing sectors, 2017.

Bloc/country	Agriculture	Commodities	Manufacturing
	% of respective EAEU total		
Mutual merchandise trade	13.9	40.3	43.4
Non-service mutual FDI stocks	5.4	92.9	1.6
Non-service employment	34.0	8.9	57.0
Non-service output	15.4	41.1	43.6

Source: UNCTAD 2019.

Indeed, the stock of mutual FDI in the EAEU is more than dwarfed by the cumulative external FDI stocks of Kazakhstan and Russia (see Table 4), which, in turn, may be just a tip in the iceberg of money moved out of the region through various channels. For instance, only in the first three years of the EAEU existence net registered private capital outflows from Russia exceeded 100 bn USD, whereas the total of such outflows for the whole period of postsocialist transformation can well be over a trillion (CBR 2018, p. 34). And while the issue of capital flight may be less severe for other Eurasian partners, it may be one of the key reasons for the apparent procrastination with modernization in general and reindustrialization in particular as arguably the key factors of the EAEU macro-competitiveness.

2.4. Postsocialist context and deindustrialization

An inquiry into the economic aspects of the Eurasian integration would be incomplete without mentioning postsocialist transformation that formally started with USSR breakup and has since been equally acute for all partners to the EAEU. From a political economy viewpoint, transformation (also frequently referred to as "transition") essentially amounts to replacing socialism based on collective-centered communist ideology with capitalism based on individual-centered liberal one (Offe 1991). Lacking historical precedents, this process has not occurred as smoothly as might have been initially envisioned by its Western proponents and has arguably not been accomplished even in those postsocialist countries that joined the WTO, EU,

OECD and are considered its showcases. As far as Eurasian partners are concerned, all of them initially adopted mainstream neoliberal prescriptions of liberalization, privatization and restructuring, which brought about immediate and severe public costs but not much, at least in the 1990s, public welfare (Ellman 2000). Consequently, some future EAEU members chose to ditch neoliberalism yet in the mid-1990s (Belarus), while others (Armenia and Kyrgyz Republic) dragged along apparently because it helped them secure foreign funds necessary to keep macroeconomic stability in the face of mounting trade deficit and foreign debt. Arguably, for much of the 1990s and early 2000s Russia has been one of the most ardent and important adepts of neoliberalism in the entire postsocialist world, while Kazakhstan preserved its neoliberal allegiance well into the late 2010s (Aslund 2012). In both cases, though, continued neoliberal practices might have been determined not so much by some sort of elite enlightenment as by hefty natural resources that helped to mitigate substantial social costs of the transformation. Postsocialist options of resource-poor Armenia, Belarus and Kyrgyz Republic were far more restricted due to their much smaller resource endowments, Soviet inheritance (especially industrial, as for example in the case of Belarus), and geography (all three are land-locked, with Armenia and Kyrgyz Republic also located in mountainous terrains sparred of transport infrastructure typical for similar locations, for example, in OECD countries).

Among numerous effects related to the early adoption of neoliberalism by the future Eurasian partners deindustrialization, perhaps, is the one that has had the greatest impact on the unfavorable (from a development perspective) profile of the EAEU mutual merchandise and investment exchange uncovered in sections 2.1 and 2.2. In 2017, the bloc's aggregate manufacturing value added (MVA) measured in constant 2010 international dollars was marginally but still lower than in 1990, whereas in the same period the aggregate MVA of the European Union increased by a half (UNIDO 2019). In both cases the dynamics have arguably been set by those of the largest members: Russia in case of the EAEU, and Germany in case of the EU. Russian manufacturing output halved in the first years of postsocialism,

and failed to recover fully even two decades later, standing at one tenth less in 2017. By contrast, despite its minor decrease in the early 1990s, in the whole specified period Germany's MVA increased by two fifths, which helped to nearly double its lead over Russia compared to 1990 (see Table 9). As far as other EAEU members are concerned, there is a clear divide between Belarus and Kazakhstan on the one hand, and Armenia and Kyrgyz Republic on the other hand. While the former two managed not just to uphold but to significantly increase their manufacturing output, the latter saw it falling by as much as a half. In the EU such a dramatic drop was not experienced even by Greece, where MVA grew by a quarter between 1990 and 2008, having contracted by nearly a third since then, on the background of the debt crisis and ensuing austerity measures imposed by foreign creditors.

Table 9 - Trends in manufacturing value added in EAEU and EU, 1990-2017.

Country/bloc	**1990**	**1995**	**2000**	**2005**	**2010**	**2015**	**2017**	**2017 to 1990**
	Billions of constant 2010 international dollars							*%*
Armenia	2.2	0.4	0.5	0.9	0.9	1.2	1.3	58.2
Belarus	5.0	3.1	5.0	8.7	13.3	13.8	13.8	275.3
Kazakhstan	10.0	7.2	8.7	13.5	16.8	19.4	19.6	197.3
Kyrgyz Republic	1.7	0.4	0.7	0.7	0.8	0.8	0.8	49.6
Russia	238.7	121.6	140.0	187.2	195.0	216.8	217.6	91.2
EAEU	257.5	132.6	154.8	210.9	226.7	252.1	253.1	98.3
EU	1825.8	1860.9	2152.9	2309.5	2344.7	2565.1	2689.1	147.3
Germany	574.6	549.1	608.9	643.3	682.0	775.0	812.0	141.3
Greece	21.2	20.3	22.9	26.6	21.7	18.6	18.4	86.8

Source: UNIDO 2019.

Admittedly, postsocialist deindustrialization of the Eurasian partners may be related not only to neoliberal ways of their transformation, but also to structural aspects of the inherited Soviet industrial sector and its general lack of competitiveness on open global markets. Nevertheless, Soviet industry was not unique in lack of global competitiveness, and perhaps no less competitive than China's state-owned industrial enterprises during the 1980s, yet it did face unique challenges of adapting not only to mountainous technological changes of the period, driven by

automatization and IT, but also to the collapse of existing economic ties, a stream of new regulations, and fierce competition resulting from ideologically-motivated radical liberalization (neoliberal "shock therapy"). Coupled by similarly radical transformation of property relations (privatization) and exodus of most talented professionals (either abroad or into emerging private sector), these multiple challenges proved detrimental for much of the postsocialist industry, in particular its most knowledge-intensive sectors such as electronics and machine-building, consistently forming the bulk of OECD exports in SITC 7 category of their trade statistics.

3. Geopolitical aspects

The geopolitical background of the Eurasian project is important due to the increasingly globalized nature of contemporary international relations in general and highly politicized global public perceptions of Russia and its external policies in particular. Even among experts, particularly in the West, the Eurasian integration tends to be closely associated with Russia, which is understandable yet rather unhelpful from an academic perspective. Indeed, the EAEU may be dominated[8] by Kremlin in all realms, yet in the modern history there has been no precedent of a power arrangement where Russia would be presented on at least formally equal terms with its neighbors, and in this respect the EAEU is an obvious breakthrough for the regional politics (Libman 2017).

However, as the analysis in the previous section should have demonstrated, the bloc is still to become a similar breakthrough for regional economics. Indeed, on the aggregate level it has so far failed to achieve visible advances not just in mutual merchandise trade, a cornerstone of any successful integration project, but also in other forms of economic exchange, notably foreign direct investment. This

[8] Domination here is understood foremost in economic terms scrutinized in the preceding section and does not necessarily equal to the notion of "hegemony" favored in some Russia-focused traits of contemporary political science literature. Nevertheless, it is this economic domination which arguably has the greatest impact on the nature and style of decision-making related to the functioning of the EAEU. Notably, since Russia's external economic standing is mostly shaped in "corporate hydrocarbon logic", it has little if any internal impetus for streamlining EAEU regulation of internal trade. This may be a key factor behind reportedly slow progress in removing numerous barriers to internal trade despite the establishment of a special task force within the Eurasian Economic Commission as early as in March 2016 (EEC 2019a).

is especially clear if one compares the EAEU with its western neighbor and counterpart, the European Union. Despite numerous internal and external challenges, including those determined by enlargement and globalization, the latter has not only managed to uphold high levels of mutual merchandise and capital exchange, but also their predominantly industrial nature, critical in the era of internationalized production along global value chains.

By contrast, the EAEU still seems to be "chained" foremost by gas and oil pipelines rather than anything else (Balmaceda 2013, 2017). Given their predominantly Russian roots, it is not surprising that the bloc is frequently considered a modern incarnation of Russian regional "hegemony" (Delcour & Kostanyan 2014; Balakishi 2016). Indeed, developments around Ukraine, as well as Armenia's 2014 last-moment turnaround in negotiations with the EU in favor of the entry into the EAEU, seem to justify such views. They also go well in line with popular anti-Russian sentiments in the West, which received a major boost after the secession of Crimea in 2014 and in the course of protracted hostilities in Syria. Besides, one can uncover an internal dimension in the discussion of Russian neo-imperialistic agenda (if it at all exists): by taking an increasingly activist foreign policy stance, authorities in Kremlin may seek to divert attention of their electorate from numerous internal problems generated by the country's neoliberal model of postsocialist transformation adopted in the early 1990s under Boris Yeltsin and uphold largely unchanged by his successor Vladimir Putin.

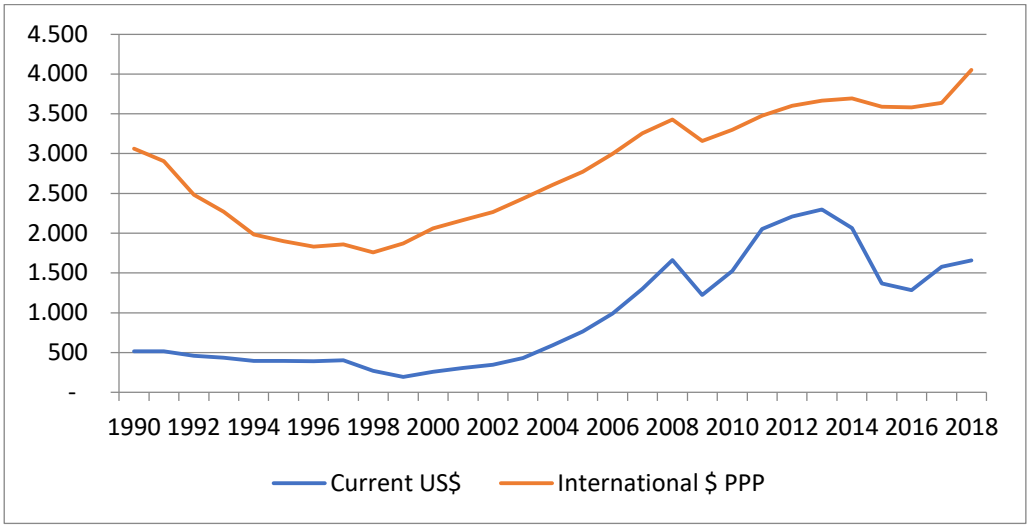
Such problems range from ageing and crippling infrastructure, particularly in remote areas, to unequal distribution of national wealth, epitomized by the phenomenon of Russian oligarchy. Essentially, they were determined by radical property reforms in the form of mass privatization that saw much of public wealth going into frequently unscrupulous private hands that chose to secure it offshore, thus diminishing local fiscal base and consequently resources for modernizing economic and social spheres inherited from the Soviet period (Abalkin & Whalley 1999; Ledyaeva et al. 2013). These new nouveau riches have naturally been interested in locking their advantages, in most cases related to commodities, by blocking any

changes not just to modalities of property relations in the country, but also to any economic measures that could transform its economic structure. As a result, Russia became a typical commodity-dependent economy[9] with untypical geopolitical ambitions highly irritating for the West.

Historically, though, it is not novel, as this nation tended to play a far bigger role first in the European and then in the global politics than what could be justified by its economic and social fortunes. What does seem novel is the role energy combined with market size play in the present regional (as well as global) power dynamics. To be sure, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow seemed to have lost its geopolitical clout, but not for long. Backed by rising commodity prices in the decade preceding the global financial crisis (and following its sovereign default of August 1998), Russia not only recovered much of its output wiped out in the turbulent 1990s, but made significant gains, particularly in current USD terms (see Figure 5). In turn, the global financial crisis might have triggered reinvigoration of practical steps towards post-Soviet reintegration that led to the formal launch of the EAEU in 2015. As usual, though, political (and for Russia mostly geopolitical) necessities have left many economic nuances neglected, which did not take long to recover in numerous trade disputes with smaller integration partners.

[9] According to the UNCTAD, a country is dependent on commodities if they exceed 60% of its merchandise exports, and if their share exceeds 80%, which was the case for every second developing country as recently as in mid-2010s, such dependence is considered strong or extreme (UNCTAD 2017, p. 19). The analysis of the merchandise trade data established strong commodity dependence for all but one member of the EAEU, namely Belarus. Notably, in 2017 share of commodities in total merchandise exports of Armenia stood at 80% (on average 76% since 2009, and 68% since 1995), for Kazakhstan the respective figures were 85%, 87% and 82%, for Kyrgyz Republic were 75%, 66% and 66%, and for Russia were 76%, 77% and 70% (UNCTAD 2019). In turn, commodities made up 46% of Belarus' merchandise exports in 2017 (41% in preceding year), with a similar average share since 2009 and 38% since 1995. It should be noted, however, that in 1995 Belarus' commodity exports constituted just 15% of its total, or nearly four times less than the corresponding average for other EAEU members in the same period. By 2018 this difference shrank to less than two times.

Figure 5. Trajectory of Russia' GDP, 1990-2018.



Source: World Bank 2019.

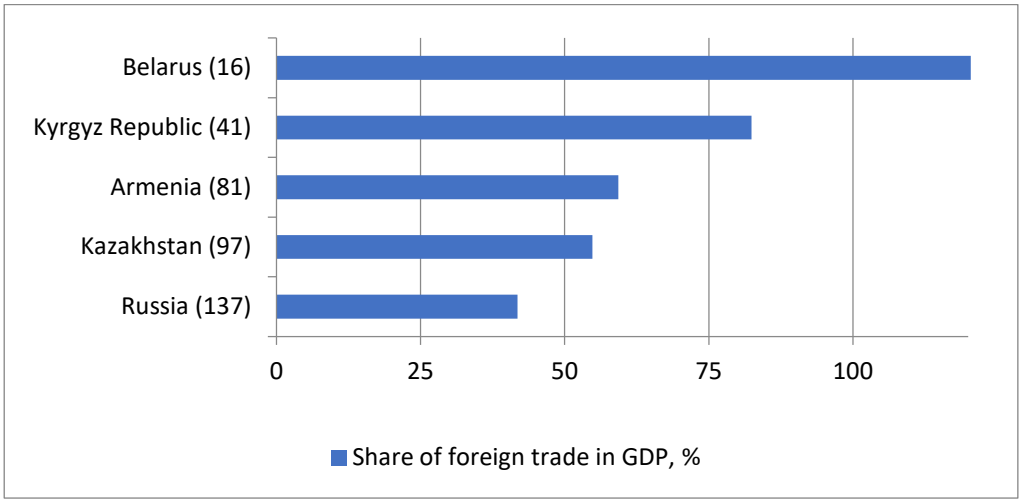
These vicissitudes have become particularly vocal in bilateral relations between Russia and Belarus in 2017-2018, and given the latter's specific geographic position and distinctive political stance towards its southern neighbor Ukraine, quickly gained a geopolitical dimension. Indeed, following a public spat between the leaders of two countries in late 2018 during an EAEU summit in St Petersburg, many observers, including those in the West, contemplated about no less than an imminent takeover of Belarus along the Crimean scenario (Carroll 2018; Ioffe 2019). Such speculations were fueled by the position Moscow took in debating with authorities in Minsk the implications of tax reforms in its oil sector. Notably, some top level Russian officials, notably prime minister Dmitry Medvedev, publicly claimed that any compensation Belarus was seeking for worsening terms of oil trade as a result of the so called "tax maneuver" was dependent on more intense integration along the lines of the Union State Treaty (Preiherman 2019).

To be sure, Belarus has long relied on special terms of energy supplies from its eastern neighbor, quite natural in the context of inherited and later upgraded Soviet-era pipeline network, refining capacity (similar, for instance, to those of Sweden or Turkey), and close political ties with Russia along the early and quite sophisticated bilateral legal framework (BP 2018). Moreover, the country was the first

among its post-Soviet peers to enter into formal agreements with Moscow, having signed a friendship treaty on 21 February 1995, a community treaty on 2 April 1996, a union treaty on 2 April 1997 and a declaration on further unity (25 December 1998) that preceded the aforementioned and still valid Union State Treaty signed on 8 December 1999 in Moscow (Union State 2019).

Historical, political and other considerations aside, these agreements were determined by the extraordinary economic importance of Russia for a newly independent Belarus which reflected itself foremost in foreign trade. Notably, in the early-1990s Russia' share in Belarus' exports was on average over 70%, and in the late-1990s was 60%, or several times higher than, for example, for other EAEU partners: in 1995-1999 similar average figure for Armenia was 25%, Kazakhstan 34%, and Kyrgyz Republic just 22% (UNCTAD 2019). Reorienting so much of merchandise exports to the West was hardly an option as most of them, no matter how feeble in absolute terms, were manufactured goods. Notably, their average share in total exports in the late 1990s was close to 80%, including in exports to Russia, while for Armenia the corresponding figure was 40%, and around 30% for Kazakhstan and Kyrgyz Republic, or several times lower than in the case of Belarus (UNCTAD 2019). And foreign trade played a special role for Belarus, averaging (merchandise exports and imports combined) 109% of its GDP from 1994 to 2017 (World Bank 2019). In 2017, for instance, Belarus ranked 16th globally by this measure, usually referred to as a foreign trade quota. Foreign trade has been important for its Eurasian partners, too, but to a much lesser extent (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Importance of foreign trade for EAEU partners, 2018.



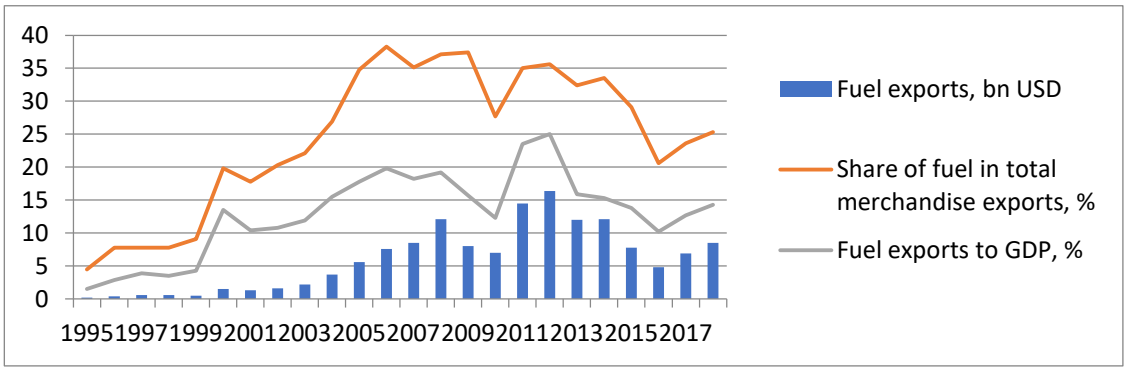
Note: in brackets – global rank among 182 countries and territories with the available data
Source: World Bank 2019.

On the background of the global commodity boom that began with the start of the new millennium, exports of fuel made from Russian crude imported on practically duty-free basis gained a major share in Belarus total merchandise outlays and foreign currency receipts (see Figure 7). As a result, the country has become frequently disdained for allegedly taking advantage from "cheap" Russian energy supplies which were attributed not just to most of its economic growth in recent decades but to the very endurance of president Lukashenka (incumbent since 1994) and his preferred model of postsocialist transformation (IMF 2012, p. 16; Dobrinsky 2016, p. 10; Soldatkin & Makhovsky 2016).

Such speculations, however, downplayed at least two important facts. First, Belarus' fuel export expansion was mirrored by its ballooning trade deficit with Russia. To be sure, since the mid-1990s the former had a positive balance in bilateral merchandise exchange with the latter only once, in 1997, when barter, or goods-for-goods exchange, was still widespread and could thus have a distortive impact. Furthermore, a cumulative deficit of Belarus in trade with Russia for the period with available data (1995-2018) amounted to no less than 125 bn USD, which was very close to the country's cumulative fuel exports in the same period, at 144

bn USD, depriving claims about alleged Belarus' profiteering of at least some empirical substance (UNCTAD 2019). Secondly, energy has been largely excluded from all trade arrangements in the former Soviet space, which is untypical for international trade practices in general and those underpinning the European integration in particular (Mattli 1999). Indeed, the very beginnings of the latter are associated with treaties establishing common markets for coal, steel and atomic energy, while in the Eurasian project creation of common energy markets was delayed until 2025, i.e. by as much as a decade from the official launch of the organization (EEC 2017; Zemskova 2018).

Figure 7. Belarus' fuel exports, 1995-2018.



Source: UNCTAD 2019.

Dragging along with the common energy agenda in the EAEU trade architecture, reportedly on the insistence of its dominant power, cannot raise suspicions about both the latter's underlying intentions and the bloc's overall future. Indeed, its short albeit rather intense history of trade disputes points at latent yet growing concerns about the divergence of driving forces of the Eurasian integration. On the one hand it gets increasingly clear that Russia values it mostly for geopolitical reasons, or as a showcase of its regional gravitational potency. On the other hand, its partners, especially Belarus, seem to be concerned foremost about economic effects, notably market access and energy supplies at present and synergies in modernization efforts, particularly related to industrialization, in the future. For them geopolitical concerns

may have mostly instrumental value. And though their bargaining power vis-à-vis Russia is ultimately restricted by differences in size (see Table 1), these nuances can be considered secondary for resolving more fundamental political economy issues of the Eurasian integration project.

4. Conclusion

Historically projects in regional economic integration have been undertaken in attempt to boost welfare through synergies resulting from trade creation. Reflecting internationalization of global production in recent decades, this traditional rationale has been expanded to include more intense cross-border foreign direct investment exchange. By both these measures the EAEU is yet to deliver: the share of mutual trade has stuck at around 12% of total, while cross-border FDI has been even less significant and actually decreased. Such dynamics were determined foremost by sector specifics of regional economic relations, as well as by the models of postsocialist transformation adopted in the early 1990s, particularly by Russia as the biggest partner and one of the keenest adepts of neoliberalism in that period. Indeed, following rapid deindustrialization along "discipline and encouragement" neoliberal agenda in the spirit of the original "Washington consensus", mutual merchandise and investment exchange in ex-USSR, including among its Eurasian partners, was swiftly dominated by commodities. At the same time, the natural appetite for consumerism, previously restrained by ideology but unleashed with the Soviet demise, was no less swiftly met by imports, helped by eased access to foreign finance eventually settled in foreign debt (Yarashevich 2013, p. 211). The global financial crisis did trigger some changes in these patterns, which were helped by new geopolitical positioning of Russia. One can observe this in relatively higher shares of manufacturing when it comes to mutual merchandise trade, as well as regional employment and output profiles. Yet these trends have not been backed by intense mutual capital exchange, and this may pose one of the most serious political economy challenges for the future of the Eurasian integration.

As argued in 2012 by the authors of the EBRD's flagship "Transition report" dedicated to regional economic integration, the latter "has the potential to bring multiple economic benefits" provided that the following issues are dealt with: non-tariff barriers to trade are lowered, cross-border infrastructure is improved, the use of tariff barriers with other countries is limited, market access to service sectors is liberalized, and institutions at the level of regional performance are strengthened (EBRD 2012, p. 63). There is also an interesting view that regional economic integration nowadays aims at bridging fragmented economic activity along global value chains with trade rules originating more than half a century ago, prior to the onset of the digital era (Baldwin 2011). But meeting these ambitious goals implies foremost the absence of restrictions in trade among partners (free trade zone) and a unified approach to third parties (customs union).

Featuring these prerequisites formally, the EAEU is still lagging behind with their practical implementation, which is testified by stagnant dynamics and rather unsophisticated structural profile of mutual merchandise and investment exchange as well as numerous internal trade disputes. Given the ultimate failure of the previous grand regional unity attempt under Moscow-based leadership in the form of USSR, it is clear that the Eurasian project can succeed only if it learns from its own as well as the European experience. Apparently, the most important lesson here would concern rebalancing political and economic considerations: globalization pressures should make the latter not just proclaimed, but the real priority. So far this appeared problematic, but the global financial crisis and ensuing economic and political troubles could and should have provided the necessary impetus for a new approach to common economic and social development in the still evolving institutional framework of the EAEU.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Beyond the 'Win-Win' Rhetoric: Drivers and Limits of the Sino-Russian Partnership in the Arctic

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ABSTRACT

The article seeks to shed light on a peculiar and generally overlooked dimension of China and Russia's increasingly intimate strategic partnership, through the assessment of their allegedly cooperative ties in the Arctic region. Accordingly, the exploration untangles the rationale of Sino-Russian interactions within the ranks of the Arctic Council, the current outlook of their joint efforts in the exploitation of Arctic resources, and the ongoing attempts to shape a shared vision for the infrastructural development of the Northern Sea Route. With the notable exception of energy cooperation in the Russian far north, this case study seems to suggest that the growing embrace between Moscow and Beijing is ultimately rooted in pragmatic, instrumental and largely opportunistic considerations, which stand at odds with the 'win-win' rhetoric endorsed on both sides during high-level summits.

KEYWORDS: China; Russia; Arctic; Cooperation; Partnership.

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1. China-Russia ties under Xi and Putin: a pragmatic partnership in the making?[1]

In 2014, at the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis, there was a general consensus that the confrontation would be quickly solved. However, as soon as the West took into consideration the possibility to introduce sanctions against Moscow, the Russian government started a series of internal consultations in order to evaluate to what extent they would impact the national economy. It appeared immediately clear that similar retaliatory measures could unleash dramatic effects due to the Russian almost total dependence on Western markets in pivotal export sectors, the most prominent being represented by the hydrocarbons industry. The only possibility Moscow had was to turn its attention towards alternative partners: the ideal candidate was identified in the People's Republic of China (PRC), which had already distanced itself from the sanctions regime that was about to be introduced. As a result, in May 2014 the Putin administration launched what has been frequently indicated as the 'Russian eastward pivot', in order to break international isolation by strengthening political and economic relations both with the PRC and other East Asian countries, as potential alternatives to China's growing influence (Mankoff 2015; Korolev 2016a, 2016b). The ill-concealed hope was, in fact, that Beijing could become an important buyer of hydrocarbons, so that Chinese companies would in turn invest in the Russian market and assuage its thirst for foreign capitals, while also contributing to a progressive revamp of Moscow's obsolescent Eurasian infrastructures.

From its point of view, China abstained from any comment regarding the Ukrainian crisis, in accordance with its deep-rooted principle of non-interference: most likely, Beijing welcomed similar developments under a favourable light, glimpsing a chance to satisfy its commercial necessities and, above all, to further distance the Kremlin from Europe. Yet, this backfire between the two actors was

[1] This article reflects the joint outcome of the efforts of both authors. In practice, though, AP wrote the paragraphs 2, 4, and 5, while AF wrote the paragraphs 1 and 3.

seen, almost unanimously, with profound scepticism. Reciprocal mistrust, territorial disputes, historical controversies, and economic disproportions would make any cooperation almost impossible. In spite of such a problematic legacy, however, the reaction of NATO countries in the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis might have convinced Moscow to overcome its reticence in establishing closer relations with the PRC, even in delicate areas such as the provision of advanced military equipment and the drafting of infrastructural projects (Kashin 2016). In a similar fashion, it is also possible to suppose that Moscow has accepted to act as China's 'junior partner' within a growingly asymmetric game, characterized by Beijing's upper hand in having access to Russia's geopolitical backyard for its own strategic purposes. This 'barter' has thus allowed Beijing to access new markets which are extremely abundant in natural resources, as for the cases of Central Asia and the Arctic, in exchange for its mounting role of 'lender of last resort' *vis-à-vis* the Kremlin (Gabuev 2016). Likewise, with the lowering of formal and informal barriers that had been previously imposed on Chinese investments, the aforementioned diplomatic shift away from Europe has spreaded out its effects also on Russia's Arctic policy, whilst paving the way for an increasingly intimate cooperation between the two Eurasian powers.

As it could be expected, the outbreak of the Ukrainian conundrum and the impact of sanctions have led to the cancellation of several cooperative projects in the Arctic formerly arranged between Russian and European companies such as ExxonMobil and British Petroleum, pushing the Kremlin to look for effective alternatives.[2] On top of that, the almost simultaneous drop of oil and gas prices has called into question the viability and future profitability of Moscow's designs in the far north, which are currently pursued by the Russian government in a quite assertive way. Numerous Western countries, for example, have recently voiced their alle-

[2] A clear example of this course was brought about in early 2018 by the cancellation of the joint-venture between Exxon Mobil and the State-run Rosneft, which was originally aimed at the exploration of the Arctic seabed through a shared cumulative investment worth $3.2 billion. For a detailed account, see Krauss (2018).

gations against Russia for the alleged build-up of military forces in its northern territories, both in term of conventional contingents and nuclear capabilities. Informed by its proverbial pragmatism, China has thus reaped the benefits of this window of opportunity to project its State-owned companies at the forefront of significant bilateral initiatives in the Arctic, as epitomized by the joint-venture for the realization of the Yamal gas plant. The Russian side, instead, seems characterized by a much more ambivalent attitude with regards to Beijing's ongoing 'race' to the Arctic, caught between the imperative of rebuffing the economic pressures unleashed by NATO countries and the risk of dilapidating its long-standing primacy in the far north. Similar zigzags, unsurprisingly, have produced important repercussions on the scope and extent of the Sino-Russian convergence in the Arctic, especially in terms of the ability in framing a shared agenda in areas such as institutional, energy, and infrastructural cooperation.

Building upon this puzzling scenario, the present article seeks to provide a preliminary assessment of both Beijing and Moscow's agendas for the far north, in order to untangle the scope, rationale, and degree of coordination displayed by their Arctic strategies, which can be either depicted as a 'win-win relation', or as an episodic, temporary, and overtly rhetorical embrace (Røseth 2019). In such perspective, the scrutiny of the tactical and zero-sum calculations ingrained in the recent strengthening of Sino-Russian relations in the Arctic can shed an additional light on the overall outlook and future direction of Beijing and Moscow's mutual bonds, which have increasingly polarized the scholarly debate on two opposite camps: those who foresee their alleged 'alliance in the making' against the US (Allison 2018), and the proponents of more sceptical views, centred on the idea of Russia and China as 'partners of consequence' (Lo 2008; Duchâtel & Godement 2016; Yu 2016; Wishnick 2017a). Against this backdrop, the case of the Arctic thus stands out as a truly paradigmatic one in the overall and multifarious outlook of Sino-Russian ties, inasmuch as it mirrors a series of key features in the bilateral relation that have been observed also in other 'contested areas' of Moscow's backyard. These encom-

pass the power imbalance between the two actors, their reciprocal sense of deep-rooted distrust, the visible gap between the rhetoric of official meetings and a general lack of tangible breakthroughs in their cooperative initiatives, the different emphasis attached to specific geopolitical domains, and the equally divergent cost-benefit analysis put forward by the two counterparts when considering their investment opportunities in frontier-regions like the far north.

In such a highly lucrative Arctic 'great game', characterized by enormous stakes and competing influences amongst several great powers, Moscow and Beijing are therefore required to forge a strong complementarity of interests and a profound degree of policy coordination, in spite of a series of tangible asymmetries. These entail their different proximity, geopolitical clout, and past interactions with the Arctic region, as well as the divergent emphasis and sense of urgency attached by Chinese and Russian policymakers to the Arctic region, with the former committed to a more business-minded approach and the latter still devoted to portray the colonization of the far north as a 'national cause'. Consequently, in order to uncover the presence (or lack of) prescriptive elements that should be presumably entrenched in the Sino-Russian partnership, the following pages unpack both the Arctic agenda of the two Eurasian giants, and the prospects for convergence or divergence amongst them, though the analysis of three paramount dimensions, namely institutional coordination in regional governance, energy cooperation, and infrastructural development. These three facets of China-Russia ties in the Arctic have been carefully selected with a strong eye on the two countries' official statements and political blueprints for the region, such as Beijing's first-ever Arctic With Paper inked in 2018, which looks at China's active participation in the governance and economic development of Arctic commons as its key 'policy goals' in the far north, while also envisioning the realization of a 'Polar Silk road' between Europe and East Asia (State Council of the PRC 2018). By the same token, the overarching manifesto of the bilateral partnership between the two Eurasian powers contained in the 2015 'Joint Statement on Deepening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of

Coordination and Advocating Win-Win Cooperation' echoes a similar view, by emphasizing the role of institutional, energy, and infrastructural cooperation as key counterchecks to the American influence in China and Russia's geopolitical backyards (Sørensen & Klimenko 2017, p. 1). Accordingly, after having recalled the historical evolution of the Russian and Chinese presence in the Arctic, the focus shifts on the scrutiny of the main drivers and obstacles behind the Sino-Russian cooperation in the far north, both within the ranks of the Arctic Council and in the framework of the joint development of new energy provisions and infrastructural corridors along the 'Northern Sea Route' (NSR). To this end, the subsequent sections provide a careful review and assessment of the existing gap between the ambitious goals put forward in the aforementioned official documents, and the concrete breakthroughs achieved by the China-Russia partnership in the Arctic.

2. Russia's history and ambitions in the Arctic

In Russia, the colonization of the Arctic started to acquire a major geopolitical relevance in the early 1880s with the first official expeditions commissioned by Tsar Nicholas II, and, since then, Russian rulers have invariably felt entitled to exercise a special status over the country's far north. Similar aspirations have been generally motivated in terms of geographical proximity and historical legacies: in fact, more than 20 per cent of Russia's national territory lies beyond the Arctic Circle, and its 3.5 million square kilometres of Arctic landmass are second only to Canada's (Josephson 2014, p. 1). In addition, the far north has been traditionally regarded by a distinctive strain of Russian nationalism as a mythic cradle inhabited by the early Slavs, which 'belongs' to Russia as a promised land full of riches (Honneland 2016, pp. 63-64). In the Soviet era, economic and security considerations began to loom increasingly large over identity motives: accordingly, Moscow kick-started a vast program aimed at modernizing and industrializing its northern regions, such as the Arkhangelsk province, the Kola peninsula, and Karelia. In 1926, the USSR also formalized for the first time its vast territorial claims over the northern territories,

which are still considered as the baseline of Moscow's Arctic policy. The proclamation encompassed all the lands and islands stretching between the Kola Peninsula, the Bering Strait, and the North Pole, as well as the adjacent waters along the Kara, Laptev, and East Siberian Seas.

Similar moves also reflected Stalin's mounting interests towards the enormous commercial potential of a Northern Sea Route (NSR) capable of cutting through the Kara Sea and the Siberian coastline to reach the Pacific Ocean via the Bering Strait. The NSR had been firstly traversed in a single navigation in the summer of 1932 by the Russian icebreaker Sibiriakov, and, during the same decade, Moscow achieved remarkable results also in the field of scientific research and in the extraction of natural resources, as epitomized by the opening of the Vorkuta and Norilsk coal mines in 1931 and 1939, respectively. Another key turning point was reached in 1968 in the field of hydrocarbons exploration, with the discovery of an extremely conspicuous oil deposit near the Samotlor Lake in Western Siberia, which still stands out as Russia's biggest oil field.

At the dawn of the Gorbachev's era (1985–91), Siberia was home to approximately 80 per cent of the USSR's total oil reserves and it also covered 90 per cent of its gas and coal potential, even though the system of state subsidies started to spiral out of control and soon became unsustainable (Reisser 2017, pp. 8-11). The state of economic disarray and the vast austerity measures that characterized the Russian economy in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse, moreover, forced Moscow to further scale-down its financial commitment and development programs devoted to the Arctic. The disappearance of material incentives for local settlers and indigenous industries made the population drain even more acute, and Russia's scientific research was left in shambles for more than a decade. At the turn of the century, the emergence of an unprecedented scramble for the Arctic put a definitive end to the Kremlin's historical primacy over these commons, which were luring the growing interest of regional stakeholders like Canada, Norway, Denmark, and the US. As a result, with Putin's advent the resurgence of Russia's influence in

the far north became a relevant political issue in the national discourse. Under the new leadership, Moscow stepped-up its endeavours to re-energize the special relation with the Arctic both from a judicial standpoint and within the ranks of the freshly-formed Arctic Council. In 2001, the Russian Federation submitted a formal claim to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) aimed at demonstrating that two vast underwater features – the Lomonosov Ridge and the Mendeleev Ridge – were natural extensions of its continental shelf, and therefore subject to Russia's exclusive economic rights.

Seeking to provide further evidences to such claims, in 2007 the explorer and member of the Duma Artur Chilingarov spearheaded the re-launch of Russia's submarine expeditions in the far north, in a much-publicized mission that planted a tricolour flag on the seabed of the North Pole. The operation generated harsh criticism among the other Arctic states, which discarded it as mere muscle-flexing. During the following year, the Kremlin drafted a revised normative framework in the hydrocarbons sector that allowed the government to by-pass the normal bidding process in the distribution of oil and gas licenses, so as to lure key energy players like Gazprom and Lukoil into the Arctic. Moscow's military presence in the Arctic region also underwent a visible revamp, as the Northern Fleet was finally equipped with a new class of nuclear icebreakers, strategic submarines, and improved air assets. In 2014, moreover, Russia established the 'Arctic Strategic Command' and put it on par with the already existing military districts (East, West, South, Centre), while also making provisions for the reactivation of several Arctic bases of the Soviet era. Since then, the number of patrols, military drills, and alleged provocations *vis-à-vis* adjacent states has grown significantly, pushing other claimants to follow suit (Osborn 2017).

On certain occasions, however, Moscow has propended for a cooperative approach with regional stakeholders on a selected range of issues, as exemplified by the settlement reached in 2010 with Norway over the delimitation of their maritime borders in the Barents Sea. In fact, the key driver of Russia's Arctic strategy since its

very resurgence in the early 2000s has been inherently economic in its nature, and largely concentrated around two overarching themes: the exploitation of natural resources and the launch of the northern maritime route, especially in light of the transformations brought about by the melting of the polar ice cap. The first imperative is intimately intertwined with the growing importance assigned to the hydrocarbons sector by the Putin presidency, which has significantly struggled to cope with Western sanctions and plunging oil prices. In this perspective, the Arctic portion of the Russian Federation is expected to provide more than 30 per cent of the country's overall oil production by 2050, thanks also to the recent development of onshore and offshore hydrocarbons plants in the Yamal Peninsula (Alexeeva & Lasserre 2018, p. 271).

In a similar fashion, Russia's recent efforts concerning the NSR have sought to divert a larger share of financial resources towards the modernization of transport and shipping infrastructures in the region, in order to advance its claim to an exclusive jurisdiction along the route and rebuff Washington's official view based on the principle of free navigation. As for energy cooperation, these endeavours have largely relied on the possibility of luring China in as the main financer and user of the northern passage, through the framing of a common vision on the commercialization of the route. In 2017, most notably, an all-time high of 9.74 million tons of goods crossed the NSR, and 11 of the 27 vessels that made it through were heading to (or departed from) a Chinese port (Pezard 2018, pp. 2-6). In parallel, the Putin government has shown a much more rigid and uncompromising attitude in its legal quest for the jurisdiction of the northern passage, through the re-submission to the CLCS of the territorial claims that had been previously rebuffed for a lack of scientific evidences.

3. China's history and ambitions in the Arctic

If compared to Russia, China's interest in the Arctic is undoubtedly more recent: the Beiyang government (1911–1928), in fact, signed the Spitsbergen Treaty

in 1925, engaging in fishing and commercial activities in the Svalbard archipelago, although its involvement remained limited, given the lack of budgetary resources and technical equipment and the greater priority that was reserved to the Antarctic (Conley 2018). In addition, the establishment of the PRC in 1949 and the outbreak of the Korean War the following year brought the country to an almost total international isolation, that hindered any form of cooperation between Chinese and Western scientists in the field of polar research. In the subsequent decades, however, China's interest in the Arctic became manifest through the publication of several reports, which highlighted its strategic location at the intersection of American and Soviet nuclear missiles trajectories, the vastly unexplored mineral resources deposited under the Arctic seabed, the impact of global warming, and also the large abundance of fish (Lasserre et al., pp. 31-33). Despite this growing attention, neither the signing of the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy in 1991 nor the establishment of the Arctic Council in 1996 – two major turning points in the governance of the far north – were reported by major Chinese newspapers. The approach adopted by the PRC's state-owned media was probably a signal that these issues had not entered Beijing's political agenda yet, thus persuading its government to observe under-the-radar Arctic developments. Shortly thereafter, Beijing's scientific agenda in the region became gradually clearer: in 1995, a group of Chinese scientists and journalists travelled to the North Pole to conduct research and, in the following year, the PRC joined the International Arctic Scientific Committee (IASC), a non-governmental organization whose main purpose was to coordinate regional scientific research activities.[3]

At the turn of the millennium China's interest in the Arctic acquired even more significance, giving way to what has been often defined as Beijing's 'great leap' in the region (Brady 2017). In 2004, the PRC built the Arctic Yellow River Station (*Huánghé Zhàn*), operated by the Chinese Arctic and Antarctic Administration, to-

[3] For a more exhaustive analysis of Chinese embryonic scientific actions in the Arctic, see Jakobson's 2010 pioneering piece.

gether with another facility in Svalbard's Ny-Ålesund (Wishnick 2017b, p. 1). As described in the 11th Five-Year Plan (2006-2010), the government also decided to increase the budget allocated to the Arctic, in order to reclaim its role as a 'near Arctic' country (Bertelsen & Gallucci 2016, p. 3). Significantly, as in many other initiatives launched by the PRC in that period, these economic efforts materialized in concomitance with a sharp decline in the spending of several long-standing Arctic players, which were forced to cope with the constraints generated by the global financial crisis. Beijing, on the other side, started to raise its stakes by upgrading the *Xue Long*, its first icebreaking research vessel that was originally built in 1993.[4] The ship has since been on several Arctic and Antarctic expeditions, becoming a symbol for China's scientific interests towards the polar commons (Lanteigne 2014, p. 13). Simultaneously, the Chinese Academy of Science approved its official Arctic research program, further involving the PRC in regional affairs through scientific missions.

Still, Arctic states appeared quite suspicious and hesitant of China's growing interest in the far north, as they believed that Beijing's designs could entail way more than scientific research. As a result, the PRC has tried to elucidate its own position on several occasions in the last few years, in order to reassure those nations about the Chinese willingness to support institutions like the Arctic Council as well as the sovereignty rights and jurisdiction enjoyed by regional states. On top of that, in 2007 the PRC also joined the ranks of the Arctic Council, even though as an *ad hoc* observer. Its application for a permanent observer status, however, was turned down both in 2009 and 2011, due also to the visible recalcitrance of the Russian Federation (Røseth 2017). The green light has finally come in 2013, under the framework of the Council's enlargement to countries such as Japan, South Korea, India and Singapore. Once Beijing was notified its accreditation as a permanent observer, the Foreign Minister spokesman Hong Lei not only reiterated the adherence

[4] The *Xue Long 2*, the first domestically-built Chinese icebreaker, was launched on September 10, 2018.

to the Council's revised criteria for admitting observers, the most sensitive of which is the recognition of Arctic states' sovereignty, sovereign rights and jurisdiction in the region, but also China's utmost respect for the '*values, interests, cultures and tradition of the indigenous people*' (MFA PRC 2013). In the last two Five-Year Plans (2011–2015 and 2016–2020) China has therefore reconfirmed its growing presence along Arctic commons and the need to safeguard an increasingly diversified array of national interests located in the far north, mostly through an active engagement and lobbying in regional fora (Wu 2016). Against this backdrop, the release in January 2018 of China's first-ever formalized strategy for the region – contained in the White Paper *China's Arctic Policy* – has further systematized the country's position on a series of prominent issues, while emphasizing the prospects of 'win-win' cooperation amongst the various stakeholders involved. The long-awaited document, most notably, represents a sort of compendium of two important speeches that had previously clarified the framework of China's Arctic blueprint: vice Foreign Minister Zhang Ming's remarks at the China Country Session of the Third Arctic Circle Assembly in 2015, in which the concept of China as a 'near-Arctic state' was firstly coined, and Xi Jinping's January 2017 speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos, where the President laid out his idea of the 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) as a historic opportunity for Beijing to take a leadership role in world affairs, especially in terms of global economic governance. Concerning the Arctic, the White Paper therefore reflects China's shift away from the traditional, low-profile attitude that paved the way for its acceptance to the Arctic Council in 2013. Furthermore, the strategy clearly emphasizes that the '*Arctic should not be regarded as a demarcated region*', but as one with '*global implications and international impacts*', so as to imply that it is not solely the Arctic states' responsibility to establish rules and norms for the future development of (and access to) regional commons (State Council of the PRC 2018). By the same token, it also stresses that China's increasing involvement in areas such as Arctic research, resource extraction, fishery, cabling, and piping must be

pursued in line with international provisions, by means of a 'win-win' approach capable of benefitting all those involved.

China's freshly-inked White Paper on the Arctic thus reflects the most visible and paradigmatic by-product of Beijing's increasingly complex and diversified regional agenda. The strategy still assigns to scientific research, and especially to climatology, geology and oceanography, a pivotal role in shaping the course of its regional initiatives, due also to the vast implications of climate change. Yet, the document also acknowledges another crucial driver that is increasingly informing the Chinese race to the Arctic, namely energy provisions. This imperative is intimately intertwined with the paramount importance attached by Chinese decision-makers to the consolidation of a stable, variegated, and sustainable network of hydrocarbons supplies, which could potentially foster a condition of energy security and nurture the country's prosperity goals. The mantra of diversification has therefore persuaded the PRC to compete on a truly global scale for energy resources that are held by other states, through the consolidation of old relations, the opening of new ones, and the active exploration of untapped frontiers such as the Arctic that may concur in satisfying its voracious appetite. In this perspective, China cannot turn its eyes away from the far north and its enormous oil and gas potential, covering up to 30 per cent of the world's undiscovered gas deposits and 13 per cent of unexplored oil reserves (Gautier et al. 2009). These resources, however, beyond presenting obvious technical challenges in terms of possible exploration, are largely located in the sovereign territories and continental shelves of Arctic littoral states, leaving the 'newcomers' as the PRC with limited possibilities of direct involvement in extractive activities. Consequently, the inability to pursue a more unilateral energy agenda has further convinced the PRC to assume a friendly and constructive stance with its Arctic counterparts, which has paved the way for the drafting of a host of bilateral mining and energy agreements with countries like Canada, Greenland, the United States, and Russia.

With Moscow, as emphasized in the pages ahead, the most significant breakthrough has been brought about with the inking of the Sino-Russian joint-venture for the realization of the Yamal liquified natural gas (LNG) project in northwest Siberia. Other initiatives, however, have not been as successful as the one in Yamal: in January 2018, for example, the Chinese oil company CNOOC withdrew from what seemed to be a very ambitious oil exploration project in the waters off Iceland, due to a large extent to a revised cost-benefits analysis stemming from plummeting oil and gas prices on global markets (Pelaudeix 2019, p. 3). By the same token, another significant catalyst related to Beijing's Arctic strategy revolves around the development of alternative shipping routes to the ones frequented today by Chinese companies, which largely rely on politically unstable regions like the Middle East and geopolitical bottlenecks such as the Strait of Malacca and the Suez Canal. Accordingly, the PRC has voiced in numerous occasions its interest towards the commercialization of the NSR, especially as a potential complement to its flagship blueprint for Eurasian connectivity centred on the BRI. The prospects of a more intimate cooperation with Russia for a complete overhaul of the logistical and infrastructural potential of the northern passage have become more apparent with the launch of Putin's pivot to Asia, which has sought to extensively court the PRC and its conspicuous FDIs. Still, the Chinese aspiration to play a more active role in the future management of the NSR (for example through a preferential treatment in terms of transit fees) has been met with a certain scepticism by the Kremlin, thus impairing the prospects of a Sino-Russian condominium over the northern passage.

4. Drivers and obstacles to Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic

Overall, the current conformation of Sino-Russian ties in the Arctic can be unpacked and scrutinized by looking at three paramount pillars, which currently sit at the very helm of both Moscow and Beijing's regional agenda. Against this backdrop, a first dimension that must be necessarily taken into account when examining the scope, directions, and rationale of the cooperative efforts put in place by the

two Asian giants in the far north revolves around China and Russia's multilateral agenda in the Arctic Council. In fact, the degree of coordination displayed by the two sides in the most relevant political forum for regional affairs tells a lot about the ultimate nature of their mutual embrace, which can be either depicted as a pragmatic, temporary and instrumental partnership or in terms of a normative one, rooted in a common set of values and win-win solutions (Røseth 2014, pp. 842-844). Secondarily, the ongoing convergence of interests between Moscow and Beijing in the Arctic region needs to be assessed from the energy standpoint, marked by the success-story of the Sino-Russian joint venture in the development of the Yamal natural gas project. In this perspective, China's financial assistance and active involvement in the opening of Yamal has proved absolutely pivotal to circumvent Western sanctions against Russia, while allowing the PRC to raise its standing and know-how as a newcomer in the Arctic 'great game'. Finally, infrastructures are another pivotal domain that will profoundly shape Sino-Russian relations in the foreseeable future. Here, the crux of the matter lies in the ability (and political willingness) of both sides to sketch-out a truly shared vision for Eurasian connectivity, capable of knitting together China's BRI and Moscow's NSR.

4.1. The Arctic Council

Since the very inauguration of the Arctic Council in 1996, the Russian Federation has traditionally showcased a quite conservative approach to regional governance, aimed at safeguarding the special status enjoyed by the eight 'founding fathers' (the US, Russia, Denmark, Canada, Norway, Finland, Sweden, and Iceland) against possible outsiders. For this reason, the Kremlin had long retained a very sceptical position concerning the Council's enlargement to non-Arctic actors such as China and the EU, which was progressively revised in the early 2010s with the onset of Putin's 'pivot to Asia' (Lanteigne 2018, p. 3). Moscow's change of mind, ultimately aimed at stepping-up Sino-Russian ties in the midst of the escalation of tensions with Western countries, has thus allowed the PRC to finally find both a

recognition of its self-proclaimed status as 'near-Arctic' state and a place inside the Arctic Council. Yet, the imperative of acknowledging and even supporting China's growing stance in terms of regional governance has been pursued with a certain reluctance by Russian decision-makers, who still maintain a cautious attitude towards Beijing's diplomatic proactiveness in the Arctic. According to Tom Røseth (2014, p. 845), the re-orientation of Russia's posture in the Arctic Council regarding the Chinese membership has been informed by a set of pragmatic considerations, so that the Kremlin could ultimately have a say in the framing of China's Arctic strategy. By the same token, Moscow's openings have been also linked to a clear request of reassurances to the Chinese side, aimed at assuaging Russian concerns. In particular, the Putin administration has invited in multiple occasions the PRC to reiterate its respect of the larger stakes and special prerogatives assigned to regional coastal states, together with the exclusive jurisdiction exercised by the 'Arctic Eight' over the deliberations and procedures adopted in the Council, and the general provisions provided by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (Sørensen & Klimenko 2017, pp. 37-38).

The PRC has therefore accepted to limit its multilateral standing in the region as a 'norm-taker' of Arctic politics, while also recognising Moscow's deep-rooted role as regional 'norm-maker'. This does not mean, however, that the two governments endorse exactly the same views about the regulatory framework that should guide the Arctic Council in the definition of new rules. In such regard, the 'elephant in the room' resides in China's tacit promotion of freedom of navigation across Arctic waterways, which stands significantly at odds with the Kremlin's official definition of the route as a domestic sea-lane of communication. Still, it must be noted that Beijing's contribution to the ongoing debate on the legal status of the NSR has been quite vague and hesitant, also in light of the controversial interpretation of the Law of the Sea embraced by Chinese authorities in the framework of the South China Sea dispute. On top of that, Beijing's involvement in the Council has also served the purpose of diplomatic diversification, in order to extend the net-

work of regional partnerships well beyond the Russian Federation. Accordingly, the PRC has remarkably elevated the level of its ties especially with Scandinavian countries like Iceland, Finland, and Sweden, seeking to find a more equidistant position between Moscow and the Western bloc (Guschin 2015). All in all, the general trends entailed in the Russian and Chinese postures within the Arctic Council thus suggest an instrumental, episodic, and overtly pragmatic approach to multilateral cooperation between the two sides. Russia, for its part, has come to terms with Beijing's increasing involvement in regional governance, even though the Kremlin still attaches great importance to its traditional model of tight regionalism based on the 'Arctic Eight'. On the other hand, China has reaped the benefits of Putin's eastward pivot to strengthen its diplomatic clout in the far north and voice an interest towards the economic exploitation of the Arctic. Nevertheless, this process has led the PRC to frame a quite independent and autonomous agenda within the Council's ranks, as epitomized by Beijing's non-aligned position on the legal status of the NSR and also in the framework of its growing efforts to reach out to alternative interlocutors.

4.2. Sino-Russian Arctic joint-ventures: the case of Yamal

In spite of the modest results produced in the institutional realm, the Sino-Russian partnership in the Arctic can also enlist few 'success stories', usually concentrated in the sector of energy and natural resources. Among them, the most renowned and publicized revolves around the mega-project aimed at developing the gas reserves located in the Yamal Peninsula, currently worth around $27 billion (Fox 2017). Originally operated by the Russian firm Novatek through a joint venture with the French energy powerhouse Total, in November 2013 the Yamal project came under the spotlight of international media with the inking of a deal that assigned a 20 per cent stake in the enterprise to the Chinese state-owned giant 'China National Petroleum Corporation' (CNPC). The agreement, most notably, represented the first concrete manifestation of Beijing's mounting interest towards

the exploitation of the Arctic's energy potential, and it also included a clause for the provision of 3 million tons of LNG per annum to the PRC over a period of twenty years, which was expected to absorb approximately 18 per cent of the plant's total capacity (Sørensen & Klimenko 2017, p. 32). Then, with the unravelling of the Ukrainian crisis and the launch of several rounds of Western sanctions, Novatek was forced to search once again for a fresh infusion of investments, even at the cost of reducing its stakes in the asset. As a result, during the second half of 2015 the Russian firm finalized two additional deals with its Chinese counterparts, ultimately targeted at erecting a powerful shelter against financial turbulences and plunging gas prices.

In September, a further 9.9 per cent share of the Yamal LNG project was thus sold to the Silk Road Fund for $1.2 billion, so as to allow Novatek to attract funds whilst retaining a 50.1 per cent stake in the joint venture. Less than three months later, the Chinese sovereign fund reciprocated the preferential treatment accorded by its Russian partners during previous negotiations with the disbursement of a 15-years loan worth around $823 million, and, in parallel, the Yamal project was also endowed with a staggering $12.2 billion liquidity injection from the Export-Import Bank of China and China Development Bank (Bierman & Mazneva 2016). According to the estimates of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Beijing has therefore committed to provide up to 60 per cent of the capital required for the realization of the Yamal facilities, which became eventually operational in December 2017 with the loading of the first cargos (Sørensen & Klimenko 2017, p. 33). The plant's opening ceremony was attended by President Putin and the Saudi energy minister, who saluted the arrival of the brand-new ice-breaker tanker 'Christophe de Margerie' in the port of Sabetta. The Russian-made vessel, named after the former CEO of Total who died in Moscow three years before, made rounds once again in international media during the following summer, when it set a new all-time record by completing its delivery route from Norway to South Korea via the NSR in just 19 days. In the meantime, Yamal's extractive activi-

ties have reached their peak ahead of schedule at the end of 2018, thanks also to the realization of a second parallel plant that is expected to project Moscow's share of the global LNG market from 4 to 8 per cent (Tanas et al. 2019).

For all these reasons, it can be actually argued that the Yamal venture stands out as the most successful and effective example of 'win-win' cooperation implemented by Moscow and Beijing in the far north. From the Russian perspective, the influx of Chinese capital has de facto guaranteed the project's survival, while allowing the Kremlin to defy Western sanctions and overcome the recent drop in gas prices. In addition, the output production of the Yamal field has been significantly allocated towards the Asia-Pacific, rather than westward, adding substance to Putin's 'turn to the East' and also contributing to the overall diversification of Russia's hydrocarbons exports. As a result, the already mentioned deal for the provision of gas towards the PRC has been coupled by analogous agreements with countries like India and South Korea, and Japan is also expected to join in the foreseeable future thanks to the ongoing political rapprochement between President Putin and Prime Minister Abe. In this regard, it is worth noticing that according to the Russian energy strategy Moscow may be able to divert 30 per cent of its total LNG exports to East Asia by 2035, with an astounding increase from the current share sitting at 6 per cent (Buchanan 2018). If completed, such a visible reorientation in the geopolitics of Russian energy provisions would further entrench the Kremlin's ongoing divorce from Europe, whilst raising its credentials as a key energy player in the Far East.

Similarly, the successful completion of the Yamal project has embodied a remarkable milestone also in terms of China's presence and ambitions in the region. Well aware of Russia's thirst for fresh investments in its Arctic facilities amidst Western sanctions, the PRC has therefore negotiated a potential participation in the joint-venture from a vantage point, using its powerful financial leverage to secure a wide range of objectives. In fact, in the eyes of Chinese policymakers Yamal is way more than a mere overseas asset capable of further diversifying Beijing's energy in-

take. Equally important, the participation in the project has also allowed China's engineering companies to substantially raise their technical know-how in the extraction industry, while profiting from the large amounts of orders and contracts related to plant's construction. According to the estimates, Chinese shipyards have realized up to 80 per cent of the necessary equipment for Yamal's facilities, and their involvement is expected to grow further in the foreseeable future with the opening of Novatek's third plant on the Gydan Peninsula (Gasper 2018). Yet, the complementarity of interests displayed by the two sides in the implementation of the Yamal field ultimately rests on the ability to convoy large provisions of LNG towards the East Asian markets at competitive prices. To meet this massive challenge, Moscow and Beijing are compelled to frame a shared blueprint for the commercial development and legal management of the NSR, thus overcoming their diverging views on the status of such a revolutionary and ground-breaking maritime route.

4.3. The NSR and China's 'Polar Silk Road'

Notwithstanding the importance of institutional and energy cooperation, the future outlook of Sino-Russian ties in the Arctic region will be likely determined by another prominent issue that has risen to the very top of both Beijing and Moscow's foreign policy agendas, namely infrastructural development. Against this backdrop, the two sides are currently striving to synergize and synchronize their strategies for Eurasian connectivity, which currently encompass the China-sponsored BRI and Russia's twin projects based on the 'Eurasian Economic Union' (EAEU) and the NSR. In this perspective, the recent signing of the agreement for the establishment of a free-trade area between the PRC and the EAEU is certainly a step in the right direction, but the sector that truly holds the premise of reshaping the geography of trade and exchanges between Europe and East Asia revolves around the commercial exploitation of the NSR. Its ground-breaking potential, in particular, stems from the massive breakthroughs in terms of shipping times and voyage costs that the NSR may actually entail. In fact, compared to the traditional

sea-lane of communication via the Suez Canal the northern passage can shorten the distance between major ports in the Atlantic and the Pacific up to 4,600 kilometres, and, during the optimal season, this translates into less fuel consumed and reduced emissions.

After a series of fuzzy and inconclusive remarks, Moscow and Beijing have therefore attempted to blend their visions for the NSR by co-sponsoring the idea of a 'polar Silk Road' (or 'Silk Road on ice'), which should ideally serve as a shared platform for the realization of both China and Russia's infrastructural designs for the Arctic (Eiterjord 2018). First enunciated in 2015 during a bilateral meeting between the two governments, the notion of 'polar Silk Road' has gained additional momentum in the subsequent years thanks to a series of highly emphatical remarks expressed by Xi and Putin, but the grandiose rhetoric utilized on the sidelines of high-level summits has failed to produce concrete progresses. Hence, the current state of the art of Sino-Russian cooperation on the NSR is limited to political declarations, preliminary consultations, and media speculations, often characterized by over-optimistic forecasts on the future potential of the northern passage. Arguably, this impasse is also symptomatic of the diverging sentiments and attitudes that animate the two sides when it comes to the drafting of a truly shared agenda for the infrastructural development of the NSR. The Kremlin, for its part, seems rather conflicted on the pros and cons of opening the doors of the NSR to Chinese stakeholders, especially if this means altering the current status quo on the jurisdiction of the route, whilst Beijing appears quite disappointed with Moscow's negotiation strategy and the scope of its potential concessions.

To a large extent, the dubious and ambivalent attitude displayed by Russian officials *vis-à-vis* their Chinese partners rests on their widely shared belief that the NSR is first and foremost a domestic waterway, stretching for 3500 nautical miles within Russia's Arctic Economic Exclusive Zone (EEZ). As such, the northern passage was formally opened to international traffic only in 2009, when the Kremlin lifted all the residual restrictions inherited from the Soviet era. Yet, the

choice of aligning with the UNCLOS and its provisions concerning the freedom of navigation has been pursued in a very prudent and hesitant fashion, so as to retain a significant control over the commercialization of the NSR. Accordingly, with the Federal Law introduced in 2012 Moscow has sought to dictate much of the rules related to the international exploitation of the northern passage, ranging from the issuing of transit authorizations, insurance requirements, and communication protocols, to the imposition of Russian escorts and auxiliary personnel on any foreign fleet that navigates through the NSR. In 2017, moreover, the Kremlin has further strengthened its legislative tools with a new bill banning the transport of domestic commodities and national resources trough the northern passage by non-Russian ships. Once again, similar moves seems to corroborate the idea that Moscow is still characterized by a zero-sum approach when it comes to the exploitation of the NSR, in what has been defined as a constant 'dilemma' between the priorities of a commercial use of the waterway and the push to its militarization (Sukhankin 2018).

At the same time, however, Moscow's ambition to rekindle the northern passage must be necessarily reconciled with the harsh reality that such a massive overhaul cannot be financially self-sustained. As in the case of energy cooperation, the Putin administration needs Beijing's investments and construction ability to substantially update land and maritime infrastructures in the far north, and, in the same vein, it also welcomes the ongoing ascendance of Chinese companies as main users of the NSR. In fact, the capitals and transit fees provided by Chinese operators – together with the extension of the navigation period caused by global warming – are regarded as quintessential elements in the attempt of boosting the overall volume of cargo traffic along the route to 80 million tons by 2025, as recently pledged by president Putin himself. Yet, regardless of its financial constraints and ongoing diplomatic isolation, the Kremlin seems also eager to safeguard its special prerogatives and historical claims by resisting any potential attempt to sketch-out a joint Sino-Russian condominium over the waterway, which could potentially dilute Moscow's long-standing dominance over the sea-lane. Arguably, this posture stands

at odds with the 'win-win' rhetoric displayed by both sides to showcase the alleged normative elements entailed in their partnership, and Russia's audacious attempts aimed at luring Chinese partners in its Arctic ventures – while maintaining a strong grip over the administration of the northern passage – have ended up by further attenuating Beijing's tepid interest towards the initiative.

In fact, as brilliantly highlighted by the Chinese scholar Yun Sun, a careful scrutiny of Russia's agenda for the future development of the NSR displays very few analogies or common features with the vision endorsed in Beijing, thus revealing once again the transitory and instrumental character of the current convergence between the two leaderships (Sun 2018). In her eyes, the elaborate rhetoric utilized on both sides during political summits has been substantially contradicted by the lack of tangible developments on the ground, due mostly to the divergent interests, conflicting calculations, and largely irreconcilable cost-benefit analysis put forward in Moscow and Beijing. The PRC, most notably, feels entitled to a greater leverage and relative weight in bilateral negotiations over the route, especially when confronted by the Kremlin's deep-rooted reticence in sharing the long-term fruits of such an ambitious enterprise. In a similar fashion, the Chinese leadership is also conscious that its growing involvement in the NSR emerged from a precise request of the counterpart, which was de facto forced to invoke China's financial commitment due to the inability to self-fund the infrastructural revamp of the northern passage. Well aware of the humongous financial costs that the revitalization of Russia's infrastructures and logistical networks along the 'polar Silk Road' may actually entail, Beijing thus expects stronger compensations for its efforts as well as preferential fees dedicated to Chinese shipping companies that navigate the NSR. Hence, the case of the northern passage can be considered as a further example of the key obstacles and shortcomings pertaining to the Sino-Russian partnership that have been observed also in areas like Central Asia and the Russian Far East, as for the power asymmetry between the two actors, their lingering mutual distrust, and the

significant gap between the grandiose rhetoric of high-level summits and the lack of tangible breakthroughs (Stronski & Ng 2018).

On top of that, it should be also pointed out that the distance between the two sides over the terms of bilateral negotiations underscores diverging evaluations about the future prospects and practical feasibility of Putin's designs for the NSR. In fact, if the Kremlin looks at the revamp of the northern passage as a vital imperative to overcome the country's economic decline and kick-start a new era of more sustainable growth, China's approach appears way more pragmatic, disenchanted, and business-minded. In this perspective, Beijing's scepticism regarding the extremely optimistic previsions of Russian officials on the future economic boom of the NSR stems primarily from practical considerations, related both to the state of backwardness of Russia's infrastructural network and to a series of natural constraints embedded in the topography of the region. At the moment, the Russian Federation has only 4 ports in the Arctic that benefit from direct linkages with the national railway, and many of them cannot accommodate large cargos (Sun 2018, p. 5). On top of that, the NSR is also punctuated by shallow straits that prevent the use of big vessels or container ships, and the additional limitations brought about by a navigation season of merely 2-4 months per year further impair the possibility of achieving competitive shipping costs by economies of scale (Pastusiak 2016, pp. 6-7). Accordingly, the growing perception of having the upper hand in bilateral discussions over the issue, the awareness of the gigantic financial commitment that should ideally rest on Chinese shoulders for the modernization of the NSR, and the competing pulls generated by the advancement of the BRI will likely inform Beijing's cautious approach towards the northern passage also in the foreseeable future, as prescribed by the opportunistic, episodic, and overtly rhetorical character of Sino-Russian ties in the Arctic.

5. Concluding remarks

Over the course of the last years, the visible convergence of the external trajectories pursued by China and Russia has pushed numerous scholars to scrutinize the intimate nature of this mutual embrace, which is becoming particularly evident in key geopolitical domains such as Central Asia and the Arctic. The ensuing debate has been animated by those who contend that the Sino-Russian cooperation is ultimately a temporary and pragmatic 'marriage of convenience', and the proponents of substantially opposite arguments, centred on the alleged normative dimension of such a peculiar partnership (Nye 2015; Wishnick 2017a; Røseth 2019). Against this backdrop, the preliminary assessment conducted in the previous pages has analysed three major issues that currently sit at the top of both Beijing and Moscow's agendas for the far north, in order to untangle the scope, rationale, and degree of coordination displayed by their Arctic strategies. These paradigmatic domains encompass institutional cooperation within the ranks of the Arctic council, the joint development of energy and natural resources, as well as the ongoing efforts to frame a truly shared vision for the infrastructural modernization of Eurasian commons. At a first glance, the far north may appear as a perfect scenario for the consolidation of a powerful axis between China and Russia, due to the growing interdependences and apparent complementarities in their economic outlooks. On one hand, the Kremlin's mounting thirst for foreign investments amidst Western sanctions, plunging hydrocarbon prices, and negative growth prospects has in fact persuaded the Putin administration to turn towards the PRC as its paramount economic partner and lender of last resort. On the other, Beijing has sought to barter its financial assistance with Moscow's active support in the field of energy provisions, so as to enhance its diversification efforts and better penetrate resource-rich regions located in Russia's immediate vicinities such as Central Asia and the Arctic.

Yet, a more careful investigation of the history and current conformation of Sino-Russian ties in the Arctic reveals all the constraints and inconsistencies that impair the materialization of this supposed 'win-win relation' and normative part-

nership between the two countries. Unsurprisingly, Moscow's posture on the advent of China as an 'Arctic newcomer' has experienced significant twists and turns, which seem to depict a rather ambivalent and opportunistic mindset. The most remarkable shift, most notably, has come with the unveiling of Putin's 'pivot to the East', pushing the Kremlin to town down its traditional recalcitrance on issues such as China's accession to the Arctic Council. Well aware of the instrumental character subsumed in Russia's recent overtures, the PRC has thus strived to make the most of the weaknesses exhibited by the Kremlin to advance its own interests in the far north, in accordance with a business-minded attitude that stand in contrast with Moscow's sensitivity for security matters and territorial claims over the Arctic commons. As a result, the two countries have formulated grandiose statements about the future outlook of their cooperative ties in the far north that largely failed to produce significant breakthroughs, due also to Russia's reticence in presenting proper compensations for its Chinese partners. By the same token, Moscow has carefully avoided the emergence of security and military spillovers from the ongoing dialogue over the Arctic with the PRC, due to its zero-sum approach in this particular domain. Hence, as brilliantly pointed out by Christopher W. Hsiung and Tom Røseth, the current outlook of Sino-Russian ties in the Arctic can be considered as the epitome of larger trends and features related to their bilateral relations as a whole, which have fueled a mutual convergence in the international arena based on pragmatic considerations (Hsiung & Røseth 2019).

On top of that, the patina of mutual diffidence that is currently jeopardizing the Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic has been also matched by the different degree of urgency and strategic relevance attached by the two sides to this specific region. If in the Russian case the development of Arctic resources is increasingly seen as a vital cause to restore the country's international standing and kick-start an unprecedented era of economic prosperity, Beijing's stance looks much more 'agnostic', inasmuch as it essentially considers the energy and infrastructural exploitation of the far north as a potentially attractive alternative to the already ex-

isting network of providers and supply routes. Accordingly, the three case-studies involved in the analysis have further corroborated the idea that the Sino-Russian embrace in the far north is ultimately forged by transitory contingencies, and largely animated by a mutually opportunistic logic endorsed both in Moscow and Beijing. Among them, the joint-venture for the realization of the Yamal project has emerged as an almost unique example of successful bilateral cooperation, rooted in a tangible complementarity of interests between the various stakeholders.

In this instance, Russia has in fact given up important concessions towards the counterpart, as epitomized by the pivotal role played by Chinese shipyards in the construction of the plant's facilities. Yamal's 'success story', however, has proven uncapable in setting the stage for a more synergic course in other dimensions of Sino-Russian relations. In the multilateral and institutional domain, for example, the various meetings of the Arctic Council have first showcased the Kremlin's half-hearted adhesion to the enlargement process that opened the doors to the PRC, to be then characterized by a visible lack of coordination between the two governments on the legal status of the NSR. The absence of a shared vision on the future evolution of the rules and regulations related to the Arctic commons, in particular, seems to suggest that the normative character of this bilateral partnership is still relatively weak and ultimately dominated to by a desire to challenge the Western-led international system, as opposed to the 'win-win' paradigm that is usually put on display during high-level summits. In a similar fashion, the much-publicized and highly rhetorical proposals of blending Moscow's blueprint for Eurasian connectivity with China's BRI have proved rather unsuccessful. Encumbered by a diverging calculus over the future returns of the NSR, mutual negotiations on the northern passage have thus resorted to a 'wait-and-see' approach that will be hardly reversed in the foreseeable future.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Information as a Source of Pressure: Local Government and Information Management in China

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ABSTRACT

Authoritarian governments commonly control information flow to prevent the exposure of regime-damaging issues and to forestall collective actions against the regime. Authoritarian governments are claimed to enjoy advantages in information control when they possess resources and new technologies. However, these advantages do not necessarily alleviate the pressure of information management faced by authoritarian governments. Using the case of China, this study shows that information management involves not only the central government but also local governments. Local authorities encounter challenges in information management because of the financial pressure of maintaining the information-collection. In addition, they also face difficulties and costs when they act upon the information they have collected.

KEYWORDS: Local Government, Information Management, Pressure, China

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1. Introduction

In December, 2017, John Studworth, a BBC reporter tested the monitoring system in a Chinese city by having his face picture inputted in the system. It took the Chinese authority seven minutes to locate and apprehend him by using the network of CCTV camera and facial recognition technology (Liu and Wang 2017). China has the largest monitoring system in the world, with some 170 million CCTV cameras installed across the country in 2017. The number was expected to increase by 400 million by 2020 (Chen 2018). In addition to the sheer numbers of lookout points, China is harvesting information with a new-found focus on intelligence. The government has worked with facial recognition and AI companies that provide technologies to extract meaningful information such as faces, ages, registration plates and more from collected data.

Thus, although new information and communication technologies (ICTs) are claimed to have empowered the citizens (Diamond 2010), they seem to have empowered the government more significantly because of the government's adaptive capacity and resources (Morozov 2011; Gunisky 2015). The Chinese government has "surmounted, one by one, the technological difficulties of monitoring text messages, emails, blogs and chat sites" (Dou 2017). It has instituted perhaps the most sophisticated system in the world to monitor the people in China. With the assistance of new technologies, the Chinese government is able to both censor information and locate regime critics for discipline (Mackinnon 2011; King et al, 2013; Roberts 2018).

However, the government's resources and new technologies do not always alleviate the pressure it faces in information management. In China, information management involves both the central and local governments. For the sake of monitoring local agents and protecting the credibility of the state media (Lorentzen 2014), the central government has to grant a certain degree of autonomy to the media, allowing it to report certain negative news. Many Chinese people make complaints not about political issues but about issues concerning their daily lives or "low

politics" (Bialer 1980). As such complaints do not constitute direct political challenges to the Party-state, they may be reported by the media, including social media. More importantly, when high-publicity issues remain ignored by the government, the people will blame the government or the political system for their lack of accountability. As local governments are responsible for addressing such "low-politics" issues, they need to effectively manage the information in order to protect their image and performance.

This study suggests that while new technologies have enhanced the government's ability to exercise control over the society, both the central and local governments in China face challenges in information management. The central government needs to balance between information control and information flow. Unlike the central government, local authorities do not have direct control over nationally influential media. They thus face the pressure of managing information because censorship is not always possible. In addition to the financial burden, local governments need to act upon the information it has collected. Mismanagement of information can have political consequences for local officials. Therefore, information can become a sources of pressure for local governments and help enhance their accountability.

2. Political System and Information Management

Autocrats commonly collect information about both power elite and the masses in order to ensure their political survival. In the former Soviet Union, the secret police were established after the Communist Party came to power. The secret police collected information on both officials and regime critics for the leader. They helped Stalin purge a large number of officials who were seen as his threats or rivals especially between 1936 and 1938. The secret police gathered intelligence, purged officials or suspected regime opponents, and instilled fear among the population. The former Soviet Union became "the world's largest-ever police state—with a frightening track record of extreme violence" (Kotkin 2008, 173).

Rule through terror deters regime opponents. Authoritarian regimes that rely on repression create superficial legitimacy or pluralistic ignorance—citizens pretend to accept the political system, thereby creating a popular belief that many others accept or support the rule (Kuran 1991; Havel 1997). The pluralistic ignorance makes it difficult for both the government and regime opponents to assess the (un)popularity of the regime (Kuran 1991). However, information control also creates a problem for the ruler because a repressed population will not voice their true views about the regime. "The more threatened they are by the ruler, the more the subjects will be afraid to speak ill of or to do anything which might conceivably displease him or her" (Wintrobe 1998, 92). As a result, the ruler lacks reliable information on his (un)popularity.

To collect information and develop the economy, authoritarian governments may conditionally tolerate information flow. This tolerance, however, create challenges for both the central and local authorities in the political system. In his study of the former Soviet Union, Seweryn Bialer (1980, 16) distinguishes "high politics" from "low politics." High politics involves the principal political issues of society, the abstract ideas and language of politics, and the decisions and actions of the political leadership. By contrast, low politics pertains to decisions directly affecting citizens' daily lives, community affairs and workplace conditions.

In information management, the central government is more concerned with high-politics issues, whereas local authorities focus on lower-politics ones. According to Bialer (1980, p. 166), a lack of interest and curiosity allowed the Soviet people to remain untouched by high politics, and they mostly participated in low politics. This is not unique to the Soviet Union. In China, partly because of censorship, the citizens are more likely to voice low-politics grievances online (Zheng 2008; Yang 2009). More importantly, such messages can be tolerated by the central government, which creates an issue of information management for local governments.

The Chinese central government has created the Reporting Center for Internet users to provide tips on "unhealthy" information online. Table 1 presents the different types of information received by the center from May 2015 to June 2017. The Center stopped releasing information in light of these categories after June 2017.[1] Among the 61.9 million tips received by the reporting system, those pertaining to pornography account for 57.5 percent. Those related to political issues constitute a significant portion or 18.7 percent. Thus, messages concerning governance or low-politics issues were not the major target of censorship.

Because of government tolerance and the limited cost, it is common for Chinese people who have encountered problems to voice their grievances online. Local governments also have opened online petition systems or online mailboxes to which citizens can submit their demands (Su and Meng 2016). For example, in 2013, the national complaints system began to accept online petitions, a practice which was then adopted nationwide in 2015. From 2013 to 2015, online petitions accounted for 43.6 per cent of all petitions filed in China (Pan 2016). Chinese citizens have also posted messages on government websites, online mailboxes, various online forums, and comment sections of influential news portals. For example, people.com.cn has launched an online forum called "Message Board for Local Leaders" that allow the people to submit questions or complaints to their local leaders. Local governments are also requested to respond to these questions or complaints (People.com 2017).

1 It only releases the total number of "unhealthy" tips now. See http://www.12377.cn/txt/2019-12/04/content_40984607.htm.

Table 1. Distribution of Valid Tips (May 2015 to June 2017)

	Tips (million)	Frequency (%)
Pornography	35.6	57.5
Politics	11.6	18.7
Fraud	4.0	6.5
Violation of Internet users' interests	2.8	4.5
Miscellaneous	7.9	12.8
Total	61.9	100

Source: *Compiled from the Reporting Center website, http://www.12377.cn/node_ 543837.htm.*

Chinese local governments have two primary goals in information management. First, local officials are assigned the responsibility of maintaining local stability, and they must prevent local residents from mobilizing collective actions that threaten local stability (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013). Second, they need to prevent negative reports on their localities from becoming high profile or to contain the influence of exposed issues. Failing to manage negative news has political consequences for local officials (Zhou and Cai forthcoming). Information management constitutes a pressure on the local government because it requires resources to collect information. Local governments also need to adopt appropriate strategies to act upon the information they have collected.

This study aims to explore local governments' management of information in China. In addition to secondary sources, this study is based on the author's fieldwork in two cities in eastern part of China from 2016 to 2017. Seven government officials or government employees involved in information collection or management were interviewed during the fieldwork in the two cities. This study also details another two cases, City C and D in Jiangxi province, based on a secondary source.[2]

2 Information on these two cities was collected from the email package released on a Chinese blog available at Xiaolan.me. Another set of data from the same email package was used by King, Pan and Roberts (2017) in their analysis of the "50-cent army" in China.

3. Local Government and Information Collection

Decentralization in China shifts the responsibility of local governance to local governments. Local officials' failures to deal with local issues can have political consequences. For example, local officials who have failed to handle local governance issues, such as social protests or productions safety, may be disciplined (Cai 2014). Obtaining information on local situation in a timely manner is the precondition for the local government to handle local issues properly and effectively. Chinese local governments have employed both traditional and new methods to collect information.

3.1 Grid-Style Management and Information Collection

Chinese local governments have commonly adopted the so-called grid-style or net management (*wangge hua guanli*) in local communities. Specifically, the government divides the locality under its jurisdiction into a number of small zones, with each zone monitored by a designated person (*wangge yuan*). In one that I visited (i.e., City A), for example, the number of designated people in a township was three times that of the employees of the township government. Most of these designated people in the countryside were village cadres who were paid by the city government for their information-collection activities. Designated people regularly collected and reported information about their zones to the next higher level of authority. Reported issues concerned various aspects of local people's daily lives, including villagers' grievances against local authorities or environmental pollution.[3]

This practice of grid-style management has also been adopted in urban communities. Local governments have allocated financial resources to establish the "grid-style management center" that oversees its branches in urban neighborhoods. In a district of an eastern city visited (i.e., City B), the district grid-style management center was responsible for coordinating the 13 sub-grid-style management centers in the 13 street offices. The 13 sub-centers oversaw 312 work stations located in the

3 Author's interviews in City A, 2016.

residential communities in the district, or 24 stations in each street office on average.

The district center, the 13 sub-centers, and the 312 work stations constituted the network of information collection in this district. The work stations and the sub-centers regularly reported collected information to the district center. The district center and the city center also conducted inspections among the neighborhoods to identify issues and problems. The district center kept the data reported by its subordinates and provided monthly summaries based on the reported information.

Table 2 presents the 23,460 tips on community issues in the district in January 2016 that were divided into two categories: proactively collected ones and passively collected ones. Proactively collected tips were gathered by its grid-management system, whereas passively collected ones were reported by residents. As the table shows, more than 94.4 percent of the tips were proactively collected, whereas a small portion was passively collected. These tips mostly concerned the environment problems and facilities in neighborhoods. An analysis of 11,600 tips shows that 56 percent concerned unauthorized parking or vendors' activities and unattended garbage, and another 20 percent focused on unauthorized construction of outdoor facilities or destruction of facilities. In other words, these tips were all about "low-politics" issues.

Grid management has been widely adopted throughout China. In Guangzhou, the capital city of Guangdong province, the city authority began to introduce the system in 2016 with a plan to hire 12,000 grid administrators, each of whom would be responsible for about 200 families. The number of administrators appeared to be based on the population of registered residents, not the migrants who swelled into big cities. The mayor explained that if an administrator was responsible for overseeing 200 families, s/he would be able to know the residents in his/her zone and obtain basic information about each family (Hornby 2016).

In the places where social stability is perceived to be a severe issue, social control is even more tight. In addition to the adoption of grid-style management,

other measures are also employed. In neighborhoods in Urumqi, the capital city of Xinjiang where riots have occurred, a 100-point scale is used to evaluate residents. Those of Uighur ethnicity are automatically docked 10 points. Being aged between 15 and 55, praying daily, or having a religious education, all resulted in 10 point deductions. Every community committee in the city needed to conduct such assessments. The control culminated in the creation of so-called reeducation camps in recent years (The Associated Press 2019). Not surprisingly, expenditure on public security in Xinjiang in 2017 increased by 50 percent, compared with that of 2016.[4] Since 2016, local authorities there have also adopted the so-called collective monitoring system in which a group of families (e.g., 10 families) are required to spy on one another. Discipline would be applied if these families fail in their duties (Shih 2017). In Lhasa of Tibet where the grid management has also been adopted, the local government credited this system for the calm and order in the city (Hornby 2016).

Table 2. Tips Received by the Local Government in January 2016.

Source	Tips	Frequency (%)
Self-collected:	22,141	94.4
Reported by monitoring staff	11,958	
Reported by residential districts	10,161	
Collected through district inspections	16	
Collected through city inspections	6	
Reported by residents:	1,321	5.6
12345 (hotline)	1,274	
12319 (hotline)	34	
Public complaints	13	
Total	23,462	100.0

Source: *Author's collection, 2016*.

4 For the statistics, see the annual report by the Financial Bureau of Xinjiang (2016-2018). http://www.mof.gov.cn/zhuantihuigu/2018ysbghb/201802/t20180224_2817391.htm; also Feng (2018); France-Presse (2018); Zenz (2018).

3.2 *New Technologies and Information Collection*

With the rise of new social media, Chinese local governments have also adopted new technologies to collect information in multiple ways. One is to assign specialized persons to deal with information matters. In the district in City B, the government designated a person specialized in the management of information matters; this person was also responsible for collecting information about the locality. In addition, the government had recruited about 25 news-collection volunteers who gathered news about their locality from various sources. The volunteers were expected to send reports or news to designated social media accounts of the government, such as QQ or WeChat accounts.[5]

A more important channel of information collection is through Internet companies or news agencies. Chinese local governments commonly outsource information collection to the business or state-owned news agencies that have the technological resources and expertise. Depending on the needs of a local government, the fees charged by Internet companies or news agencies varied. In the district in City B visited, the district government outsourced information collection to a news agency and paid a large amount of money for the service. In return, the news agency provided five types of service, including the monitoring of public opinion, reports on various issues, information analysis, and consultation.

The monitoring of public opinion involved three responsibilities. First, the news agency closely followed over a thousand news media in and outside China, including those located in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Macao, to collect both positive and negative reports on the locality. The media monitored include mainstream Internet websites, newspapers, and televisions. The news agency should conduct an analysis of the amount of news broadcast, the proportion of coverage, the medium of coverage, the regions the news was disseminated to, and the impact of negative coverage. The news agency also formed a team that provided analyses and judgment about important events that attracted public attention. The news agency was also

5 Interviews in City B, 2016.

expected to submit a report to the designated local authorities through email between 4:30 and 5:00 pm every day.

Second, the news agency should review and analyze important events of the previous month and send the reports to designated departments before the 10th of each month. Third, when important and emergent incidents occurred, the news agency should inform the local authority through text messages at the first moment regardless of whether or not it was a holiday. It should also provide analysis of public opinion based on the needs of the district government. When negative reports were detected, the news agency should send the message to the local authority through both emails and phone messages in a timely manner.

The district government also signed an agreement with a telecommunication company to better maintain social stability. The company, which was responsible for the construction of the "smart city" for the government, was expected to help the district government in four areas: the construction of a peaceful and safe city, the construction of cyber governance, the construction of a credit system, and the construction of a civilized city. But what the district government expected most from the company was that the company needed to provide technical assistance to ensure public security. When sudden events occurred, the company would provide ways of transmitting mobile video to the government to better handle the events.[6] It would also help government staff who were collecting information on the site with technical guidance and support. The company would regularly upgrade the existing monitoring equipment for the governments at different levels in the district. The monitoring network in this district would be incorporated into the monitoring system of the city.

6 The district government also had an administrative center where a monitoring system based on a network of video cameras was instituted.

3.3 Problems with Information Collection

Chinese local governments face two challenges in information collection. One is the cost involved in maintaining the information collection system. The other is related to the legitimacy of information collection because certain information concerns citizens' privacy. Chinese local governments have invested a large amount of resources in creating and maintaining the monitoring system, but they varied in terms of their financial capacity. In City A, each grid-management member was paid 400 to 500 yuan per month. But because the township and county governments lacked financial resources, these grid management staff were paid by the city government. As maintaining social stability is the top priority of local governments, this grid-style management system has been widely adopted in the country. But local financial resources affected the number of recruited grid-management staff as well as their pay.[7]

Resource availability also affects local governments' information collection in other ways. Resourceful governments are better able to secure new technologies and allocate resources and manpower for information management. In contrast, resource-deficient ones tended to limit their budget. In City B, another district government was more cost-conscious due to its budget constraint. It outsourced information collection to a private Internet company that charged much less than state news agencies did.[8]

Information collection and social control seem to have created a government-business nexus that has in turn resulted in vest interests that will pressure the government to continue to invest in and maintain the system. For example, state news agencies have made considerable profits by providing information services to state agencies, local governments, and other businesses. The subsidies received by people.com and xinhuanet.com from the government were only a small portion of

7 Talk with government officials, 2016.

8 The propaganda department in this district outsourced information collection to an Internet company who promised to "fulfill the responsibility." This Internet company charged the district government 1.2 million yuan per year, which was lower than that charged by the Xinhua news agency. Interviews, 2016.

their total revenue (Table 3). In 2013, people.com only received 500,000 yuan in subsidy, and xinhuanet.com received 9.8 million yuan (6 percent of its net revenue). Providing information services to customers has become an important source of revenue of these agencies. In 2014, Xinhuanet's income, resulted from information services, increased dramatically- by 81.5 percent-, compared with that of 2013. Intelligent analysis of big data contributes to a large portion of the revenue. Major customers of the big-data service are national state agencies, information management departments, and local state authorities.

The monitoring system thus creates beneficiaries who are reluctant to give up their interests. Some of these beneficiaries can overstate the problems with social control in order to justify their continual efforts of information collection. For example, businesses engaged in the surveillance industry can lobby local governments to keep updating their surveillance system in order to sell their products. The business can also find allies or representatives in the decision-making body to represent their interests.[9] Moreover, because of departmental interests or a lack of coordination, information may not be shared across agencies. As a result, different sectors and agencies have to maintain their own networks of information collection, causing a waste of resources invested in information collection.[10]

9 Talk with a Chinese scholar specialized in surveillance industry in China, 2018.
10 Talk with government officials, China, 2016.

Table 3. Statistics on people.com and xinhuanet.com (100 million yuan)

	2012	2013	2014
People.com			
Business turnover	7.0	10.2	15.8
Advertisement turnover	3.94	5.41	5.72
Net revenue	2.1	2.7	3.3
Government subsidy	0.126	0.005	0.278
Xinhua.com			
Business turnover	3.3	4.6	6.3
Advertisement turnover	1.82	2.9	3.48
Net revenue	1.3	1.6	1.88
Government subsidy	0.133	0.098	0.122

Source: "Xinhua wang IPO huo pi" (The IPO of xinhua.net approved), http://business.sohu.com/20160420/n445212585.shtml, accessed April 20, 2016.

Information collection has created another problem in China—violation of citizens' rights or privacy. For example, in 2017, Chinese authorities in Xinjiang begun collecting extensive biometric data from residents aged 12 to 65 as part of an increasingly advanced state surveillance apparatus. Government notices mandated police officers and cadres to collect and record pictures, fingerprints, blood type, DNA and iris scans in six counties and prefectures through specially-designed mobile apps and a health check-up program offered to all Xinjiang residents (Feng 2017). Nominally, it's part of a fitness program to screen for diseases, target health care, and create electronic health records. China's database already had 54 million profiles by 2017, and the police had a goal of almost doubling its current DNA trove to 100 million records by 2020 (Fan et al, 2017). Collecting such information *per se* is controversial because it violates individuals' privacy.

4. Information Management as a Pressure

Information collection is the first step of information management. The local government also needs to process and act upon the information it has received. The Chinese central and local governments commonly use censorship and discourse manipulation to contain the effect of exposed problems (Han 2015 a; King et al 2017). The central government is better positioned than local governments in information management because it has direct authority over influential media, including social media. As influential social media are limited in number, the central government can guide public opinion by exercising direct control over these few media, in particular WeChat and Sina weibo. For example, the central authority receives copies of the messages posted by WeChat users from Tencent.[11]

Unlike the central government, local governments do not have direct authority over nationally influential media. Thus, censorship is not always possible for local governments, though they can still seek help from central authorities or Internet companies.[12] While local governments are unable to exercise direct control over influential media, they are held accountable for exposed local problems. They thus need to both guide public opinion or to act upon exposed local problems in order to protect their images.

4.1 Guiding Public Opinion

The Chinese government has strongly urged the media to release positive reports instead of negative ones because negative issues tend to damage the image of the government. For example, the Public Opinion Office of people.com released a report presenting Internet users' attitude towards hot issues or news in 2015. Out of the seven issue areas, public security (with a positivity index of 0.23), social conflict (0.38), and anti-corruption (0.44) were the three areas that the public were most critical of. The public were less critical about issues concerning sports, entertain-

11 Talk with former employees of WeChat, China, 2016.
12 Interview with a government official in City A, 2016.

ment, and celebrities (0.76).[13] Table 4 reports the "positivity" index of the 16 high-profile incidents that occurred in 2015. Issues that most likely caused the public's disapproval of the government often involved substantial losses of lives and property.

The attitudes of Internet users toward the parties directly responsible for the tragic events are naturally negative. Accidents that caused great casualties were most widely criticized, whereas incidents involving national pride received positive comments. For example, the most negative incident in 2015 was the fire in Harbin that caused 19 deaths, including deaths five firemen. The second most negative event was the stampede that occurred in Shanghai on the night of December 31, 2014 in which 36 people died. Needless to say, both the central and local governments face great pressure when such incidents occur.

13 The other three are news about firms; news about sports, entertainment, and celebrities; and miscellaneous.

Table 4. Incidents that Attracted Most Public Attention in 2015

Events	Positivity Index
Accidents	
1. The Fire in Harbin	–0.06
2. The Shanghai Stampede	0.16
3. The Sinking of "Oriental Star"	0.21
4. A BMW killed two people and injured one in Nanjing	0.24
5. The Explosion in Tianjin	0.36
Governance	
6. The management of private cars engaging in business	0.16
7. A man was shot in a railway station in Heilongjiang Province	0.20
8. The collapse of the stock market in June	0.44
9. Corruption of Shi Yongxin, the abbot of a Shaolin Temple	0.60
10. Li Keqiang urged ministries to simplify and decentralize administration	0.93
11. The arrest of Ling Jihua	1.02
12. The reform plan for football	1.42
Events of national pride	
13. Awarding of the Nobel Prize to Tu Youyou	0.82
14. The memorial ceremony for the 70th anniversary of the victory of the Anti-Japanese War	0.84
15. Successful bid for the Winter Olympics	1.53
16. Xi Jinping's visit to the United States	1.88

Source: *The Public Office of people.com, "An analysis of 2015 Internet public opinion," see the website http://yuqing.people.com. cn/GB/392071/401685.*

4.1.1 Mobilizing Online Commentators

Both the central and local governments have to censor information or guide public opinion when influential negative events occur. One major method used to guide the public opinion is mobilizing online commentators. There are three types of online commentators in China. One is the so-called "voluntary 50-centers." Self-mobilized Internet users voluntarily lend their support to the regime. As Han (2015 a) finds, these voluntary commentators have employed a range of tactics to defend regime against critics online, including counter labeling, attacks, mocking, and trapping or fishing. These voluntary 50-centers include leftists, nationalists, and patriots, and some of them become voluntary 50-centers because they do not accept the unsubstantiated claims or criticisms of the rightists (Xinhuanet 2008).

A second group of commentators are recruited from outside state agencies and are therefore paid (i.e., 50-centers). These people can be recruited by the propaganda department or by state agencies. Local authorities began to recruit paid commentators in early 2000s (Han 2015 b). These commentators were expected to "proactively raise topics for discussion, guide the people to look at hot issues correctly, and express their demands in a reasonable and legal way" (Southern Metropolis Post 2010).

Some commentators are recruited to work for specific state agencies. In City B, the justice department and a district government made a plan to form a new social media center for legal education and launch a project on "Internet + legal education." The goal of this center was to train a team that would be able to complete the responsibility of legal education. The center was to sign contracts with 20 to 30 people who were familiar with law and new social media, in addition to having writing skills and enthusiasm. The writers would be remunerated for their work. For example, the remuneration for an article with less than 2,000 words was 1,000 yuan, and it was 1,200 yuan for an article with more than 2,000 words. Writers may be further rewarded based on the number of views and "Likes" an article received.[14]

14 Interview in City B, 2016.

A third type of commentators is recruited from within state and public institutions. Compared with the previous two types of commentators, this third one is more manageable. These commentators are recruited from a variety of state or government agencies, such as the propaganda department, the office of civilization, party schools, and agencies involved in cultural work. Many local state agencies have designated persons specialized in the work of information management. These people are familiar with both the Party's propaganda rule and Internet tools, in addition to mastering good writing skills. The authority also encourages other qualified people, including non-state employees, to join this group.

Commentators generally receive training before they start work. In City C in Jianxi Province, the city authority organized training sessions for 185 people from about 85 city state agencies, schools, public firms, and counties in 2014. These people received training in making online comments, managing governance weibo, and dealing with public opinion. Each of the counties had 6 to 10 representatives whose work duties were related to propaganda, news and information, and Internet. In one county, for example, five of the eight people participating in the training sessions worked in agencies related to information management and propaganda.[15]

In City D still in Jiangxi province in 2013, the city authority required each stage agency to designate a leader responsible for online public opinion.[16] In each of the agencies, there should be a designated person responsible for the management of online commentators while serving as a commentator himself. County governments should also form teams of commentators. A commentator might be self-nominated or recommended by his work unit. In principle, there should be a commentator in each public agency with fewer than 20 employers, at least two in an agency with more than 20 employees. In addition, each of the counties should recommend two commentators to the city authority as city online commentators, and

15 "Canjia peixun mingdan" (List of participants of the training session), see https://xiaolan.me/50-cent-party-jxgzzg.html, accessed May 12, 2016.

16 "Guanyu jin yibu jiaqiang wangluo pinglun yuan duiwu jiansh de tongzhi" (Notification on further strengthening the construction of team of online commentators), see https://xiaolan.me/50-cent-party-jxgzzg.html, accessed May 12, 2016.

each city government agency should nominate one to the city authority. A report of a county government stated that 15 people nominated by the county government became city, provincial, and national commentators.[17]

The responsibilities of online commentators include keeping a close eye on the Internet, carrying out online propaganda, making online comments, guiding public opinion online, and actively responding to important events, in particular negative news. They are also expected to make comments and replies and guide the public opinion. Specifically, each of the commentators should publish a regulated number of articles on selected important websites and forums run by the central, provincial, and city authorities, in addition to fulfilling ad hoc responsibilities assigned by the city propaganda department.

4.1.2 Assessing Online Commentators

King et al (2017) suggest that the Chinese regime's strategy is to avoid arguing with skeptics of the party and the government, and to not even discuss controversial issues. But this practice also has to do with how online commentators are assessed. Online commentators are assessed by the number of articles, posts, and replies they post online, and it is not their responsibility to argue with regime critics. Indeed, the primary responsibility of online commentators is to show the presence of regime-supporting messages. Many of these messages are window-dressing ones that may not receive serious attention from Internet users. At the local level, the government generally mobilizes their online commentators to protect local images.

For example, in City D in Jiangxi province, the city propaganda department oversaw online commentators and assigned responsibilities to them each month.[18] The city propaganda department regularly held training sessions, discussion meetings, and conferences for commentators in order to strengthen their abil-

17 "Ruichang shi 2014 nian wangluo anquan he xinxi hua gongzuo zongjie ji 2015 nian gongzuo dasuan" (The 2014 work summary on Internet security and informization and the 2015 work plan of Ruichang city), see https://xiaolan.me/50-cent-party-jxgzzg.html, accessed May 12, 2016.
18 "Jiujiang shi gong'an jiguan wangluo pinglun yuan jixiao kaoping zanxing banfa" (Provisions on the assessment of online commentators of Jiujiang police department), see https://xiaolan.me/50-cent-party-jxgzzg.html, accessed May 12, 2016.

ity and improve their skills. It also made rules to assess the performance of commentators. If a commentator failed to perform his or her responsibilities for two consecutive months or failed three times in one month without justifiable reasons, the propaganda department would notify his or her work unit.

In a 2013 report, the online propaganda office of the city propaganda department listed the assessment of each of the 17 county and district governments. As a whole, the governments had recruited 740 commentators who published 994 articles on influential websites, such as people.com and xinhuanet.com. In a 2014 work report issued by a county authority in this city, it was indicated that its 106 commentators who were coordinated through a WeChat forum published more than 2,000 articles about the county on mainstream websites.[19]

In City D, the police department specified the assessment of online commentators as early as in 2011. A commentator's responsibilities were divided into three types. One was the basic work which constituted 30 points. Each commentator needed to open one account in about 20 influential (national and provincial) websites and two accounts in designated city and county websites. The second was daily work, which was also accounted for 30 points. Each commentator should publish three articles and make at least 20 replies each month in order to raise one's status on online forums. A commentator would gain 10 points if he or she became the moderator of a forum of a nationally influential website, seven points for being a moderator of a forum of a provincial website, and five points for being a moderator of a forum of a city website.

The third item was the management and guidance of online public opinion, which accounted for 40 points. When called upon by the office of online public opinion of the bureau, commentators should guide public opinion online and keep a record of the replies and articles he or she had posted online. When responding to online messages involving police, commentators should listen to the instructions of upper-level authorities. For example, if the instruction is "making fewer replies (*shao*

19 "The 2014 work summary on Internet security and informization and the 2015 work plan of Ruichang city."

yan) or make cautious replies (*shen yan*)," commentators should post fewer messages to prevent the cascade of public opinion.

Commentators should act accordingly if asked to guide public opinion by posting messages on national, provincial, and city websites. A commentator would lose 10 points for failing to post sufficient messages on national websites, and 5 points for failing to post sufficient messages on provincial or city websites. In addressing cases involving police, a commentator would gain 10 points if he or she was able to post messages on national websites and offered important help to preventing the cascade of public opinion, and five points for posting such messages on provincial and city websites.

Each county police bureau in the city would make a brief summary of each commentator's performance each month and a detailed summary each quarter. An overall assessment would be conducted at the end of each year. The city bureau would allocate a budget to reward the top 20 commentators at the end of each year. When managing crises of public opinion, if the commentator failed to follow the city bureau's regulation and damaged the image of the police, his or her work-unit leaders would be held responsible. When guiding public opinion, if a commentator disclosed his or her identity, caused negative public opinion, and rudely treated Internet users, a notice of criticism would be circulated. If the consequence was particular severe, administrative discipline would be imposed.

Such measures reflect the pressure faced by local governments in information management. However, despite these efforts, local governments may still fail to manage information in a way as they wish. Time and again, issues revealing the problems concerning local governments or local officials are disclosed and attract public attention. Some of the exposed officials have been disciplined after their malfeasance became high profile (Zhou and Cai forthcoming). Thus, information flow constitute a constant pressure on local governments and their officials because of the possibility that media exposure may lead to discipline. Thus, local officials sometimes approach public relations companies in order to delete undesirable online messages (Dai 2019).

4.2 Pressure of Responsiveness

Chinese local governments also face the pressure of responsiveness in information management when they fail to censor the information or guide public opinion. New ICTs empower the citizens because they enable citizens "to report news, expose wrongdoing, express opinions, mobilize protest, monitor elections, scrutinize government, deepen participation, and expand the horizons of freedom" (Diamond 2010, 69). In China, a better flow of information increases difficulties for the authoritarian government to avoid blame. The Chinese central government enjoys significant space to avoid being blamed for problems that occur at the local level because it is not directly involved in local governance. It can thus pretend not to be aware of local problems (Cai 2008). However, a better flow of information makes it difficult for the central government to pretend.

The Chinese people understand that lower-level authorities and agents are held accountable to upper-level authorities, including the central government. An improved flow of information increases the government's difficulties in blame avoidance in two ways. One is the enhanced publicity of reported problems. When some issues gain high publicity among the population, they become common knowledge of the public and the government. As a result, the central government can no longer pretend that it does not know about the problems. Second, repeatedly reported problems will eventually make people believe that the central government is aware of the problems. The central government's concern over regime legitimacy may lead it to intervene or to pressure local agents to solve exposed issues.

Therefore, the political space for blame avoidance on the part of the central government is determined by whether the public believe that the central government is aware of the exposed problems caused by local agents. If the public knows that the central government is aware of their problems, the latter loses legitimacy if it fails to respond or to pressure local governments to respond. This explains why peasants are disappointed by upper-level governments, including the central government, when their petitions against local governments were ignored by the central authority (Li 2004; Yu 2005). However, if local governments believe that

the central or high-level local government pays attention to exposed local issues, they are under the pressure to respond (Chen et al 2016).

4.2.1 Local Responsiveness

Chinese local officials have been disciplined for their inappropriate handling of reported issues (Cai 2014). Although not all local officials have been disciplined, media exposure remains a threat to them. Local governments are particularly reluctant to see negative cases becoming the focal point of public attention because such cases also create pressure on their superiors. Local officials are thus strongly motivated to respond to high-profile cases in order to prevent them from becoming the constant focal point. Some of the high-profile complaints or issues were thus solved by local governments with or without the direct intervention of high-level authorities (Zheng 2008; Yang 2009; Tong and Lei 2013).

In the district in City B visited, some of the detected issues in 2016 were reportedly solved. Monitoring staff provided quick solutions to 8,633 issues (or 59.5 percent). In January 2016, they solved 59.8 percent of the 11,958 issues and reported the remaining to the upper-level authority. In this month, the district authority surveyed residents to see their attitudes towards the 577 cases that had been addressed. It found that 51 percent of the residents were satisfied with the solutions. It is difficult to verify the reliability of the survey, but it is likely that some of the reported issues were addressed.[20]

Local governments pay close attention to exposed issues because some of them may attract public attention. In the district of City B visited, the news office of the propaganda department was responsible for collecting information. The propaganda department had a leadership group responsible for analyzing the collected information and making decisions on how to address exposed issues. Each day, after the staff responsible for information management compiled a report on reported local issues, the leadership group would discuss how to deal with the exposed issues. This group would come up with a report on important events and submit it to

20 Author's fieldwork in City B, 2016.

the four authorities around 10 o'clock in the morning—the district Party committee, the government, the people's congress, and the political consultative conference.

If an issue needed to be clarified or if there were rumors to be rebutted, the local authority would make public clarifications. In dealing with negative reports, the authority first verified the reports. If the reports were proven to be false or partly false, local leaders might convene a meeting with experts from pertinent fields (e.g., food safety). The government's office of emergency matters would come up with a proposal that outlined a division of labor among pertinent agencies. A unified statement would be made when dealing with the media. The local authority might also mobilize commentators to guide public opinion online. The district government had 50 Internet commentators who were mostly employees in the propaganda department or the civilization office.[21]

The district authority addressed verified cases by distinguishing between the outlets. If negative reports were released by the central and provincial-level media, the news office would consult pertinent agencies, gain information, and communicate with journalists. Pertinent state agencies needed to report the redress measures within five days. If an issue was reported by other media, a response from pertinent state agencies needed to be made within seven days. The news office needed to report the feedback and redress measures that had been taken to the district Party committee and the government. A unified statement would be released through official media, like television. The redress would be released to newspapers, television, news websites, and weibo and WeChat. The news office might also contact journalists and provide them with rectification measures that had been employed.

The performance of the district agencies responsible for information management was assessed with a point system. If an agency was seen as ineffectively managing negative reports or if the issues were re-exposed, responsible leaders would lose points, whereas those who succeeded would gain points. The news of-

21 Interviews in City B, 2016.

fice was also responsible for follow-up reports on exposed issues. It might approach the media proactively to invite them to report on the rectification. In addition, the news office regularly analyzed and compiled the cases addressed by state agencies. In this district, the propaganda department held sessions to train spokesmen for government departments each year. A case in which negatively reports were successfully handled would be used as an example in such training sessions.

In City D in Jiangxi Province, the city authority outsourced information collection to Xinhua News Agency, in addition to designating its own people to collect information online. The city propaganda department is responsible for overseeing the response to exposed issues by lower-level authorities, including county and township governments, street offices, public schools, and state-owned enterprises. In 2014, the city propaganda department required these parties to address 1,160 citizens' complaints the department had collected, including the reports provided by Xinhua News Agency. Of these complaints, 22 percent of them were addressed by pertinent authorities (Cai and Zhou 2019).

Chinese local governments face the pressure of response because the central government tolerates media exposure of "low-politics" issues and because local authorities are unable to directly control influential social media (Tong and Lei 2013; Chen et al 2016; Cai and Zhou 2019). As long as the central government is concerned with regime legitimacy, government responsiveness is seen as necessary to protecting the legitimacy. This need of responsiveness constitutes a constant pressure on local governments that are responsible local governance.

4.2.2 Limitations of Selective Irresponsiveness

As it can be politically or economic costly to respond to all exposed issues, government response is selective, often depending on the pressure generated by the exposed issues (Chen et al 2016). Many of the grievances or complaints gathered by the government remain unsolved. The primary concern of local governments that face exposed issues is whether their response is acceptable to higher-level authorities. They may ignore exposed issues if they believe that doing it carries little risk.

Their ignorance can be a correct choice because disciplining malfeasant agents is a complex political issue in the Chinese political system (Cai 2014).

The central or provincial government does not always pressure local authorities to address exposed issues. Instead, the central or provincial government sometimes turns a blind eye to local governments' ignorance of exposed issues or even tolerates the latter's use of repression. In addition, local governments may politicize and then repress disobedient citizens. Some people were disciplined not because they criticized the regime, but because they criticized the local government. But local governments may claim that such criticisms are directed at the political system instead of the local government (Cai 2010).

High-level local governments are even less likely to be disciplined for their malfeasance. For example, in November, 2017, the city authority of Beijing launched a citywide campaign to demolish illegal dwellings after an apartment fire killed 19 people earlier that month. The forced demolitions and evictions mostly took place on the city's rural-urban fringes, home to millions of migrants or "low-end population" from other parts of the country who worked in low-paid service jobs. Many migrants were forced out of their rented apartments in the winter, with their property destroyed. When the news reached the public, the campaign gave rise to strong public anger, and the government's move was seen as inhuman (Battaglia 2017). As a protest, some people printed the term "low-end population" on their T-shirts to show their support for migrant workers.[22]

The central government tried to downplay the forced eviction in Beijing. The censors were ordered to shut down online discussions and criticisms about the evictions in Beijing, and the Chinese news outlets were banned from publishing investigative reports and commentaries on the incident. However, Hua Yong, a Beijing-based artist posted dozens of short videos recoding how the authorities had forced tens of thousands of people to leave the city and demolished vast swaths of neighborhoods. The police came to arrest him after he filmed residents protesting

22 When online shops in Taobao.com sold such t-shirts, they were soon ordered to stop the sale. "Taobao chuxian 'diduan rekou' mao T" (Taobao.com sells T-shirts printed with "low-end population," *Apple Daily*, November 30, 2017.

by blocking a roadway. With the help of the villagers, Hua managed to escape. When he was running away, he kept posting videos about his situation before he was eventually caught and detained (France-Presse 2017). Although he was released later, none of the government officials in Beijing was held liable for this event.

Both the central and local governments make political calculations in deciding on whether and how to respond to public opinion. Selective response may damage the regime's legitimacy if government malfeasances or irresponsibility is frequently tolerated. The central government's concern over regime legitimacy is the primary constraint faced by local governments in information management. The degree of the central government's concern dictates the pressure faced by local governments in information management.

5. Conclusion

Authoritarian control over the society can be compounded by the government's lack of information on the masses' views about the regime. Without such information the government is unable to assess the size of regime opponents or the severity of popular grievances Censorship can thus create what Wintrope calls the dictator's dilemma: the ruler is afraid of enemies, but he cannot easily know who they are or how many they are. As a result, the rulers tend to use repression. However, "[t]he more his repressive apparatus stifles dissent and criticism, the less he knows how much support he really has among the population" (Wintrobe 2001, 35). This difficulty can be at least partially overcome when the government allows a monitored flow of information or media exposure (Chen and Xu 2017; Lorentzen 2014). However, when a society becomes a half-opened one, information flow creates challenges to the government.

This study finds that an authoritarian government's power and advantage in information control does not necessarily alleviate the pressure it faces in information management. The pressure comes primarily from those who support or accept the regime. In China, information management involves both the central and local governments. The central government has direct authority over nationally in-

fluential media and social media, and its attention tends to focus on "high-politics" issues. In contrast, local governments focus on the management of information concerning "low-politics" issues or local governance.

Both levels may face the pressure of information management. Authoritarian governments that enjoy people's political trust are motivated to maintain the trust. In China, the central government still enjoys a higher level of trust among the people, at least compared with local governments (Li 2004). Legitimacy is thus a concern of the central government. Information becomes a source of pressure on the central government because some exposed issues concern people's non-political complaints. When low-politics complaints are repeatedly ignored, the people lose their confidence in both the central and local governments.

As local governments are responsible for local governance and for most low-politics issues, they face several types of pressure in information management. One is the financial resources that are required to sustain the information collection system. Because of the rise of vested interest in the monitoring system, the government-business nexus is likely to persist. The business may pressure the government to keep investing in the system. Second, the local government needs to respond to or act upon the information it has collected. Unlike the central government, local governments do not have direct authority of nationally influential media. They thus face the pressure of responsiveness. Damages to the regime's legitimacy emerge when government response falls below the public's expectation. As local governments are part of the political system, their management of information is thus connected to the regime's legitimacy. In this sense, the central government faces a similar pressure of responsiveness.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The 2012 Rebellion in North Mali: the MNLA Insurgency, Caught Between the State and the French Intervention

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ABSTRACT

In 2012, North Mali was riven by an armed insurrection. The rebellion was led by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), a mostly Tuareg armed organization, allied with Islamist elements. Its aim was the secession of the Northern territories of the country and to claim the independence of Azawad. Throughout the different phases of the crisis, the MNLA always remained a key actor, being able to reshape its political and military strategy in order to adapt to the evolution of the situation. In this context, France played a capital role. French authorities contributed to giving a new political legitimacy to the Tuareg insurgents, despite strong opposition of political élites in Bamako; the Tuareg insurgents de facto exploited France, leveraging its security interests in pursuit of their own political goals. Examining the agency of insurgent actors in Kidal allows outlining the power relationship with the state institutions and the attempt of consolidating a system of informal rebel governance.

KEYWORDS: Mali – Tuareg – France – Insurgency – Legitimacy

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1. Introduction

The 2012-2013 crisis in Mali has defined a highly complex security environment, characterised by the presence of state and non-state actors and by the structuring of evolving strategic alliances, depending on changing circumstances and the prevalence of particular interests.

The National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) was a key player in the crisis. The insurrection launched during the first months of 2012 revealed the elements of structural fragility of the Malian state, which was deemed to be a model of democratic governance during the '90s (Thiriot 2002; Wing 2008). From the early 2000s, deep cleavages, particularly rooted in the desert areas of the north, acted as destabilising forces in the regional system. First, the proliferation of criminal trafficking networks (of drugs, weapons and human beings) developed as part of highly interconnected regional systems (Lacher 2012; Scheele 2012). Then, several jihādist armed groups, established during the Algerian civil war, were pushed into Northern Mali as a result of the harsh military repression of the Algiers regime (Harmon 2010; Lounnas 2013). Lastly, the recurrent environmental and climate crises boosted the spread of community conflicts over the access to natural resources.

The demands for independence of the Tuareg movement contributed to the political and institutional collapse of the country, deeply weakened by limited state capacity and a neo-patrimonial system of governance based on political nepotism, patronage and corruptive practices (Bergamaschi 2014). The military capture of the territories of Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu by a heterogeneous coalition of Salafi-jihādist armed groups, following the MNLA's declaration of independence of Azawad, was partly a result of the loss of legitimacy of the Tuareg nationalist demands – as compared to the 1990s' rebellion – which were essentially disconnected from the north-Malian social fabric.

The evolution in the regional political status quo encouraged a redefinition of the MNLA strategic view. The secular movement capitalised the diplomatic openness of French authorities – who needed military support in the fight against

the Qaedist armed groups in the mountain region of the Adrar n Ifoghas – in order to gain international recognition of their autonomist claims in Kidal and obtain the consolidation of an informal system of governance.

We will focus hereby on the MNLA's changing sources of legitimacy in the Azawad, ranging from a presumed popular legitimacy, directly related to the social representativeness of its political claims, to an international legitimacy, that is an outcome of the movement's agency in leveraging on French interests, on one side, and the French authorities' co-opting strategies towards the Tuareg nationalists, on the other side, in the framework of the struggle on Salafi-jihādist armed groups.

This paper is based on a fieldwork conducted in Paris (April-June 2016) and Bamako (November-December 2016) through the collection of semi-structured interviews – selected quotes have been translated from French to English – of policy-makers, diplomatic and military officers, members of international (EU, UN) missions. It aims at reconstructing the dynamics of the MNLA's presence in the north-Malian region, the evolution of its political strategies and its search for legitimacy on the internal and international level. Furthermore, the paper analyses the power struggle between the MNLA and the state actors in Mali, as well as the conflict relationship with the Salafi-jihādist actors in the North, outlining elements of interest for further reflection, while contributing to the debate on insurgencies, rebel governance and areas of limited statehood.

2. Legitimacy, terrorism, limited statehood: theoretical premises

The concept of legitimacy defines the theoretical boundaries of the political discourse about the state in Mali and the MNLA as a central actor in the north. Weber defines legitimacy as "the basis of every system of authority, and correspondingly of every kind of willingness to obey, is a belief […] by virtue of which persons exercising authority are lent prestige" (Weber 1964, p. 382). He assumes that legitimacy rests on the belief of the absolute validity of a political order that generates people's voluntary compliance with the state authority. Generally, empiri-

cal legitimacy can be described as a social group's sense of obligation or willingness to accept the authority of governance actors, including external and non-state actors; it is an essential condition for the effectiveness of rule and the resilience of the systems of governance (Börzel & Risse 2018). Beetham adopts a different approach to legitimacy, stressing that "a given power relationship is not legitimate because people believe in its legitimacy, but because it can be justified in terms of their beliefs" (Beetham 1991, p. 11). He characterises as 'legitimate' any order that addresses people's demands of 'moral' legitimacy (Thomas 2013). This definition of legitimacy is based on three levels: its conformity to established rules; the fact that rules can be justified by reference to shared beliefs; the expression of consent on the part of subordinate groups to the power relation (McCullogh 2015).

While normative legitimacy can be justified according to universal and normative standards, empirical legitimacy is directly linked to the outputs provided by governance actors, in terms of normative appropriateness of capacity-building or service provision towards the population (Krasner & Risse 2014). Even if the normative legitimacy of an actor is questionable, its empirical legitimacy among supporters might be well grounded.

According to Suchman, legitimacy is a "generalised perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed norms, values, beliefs and definitions" (Suchman 1995, p. 574). Stillman describes legitimacy as "the compatibility of the results of governmental output with the value patterns of the relevant systems" (Stillman 1974, p. 48), stressing that a government is legitimate when it protects and enhances the values and norms of its citizens. Similarly, Levi points out that the legitimacy stems from the awareness that citizens have of the appropriateness of structures, officials and governance processes. Therefore, although it is possible to govern with the use of coercive power only, legitimate power makes the government more effective, because it facilitates the exercise of the domain, empowering the authority to steer the behaviours (Levi et al. 2009).

A key aspect of the notion of legitimacy stems from the capacity of the state to respond to the needs of the population. It is directly linked to the effectiveness of policies to deliver collective goods and services, which the social contract between government and governed is based on (Rotberg 2004), or the government's accountability towards citizens and their basic needs. The absence of the state in the domain of the provision of essential goods and services to the populations of marginalised areas, which enables non-state political or military actors to fill the state performance deficits, produces severe consequences for the service-related legitimacy of the system (Cilliers & Sisk 2013). The deficits in the state capacity undermine the quality of the political processes, nourishing centrifugal claims in areas of limited statehood (Krasner & Risse 2014).

The definition of 'areas of limited statehood fits in the larger debate on ungoverned spaces in Sahel. In areas of limited statehood "central authorities lack the ability to implement and enforce rules and decisions or […] the legitimate monopoly over the means of violence is lacking, at least temporarily" (Risse 2013, p. 4). This enables non-state actors to contest eventually institutional orders and to take over the role of state actors in enforcing regulations, ensuring security through the monopoly over the means of violence, delivering public services. External or rebel actors engage in state-building processes in order to fill the political or administrative capacity gap of the state (Krasner & Risse 2014). Order contestation "increases the risk of fragmenting societies along ethnic, religious, and ideological lines, thereby undermining social cohesion and trust. [...] The interaction between contested orders and limited statehood bears the risk of governance breakdowns" (Börzel & Risse 2018, p. 13) and violent opposition by non-state political actors seeking to establish a different order. As a result, governance in areas of limited statehood relies on a combination of state and non-state actors, lacking a fully functioning state capable to enforce and implement decisions (Risse 2012).

Generally, the concept of 'ungoverned space' is understood as a political space deprived of effective institutional control and directly related to the existence

of a security threat (Keister 2014). It assumes the inability of the state to rule a specific territory, ignoring though the existence of rebel-governed spaces and failing in adequately describing a social and political system defined by the interactions among different actors that do not comply with institutional and formal dynamics of control. In that sense, as claimed by Börzel and Risse, areas of limited statehood characterised by a dysfunctional state are rarely 'ungoverned', because "the provision of rules and regulations as well as of public goods and services does not necessarily depend on the existence of functioning state institutions" (Börzel & Risse 2015, p. 5). In North Mali, territories that meet the definition of 'ungoverned spaces' are marked by the presence of corrupted institutional power and bad political and socio-economic performances of formal governance structures, as well as the activation of informal governance processes. Consequently, more than 'ungoverned spaces' North Mali is characterised by multiple actors competing for power and influence – local and traditional authorities, traffickers, insurgent groups – and overlapping forms of governance (Bleck et al. 2016). This leads to rethinking and calling into question the 'fragile state' paradigm, understood as a political narrative that is instrumental in the pursuit of specific interests (Nay 2013). The limits of capacity, legitimacy and effectiveness of institutional presence in marginal and non-strategic areas create a political vacuum occupied by non-institutional actors. The criminalisation of informal governance processes in the so-called 'ungoverned areas', which is achieved by emphasising the role of external actors and the interpretations of instability as a product of 'terrorism' of armed groups, builds politically the need for international intervention that, in the case of Mali, has been associated with the militarisation of territories.

Finally, the debate on power relations between state and non-state – local or international – actors has been articulated around the 'liberal peace' framework, which outsources the problem of international intervention in terms of violation of state sovereignty or local capacity to build peace through the use of force against different forms of local resistance (Charbonneau & Sears 2014). The implied mean-

ing of the concept of 'terrorism' relates to a moral judgement on the use of force and violence. The 'terrorist violence' is delegitimised, while the terrorist actor is dehumanised and abstract from the specific historical context (Charbonneau & Jourde 2016). Ignoring the domestic drivers of insurgencies and characterising local actors as 'terrorist' may risk of misrepresenting their nature, with crucial policy implications such as "enabling government abuses that have previously driven recruitment into armed groups" (Matfess 2019). Reducing – for analytical purposes – the complexity of armed groups that challenge the state monopoly on the use of force implies undermining political and social claims related to state governance, service delivery inefficiency, government abuses, socio-economic marginalisation and imbalances in the distribution of resources. Therefore, prioritising a 'terrorist' label in the discourse about radical armed groups leads to the adoption of ineffective policy responses to local drivers of insurgency.

3. Legitimacy in rebel governance systems

Insurgent governance systems, based on practices through which rebel forces are able to control social interactions and to rule civil populations, require "a normative assessment of the ability of a rebel political authority to regulate life within a defined territory. Thus a 'governance system' refers to the practices of rule insurgents adopt" (Mampilly 2011, p. 4). The effectiveness of rebel governance relates to territorial control and security, institutional development and public good provision. Mampilly points out that the institution of a police force and the establishment of a legal mechanism are "determinant as to whether the rebel group is able to make the transition from a roving insurgency to a stationary one" (Mampilly 2011, p. 63). Rebel governance systems may include coercive, extractive and redistributive activities, through which non-state insurgent groups regulate socio-economic and political aspects of life, ranging from the violence monopoly over the territory under their control up to taxation, public goods provision, judicial and administrative structures.

Legitimacy, as a process constantly re-negotiated (O'Connor 2019), stands as a condition for rebel groups to stay in power. It allows non-state actors to exert power through voluntary or quasi-voluntary compliance, which is occasionally backed up by coercion (McCullogh 2015). When rebel forces become involved in governance processes, implementing collectively binding rules and providing a social contract based on the delivery of public services – security from state violence; education; health needs; food production and distribution, social justice – they have to legitimate themselves, justifying their agendas and actions in order to seek material and moral support from local communities. Performative legitimacy, in this sense, results from a delivery-based legitimization process. However, it is clear that, in the context of weak and predatory states, armed actors can gain legitimacy implementing minimal provision standards of security and protection (McCullogh 2015).

Worral states that legitimacy is "generated with reference to local norms, identities and realities which resonate with target populations. In this sense it attempts to link to local ordering practices and structures but can equally derive strength by challenging these same processes" (Worral 2017, p. 715). He describes pragmatic forms of legitimacy, based on protection, provision of services or willingness to share power, and moral legitimacy, which derives from the compatibility with existing social norms and moral or religious codes (Worral 2017). Legitimacy is therefore a social construction that shapes the rebel governance order and the absence of legitimacy influences the sustainability of the rebel order and the capacity of insurgent actors to operate and meet their own goals.

While coercion is often related to the use of violence in order to shape civilian behaviours and induce obedience, with the risk of being counterproductive and jeopardizing the stability of the system of rebel governance (Péclard & Mechoulan 2015), legitimation strategies increase the compliance of local populations and provide sustainability to their governance systems. Frerks and Terpstra highlight five legitimation strategies adopted by rebel groups. First, looking at a socio-

economic and political dimension, rebel leaders claim their positions as representatives of the local community's grievances. Second, they describe the enemy as inhuman and as a threat against which it is needed to adopt a violent action. The charisma of the leadership is also relevant as a source of legitimacy, as well as the readiness of the rebel fighters to sacrifice their life for a common goal. Lastly, the reference to popular belief systems, shared traditions, local cultures or religion may ensure legitimacy to rebel forces (Frerks & Terpstra 2017). Particularly, non-armed groups' strategies instrumentalising religion have been used to delegitimise existing power structures and systems of inequality, as shown through the strengthening of Salafi actors in North Mali (McCullogh 2015).

In order to obtain support of local populations, rebel organisations "adapt their message to local belief, or educate civilians to change their preferences" (Kasfir 2005, p. 281) through legitimation strategies. The absence of legitimacy could weaken the rebel control of territories and populations, encouraging noncompliance, collaboration with the state or other non-state actors, sabotage actions and violent actions by local-based militias: these challenges push insurgent actors to negotiate with civilians and not to resort to systematic coercion (Péclard & Mechoulan 2015).

Rebel orders may take different forms depending on different styles of governance: some rebel actors may take territories to create proto-states while others may exert remote control governance lacking sufficient resources to hold territories. In any case, they need to engage with civilian populations to pursue their aims (Worral 2017). The legitimacy of rebel actors is therefore a crucial element to understand the dynamics of rebel governance.

Among the sources of legitimacy, external actors and international interventions forces are also supposed to play a critical role, through recognition of non-state insurgent actors as potential partner for cooperation or negotiation. Nonetheless, international recognition as a source of legitimacy does not automatically en-

sure the strengthening of insurgent governance systems, when opposed to locally rooted sources of legitimacy (Duyvesteyn 2017).

3. The MNLA and the 2012 insurgency in North Mali: a matter of legitimacy

The MNLA was officially established in November 2011. A general consent on the aims of the insurgency led to the merger of some heterogeneous groups, such as Tuareg fighters coming back to North Mali after the fall of al-Qadhafi's regime (Lecocq & Klute 2013),[1] militiamen involved in the '90s Tuareg rebellion (Cristiani & Fabiani 2013), Kel tamashek army deserters (Livermore 2013). From the political side, the civilian members of the National Movement of Azawad (MNA) asked the government in Bamako to put an end to structural political, social, economic marginalisation in the north of the country (Branson & Wilkinson 2013) and adopted a legitimation strategy based on a presumed representativeness of the local socio-political grievances through a cross-ethnic approach.

> In light of the successive crises that have occurred in the region of Azawad and the need to find solutions, the Mouvement National de l'Azawad (MNA) has been designated as the most relevant entity to politically address the needs and concerns of the people of Azawad […] on the whole.[2]

Several Tuareg insurgencies have succeeded in Malian history. The first rebellion occurred in the 1960s, following the declaration of independence of French Sudan: the Tuareg insurgents, belonging to the Ifoghas clan, opposed Modibo Keita's socialist government, who repressed the rebels and militarized the region of Kidal. The second insurgency occurred in the early '90s and contributed to the collapse of Moussa Traoré's authoritarian regime (Grémont 2010). Lengthy negotia-

[1] Many Tuareg people decided to move to Libya in the 1980s due to the poor socio-economic conditions in their homeland. Once in Libya, they were enlisted and trained in the national army.
[2] '2010 dans l'Azawad (Nord du Mali). L'année du chaos sécuritaire, politique, économique et climatique', 03 November 2011, viewed 16 October 2019. < http://mnlamov.net/actualites/46-2010.html >

tions led to the signing of the 1996 peace agreement in Timbuktu (Boilley 1999). A third rebellion took place in 2006 and was fuelled by clan and intra-ethnic rivalries, and by the armed groups' interests in illicit trafficking networks (Lecocq 2010). In the case of 2012 MNLA's rebellion, the most peculiar aspect was linked to the widening of the political claims to the benefit of all ethnic communities in the region, due to the sharing of common problems by the local Tuareg, Songhai, Fulani and Arab people (Cline 2013). According to the MNLA's propaganda, secessionist claims were raised not only as expression of an existential right of the Tuareg communities to have their own homeland and obtain the recognition of an independent state, but also as the manifestation of the needs of the Northern populations to free themselves from a predatory and corrupt state. Furthermore, the nationalist rebels claimed that the armed offensive of January 2012 represented a legitimate response to the progressive militarization of Northern Mali. This had been imposed through the deployment of anti-terrorism programmes (Niang 2013) and the adoption of the Special Programme for Peace, Security and Development of North Mali (PSPSDN), financed by bilateral and multilateral donors. It was seen as an instrument for strengthening the military presence in the region rather than as a driver for the development of the Sahelian territories (International Crisis Group 2012). In this sense, the insurgents sought to obtain popular legitimacy depicting Malian government as willing to establish a 'southern' military presence in the North, through a vertical management structure and a lack of participation by the local communities.

The legitimacy of MNLA's demands was, however, inherently fragile, weakened by the lack of popular support given to the Azawad liberation movement (Gaasholt 2013). Despite claiming to represent the ethnically heterogenous north-Malian populations (Chauzal & van Damme 2015), it was still perceived as a Tuareg ethno-nationalist organization (Klute 2013) and a tool in the hands of influential Kel intessar or Kel adagh clans to give strength to their own political interests, while claiming an abstract right to act on behalf of the people of the north. Several Arab, Fulani, Songhai communities and many Tuareg members of rival tribal confedera-

tions – such as Kel ansar and Kel iwellemmedan – were opposed to the MNLA, denying support and legitimacy to Tuareg rebels. Internal tensions and disagreements on whether the movement had to claim independence or a broader form of autonomy, weakened its cohesion and the coherence of its stances, with an impact on representativeness and legitimacy (Pezard & Shurkin 2015).

The deep heterogeneity of the armed movements in the Sahel-Saharan region of Mali did not prevent the formation of short-term arrangements to oppose the political power in Bamako. In particular, the events that took place in the first months of 2012 were the result of a convergence between the secular MNLA and Ansār al-Dīn, a Salafi Tuareg-based movement led by Iyad Ag Ghali, which advocated the institutionalisation of sharī'a law in the whole country without claiming the independence of the Azawad. (Thurston & Lebovich 2013). A former nationalist leader of the '90s Tuareg rebellion, he created Ansār al-Dīn after a failed attempt to be appointed as aménokal[3] of the Ifoghas clan and head of the MNLA. Leveraging on a strong individual charismatic leadership, ag Ghali gave birth to his new political and military organisation. He adopted a legitimation strategy based on the Salafi-jihādist ideology and the rhetoric of the violent struggle against state authorities and the Western powers, in a social environment where the growing influence of political Islam in the public sphere was "rooted in a call for better social justice and a will to reassert ethical values in response to growing corruption" (Marchal 2013, p. 4).

In the background, the main Qaedist groups in the area – al-Qā'ida in the Islamic Maghreb and the Movement for Unity and Jihād in West Africa, significantly involved in drug trafficking[4] (Raineri & Strazzari 2015) – provided military and financial support to Ansār al-Dīn, thanks to the common ideological positions

[3] The title of Tuareg's traditional political leaders.

[4] While the involvement of AQIM in the criminal trafficking activities was circumscribed to the collection of taxes imposed on convoys carrying drugs or illicit goods to allow them to pass through the desert zones under their control, the MUJWA was deeply involved in trans-Sahelian trafficking networks, thanks to the complicity of local politicians and traditional authorities.

and political demands. The differences among the insurgent actors were provisionally put aside in order to pursue a common interest: opposing the militarization of sub-Saharan territories, breaking the resistance of the Malian army and taking control of the Northern regions of the country. Because of its alliance with the jihādist groups, the MNLA attracted accusations of involvement in international terrorism activities by the government and the international community.

The military attack by MNLA and Ansār al-Dīn began in January 2012. The rebels forced the Malian army, poorly equipped and inadequately trained for combat in a desert environment, to retreat in the face of the sudden offensive (Perret 2014). The *coup d'état* by some non-commissioned officers in Bamako,[5] aimed at strengthening the military response to the rebels' offensive in the North, had the opposite effect to precipitate out the events, speeding up the collapse of the army and increasing considerably the number of deserter soldiers, many of which were convinced to switch allegiances to the insurgency (Wing 2016).

By the end of March, the rebels occupied the main towns in the north. The mujāhidīn of AQIM played a leading role in the fall of the cities of Kidal and Timbuktu (Lounnas 2012). Two-thirds of the country therefore ended up under the control of the MNLA and the jihādist militiamen. The capture of the North Mali by nationalist insurgents and jihādist militants went together with a progressive restructuring of power relationships between the MNLA and the Qaedist groups. On April 2, Ansār al-Dīn, with the support of AQIM, forced the MNLA to leave Timbuktu's city centre. In the same vein, Kidal was placed under the control of Ag Ghali's fighters, who accessed the town first after the withdrawal of the Malian army. In fact, Ansār al-Dīn broke the alliance with the MNLA and announced the imposition of Islamic law on the occupied areas (International Crisis Group 2012).

[5] The coup leader, Amadou Haya Sanogo, accused the president Touré of feeding his own influence in the north without addressing the root causes of the Tuareg insurgency. He was also charged of having displayed an excessively conciliatory behavior towards the armed groups in Azawad. It is worth noting that, before the coup, several demonstrations had already revealed a deep popular dissatisfaction with a corrupted political class who shared responsibility for the crisis with the rebels.

On April 6, 2012, despite the loss of centrality in the political and military balances of the alliance, the MNLA proclaimed the independence of Azawad. Nevertheless, the unilateral declaration did not mean achieving nationalist aims. Rather, it seemed to lay the foundations for the crystallisation of a jihādist sanctuary in the heart of the Sahel. The full deployment of Ag Ghali's fighters in the cities left by the national army and the increased presence of the mujāhidīn of AQIM and MUJWA forced the MNLA to withdraw to the suburban areas of the main towns (Pellerin 2012). On June 26, the MUJWA members, who had strongly consolidated their presence in Gao enjoying the support of AQIM's leaders, attacked the MNLA militias, instrumentalising a widespread anti-MNLA sentiment among local communities (Desgrais et al. 2018). They inspired a popular uprising that forced the MNLA to flee the city and to take refuge in Ménaka, before being chased away from the town in November 2012 (Lecocq & Klute 2019).

4. The jihādist performative legitimacy and the consolidation of power in Azawad

By the autumn of 2012, the alliance among Islamist movements was exerting a military and administrative control over the entire north of Mali: Ansār al-Dīn reinforced its presence in Kidal, the MUJWA had its stronghold in Gao while AQIM was mainly based in Timbuktu.

In October, facing a situation of political and military marginalisation, the MNLA began to redefine its political strategies. The movement announced the surrender of its secessionist claims and the adoption of a new approach towards Malian institutions and the international community, based on a more acceptable demand for regional self-determination. The leadership of the Tuareg-based organisation sought to obtain international recognition and support (Marchal 2012): this was a first step in the process of changing its sources of legitimacy, acknowledging itself as a trustworthy (secular) bargaining partner in North Mali, whose support would have been essential in the struggle against jihādist actors.

Several factors favoured the strengthening of Ansār al-Dīn and the other jihādist groups in terms of popular support: first, the advance towards Gao and Timbuktu was fostered by the presence of a non-hostile social, politico-economic and religious ground to the project of promoting a strict version of shar'īa law within the framework of the Malian state. Qaedist organisations co-opted and funded several religious leaders and traditional authorities, obtaining in return the support for the spread of a Salafi Islam (Konaté 2015): they acted somehow as a legitimation driver for the jihādist actors, which took advantage of religious beliefs to achieve compliance from local communities and delegitimise institutional powers and international actors.

AQIM had established its operational base in Timbuktu since the early 2000s, operating in a largely undisturbed manner thanks to what many analysts considered a kind of 'non-belligerent' agreement with the Government of Amadou Toumani Touré (personal communication, former civil servant at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 24 May 2016). Abd al-Malik Drukdal's organization adopted a thorough and gradual social penetration strategy, based on a combination of military, political, religious, economic and humanitarian instruments (Bøås & Torheim 2013). It structured a network of alliances with local communities, assisting them financially and offering protection from criminals (Tham Lindell & Mattsson 2014): "al-Qā'ida [is presented] as the defender of the local population and, more globally, of all Muslims. Thus, AQIM and its affiliated Salafi-inspired movements stand out as fighters for the rights of local people in order to get the necessary support from them" (Lounnas 2012, p. 52). During the occupation, AQIM's members built a 'jihādist' welfare system, based on the delivery of essential services such as water, electricity, land, mineral resources, employment and housing policies, to the benefit of historically marginalised communities (De Georgio 2015). They gradually obtained a performative-based social legitimacy, filling the gap in institutional governance through the provision of security, justice and basic goods.

> The Northern Malian communities called for safety, education and health that they did not obtain from the Malian state. The jihādist groups provided services, the Gao hospital worked very well during the occupation and there were no security problems. [...] The shar'īa was already the traditional source of justice for civil disputes. [...] The reality is that, as the state justice does not work, the traditional justice has to be applied. In any case, the people concerned will grab on whom can provide them with a minimum standard of protection and security (personal communication, former civil servant at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 24 May 2016).

AQIM and the jihādist groups proved particularly careful to nourish the support of the populations, by addressing their basic needs. They capitalized on the popular discontent caused by the widespread insecurity, the multiplication of community conflicts, the lack of public services and the endemic poverty. They provided subsidies and economic assistance to poor families, further strengthening their social relationships to local communities (Briscoe 2014).

> The communities said that they felt safe. They did not pay taxes and enjoyed some [social] support. When someone was sick, [the jihādists] took care of him. [...] They introduced an element of certainty of legal punishment. [...] We should admit that they are not bandits; they are individuals with [political] objectives. [...] It is true that not everyone accepts their project, but it is after all a project aiming to build something. [...] Some farmers in Timbuktu told me that when the jihādists were there, local communities were happier. [...] At a certain point in time, the communities benefited entirely from the water and electricity without paying, even if this situation could not last forever: probably, a socially accepted price would have been negotiated. Therefore, there is a clear problem of governance – bad governance practices, corruption, favouritism, nepotism – while the rights and aspirations of the people were better met while the Salafi-jihādists were there. The state often abuse its power, does not fulfil its obligations in the domain of public service. Our politicians have personal ambitions that are detrimental to the satisfaction of the people concerned (personal communication, civil servant at the Malian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, originally from Timbuktu, 15 December 2016).

In sharp contrast to the state of neglect of the north, in the absence of public services, infrastructure and structural investments (Bleck & Michelitch 2015), the jihādist system was based first on ensuring the incorruptibility of Islamist officials and on effective public order and security management. Justice was ensured by the certainty of a legal punishment proportional to the offence committed, and by means of extensive and rigorous social control carried out by an Islamic police, often made up of young people recruited locally (Konaté 2015). This 'real governance' system allowed the jihādist groups to secure the power, transforming violence into legitimate domination through the provision of several measures to sustain local communities and earn legitimate recognition by them (Polese & Santini 2018).

Despite the alleged legitimacy of the regional and inter-ethnic grievances of the Tuareg nationalist movement, the Northern populations were often more favourable to the jihādist presence, because of the ability of Islamists to put in place socio-economic systems that were compatible with the needs and characteristics of the social fabric. Furthermore, while the MNLA was still considered as an ethnic-based movement fighting for a Tuareg-controlled independent Azawad, the jihādists' claim to establish an Islamic state in Mali did not rest on any ethnic or racial exclusionary attitude (Lecocq et al. 2013).

Bøås explained the fragile legitimacy of the MNLA stressing that, as a movement mainly composed of fighters who returned to Mali in 2011 after years in Algeria and Libya, the MNLA was regarded as opportunistic. The militants of Ansār al-Dīn, AQIM and MUJWA seemed to be more deeply rooted in the Northern Malian society, thanks to strong social relations developed over the years, than the MNLA. Nationalist demands were largely disconnected from the political and social context, in which local communities were not asking for secession, but claimed instead better governance, service delivery, justice and security (Bøås 2015).

Following the military occupation of the north, the deficit of social and political legitimacy of the MNLA insurgents towards the Northern populations turned into open hostilities of Malian communities against them. Tuareg nationalists

committed violence towards the communities living in the occupied areas, looting of banks and public institutions, abuses of power (Onuoha & Thurston 2013) to respond to the need for supplies in the absence of the funding expected to support the rebellion (Marchal 2012). They dismantled the state bureaucracy in the occupied territories but were unable to build up new administrative structures, and failed to enforce order, security and justice (Bøås & Torheim 2013). The MNLA de facto renounced to secure legitimacy to its political power and did not act to strengthen a form of popular consent among the communities of the Azawad (Lecocq & Klute 2013).

> The MNLA committed violence against local populations much more than other groups. [...] For this reason, the populations of the north hated the nationalist rebels, and when the MUJWA expelled the MNLA from Gao, the people supported it and agreed with their decision. Subsequently, the situation in Gao was quiet: [...] for this reason, the local communities have started to appreciate jihādists, considering that the MNLA militiamen were the real terrorists. Somehow, they tolerated the shar'īa and the amputations of hands in return for peace (personal communication, Tuareg member of the National Assembly of Mali, 09 December 2016).

In Timbuktu, AQIM members ensured people protection against MNLA members' violence: jihādists provided them with a 'green' phone number to call in case of harassment by the Tuareg nationalists (Bøås & Torheim 2013). The local communities in Gao, hostile to the secessionist intentions of the MNLA fighters, rose up against them. They supported to a larger extent the prospects offered by the MUJWA mujāhidīn, who "let the MNLA Tuaregs harass the population before intervening and restoring law and order" (Marchal 2013, p. 16). The MUJWA did not use a liberation discourse, nor aimed to build an independent state, but rather helped to meet the social demands and the economic needs as part of a highly effective territorial consolidation strategy (Raineri 2015).[6]

[6] The growing difficulties in providing the delivery of goods and services boosted the re-emergence of social cleavages that destabilized the networks of alliance built up by the Salafi-jihādist armed

5. France and MNLA: towards a change in the legitimation strategies

Part of the MNLA's leadership was based in Paris, particularly its media and political wing. This aspect contributed to project the movement as a pro-West secular force, hoping for support from France and other Western powers (Desgrais et al. 2018). Nevertheless, at the first stage of the Tuareg insurrection in Azawad, the reaction of French authorities was hesitant. This cautious attitude was imposed by the need to protect French expatriates in Mali and by the urgency to manage carefully the issue of hostages kidnapped by jihādist groups in the region. Alain Juppé, French Minister of Foreign Affairs under Nicolas Sarkozy's presidency, talked about the need to "deal with the Tuareg issue in depth" (Notin 2014, p. 70), avoiding any sharp condemnation of the insurrection.

For many observers, the French attitude towards the Malian crisis was the natural development of what happened in Libya. Pointing out a historical convergence between French authorities and Kel tamashek people in Sahel, many political activists and civil society organizations accused Sarkozy of having reached an agreement with the Tuareg fighters enlisted in the Libyan army during the '80s. Specifically, the 'Libyan' Tuareg would have deserted, giving up the fight in defence of al-Qadhafi's regime and allowing the French military forces to launch their final offensive. In exchange, they would have received reassurances on the support of French diplomacy to the secessionist claims towards the Malian state, on condition that they engaged in the struggle against al-Qā'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in North Mali (Notin 2014).

On February 26, 2012, Juppé went to Bamako to see Malian President Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT), discussing with him the last developments of the

groups and weakened the systems of governance in the region. This caused in turn the worsening of the conditions of social control of the local populations and a more and more severe imposition of the Islamic law to the communities by the jihādist authorities, despite the instructions provided by the AQIM leadership, which advocated a gradual application of the shar'īa for ensuring success to their political project.

political and security crisis in the country. During the public press conference, the French Minister reaffirmed the importance of ensuring the respect of the fundamental principles of unity and territorial integrity, excluding any possibility for a military intervention and endorsing the path for an inclusive dialogue with the insurgent actors.[7] At the same occasion, the local press solicited him to clarify the French responsibility regarding the alleged support assured to the MNLA. In fact, several Malian political actors highlighted a proximity of French authorities towards Tuareg armed groups (Bergamaschi & Diawara 2014), because of historical and cultural linkages and the possibility to obtain from them some sort of assistance for the liberation of the hostages detained in the Sahel (personal communication, member of the National Assembly of Mali, 24 November 2016). This theory was confirmed, in their view, precisely by the presence of some eminent members of the political direction of the nationalist movement in France.

> We never questioned the unity and territorial integrity of Mali. If asking to the MNLA to lay down the arms was enough, this would be perfect. Nevertheless, if we restrict ourselves to this view and we continue to confront each other, there will be no solution. […] Only a political dialogue could allow to come out the impasse and not a violent confrontation, because in this moment the consequences could be extremely severe, not only for Mali but for the whole region. […] Clearly, we need to negotiate [with the rebels]. However, what is important to avoid is the negotiation with the terrorists. We have denounced since long time the danger of AQIM, which got stronger in the last months. […] In our view, there is no ambiguity: terrorism is the first enemy and AQIM is threatening us directly. […] Therefore, this is the red line not to go beyond. For the rest, it is evident that there are issues emerging in North Mali, and these issues must be dealt with. It's not the responsibility of France to negotiate or propose solutions: we only could ensure support and mediation (personal communication, former French ambassador to Mali, 13 May 2016).

[7] 2012, 'Point de presse de M. Alain Juppé, ministre des affaires étrangères et européennes, sur les difficultés de la situation au Mali confronté au terrorisme et menacé dans son intégrité territoriale, Bamako le 26 février 2012', *Vie Publique*, 02 March, viewed 08 January 2019. <http://discours.vie-publique.fr/notices/123000508.html>

The former French ambassador in Bamako denied any hypothesis of a presumed preferential treatment for the Tuareg militants:

> There was no relationship between the ambassador and the MNLA. In 2011, some Tuareg representatives in the National Assembly asked for meeting me, and I received them. They were members of ADEMA, the ruling party supporting ATT. I received them as I received any other representative who wished to see me, whichever their party. […] Following the *coup d'état*, I found out that these representatives had become members of the MNLA […]. I never met someone who told me to be a MNLA or MNA member, at that time. I knew that they claimed for autonomy, but I perceived them just as critical members of the Parliament (personal communication, former French ambassador to Mali, 13 May 2016).

The declaration of independence of Azawad triggered the political-institutional collapse of the country, and encouraged a stronger diplomatic initiative by France, together with the regional actors.

On May 15, François Hollande was officially designated President of the Republic. The attention of the new socialist government was directed to the Malian crisis, which was considered a foreign policy priority. Initially, the French political and diplomatic strategy was based on a clear move away from the MNLA, which was deemed as a key player in the crisis but not a partner in the negotiations. The legitimacy of the claims raised by the movement was questioned because of the low representativeness of the populations of Northern Mali: the Tuareg communities were acknowledged as a minority in the North, except for Kidal. In addition, the unclear relations with Ag Ghali's Ansār al-Dīn, which advocated the constitution of a Malian Islamic state, carried weight for France, even though the DGSE intelligence services – to which some analysts attribute a proximity to the nationalist movement in the region (Marchal 2012) – would continue to maintain a relationship with its leaders (Notin 2014). With regard to the declaration of independence of Azawad made by the insurgents, France pointed out that a unilateral application of

self-determination claims not garnering the recognition of African states could not be considered legitimate (Ayoedema 2015).

However, at the end of November, the French strategy for the management of the Malian crisis seemed to change, at least in part. The rupture of the alliance between the MNLA and the Qaedist movements, which excluded the secular nationalists from the political-administrative management of the regions of the north, allowed the leaders of the movement to redefine their political strategies. The violent marginalisation of Tuareg insurgents in Azawad made a political relationship with them potentially acceptable for French authorities. A delegation of the movement was received at the Quai d'Orsay, in the presence of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Laurent Fabius, and the Special Representative for the Sahel, Jean-Félix Paganon. The circumstance seemed to upset the diplomatic balances outlined by Paris until then, due to the hostility of Malian political actors towards the Tuareg insurgents. The rationale behind the French decision to receive representatives of the Azawad movement at the headquarters of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were not specified. It seemed clear, however, the will to engage the nationalist rebels at the bargaining table as political interlocutors.

France explored the willingness of the movement to give up demands for independence and secession, within a highly decentralised state and an institutional system characterised by the recognition of a wide range of autonomy to the regions in the north. However, the negotiations were suspended in the face of the MNLA's requests to prevent the comeback of the Malian army in Kidal: this demand was held inadmissible by the French negotiators, since it was not compatible with the aim of restoring Malian national unity and territorial integrity.

The political dialogue initiated by Paris with the representatives of the Tuareg insurgents was sharply conflicting with the positions of Malian political actors in Bamako, who were adverse to any involvement of the Tuareg movements in the crisis management and resolution processes. The meeting between the MNLA delegation, led by Moussa Ag Assarid, and the representatives of French diplomacy

raised the anger of Malian political élites in Bamako. They accused France of collusion with the Tuareg insurgents and blamed them for legitimising MNLA 'terrorists', responsible for the secession of Azawad, through a political dialogue that "was enabling them to talk to France24" (personal communication, former French ambassador to Mali, 13 May 2016).

6. Variation in rebel orders: a new international legitimacy

During the night of 9 to 10 January 2013, the jihādist armed groups assaulted the town of Konna and its military base. Once again, the Malian army proved to be structurally unprepared to deal with the offensive, letting the Qaedist armed forces advance (Bergamaschi 2013). The sudden attack southward reinforced the consensus on the fact that immediate external military action was needed. On January 10, Dioncounda Traoré officially requested military action from France, in support of the Malian response to the jihādist attack on the first defence lines of the army. Two days later, on January 11, 2013, President Hollande endorsed the deployment of the Opération Serval, consisting of three steps: to block and destroy the advance of jihādist pick-ups; to win back the towns of Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu; to intercept surviving fighters in the Sahel and in the Adrar Mountains (Chivvis 2016; Galy 2013). The main targets of French intervention – preserving the Malian sovereignty, restoring the territorial integrity of the state, destroying the jihādist sanctuary in the region – were accomplished within a few weeks (Delage 2013). The mujāhidīn, deprived of military assets that had been destroyed by the bombing of French aviation (Leauthier & Merchet 2013), were forced to evacuate the main Northern cities.[8] Following the recapture of the north, the French political and military apparatus announced that the emergency phase of the operation was closed. The next stage of the intervention was the definitive neutralisation of the ji-

[8] 2013, 'Where have the jihādists gone?', *The Economist*, 02 February, viewed 08 January 2019. <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2013/02/02/where-have-the-jihadists-gone>

hādist threat, in order to ensure the implementation of a state-building process (Shurkin 2014).

The Qaedist armed groups adopted a resistance strategy based on different military tactics. They melted into the civil populations, planning an irregular and asymmetric warfare consisting of raids, ambushes and suicide bombings (Walther et al. 2016). In other cases, they took refuge in the mountains of the Adrar n Ifoghas, where the stronghold of AQIM was located, all the while avoiding frontal clashes in order to weaken the enemy's military force in the long term.[9]

The political aim of French diplomacy was to develop a form of constructive engagement with the secular Kel tamashek nationalists, involving them in the struggle against terrorism and providing "new opportunities to renegotiate their positions in the power competition with other insurgent actors" (Bencherif & Campana 2017). The perfect knowledge of the regional geography by the jihādist groups seriously challenged the French forces, which were confronted with the enemy on a hostile ground, facing the risk of a stagnation of the conflict. The alliance with Tuareg rebels was perceived as an effective way to limit the asymmetries of the jihādist guerrilla.

From the beginning of February, the French authorities had already put forward a statement of legitimacy for the Tuareg 'non-terrorists' rebels from MNLA and MIA, a breakaway group of Ansār al-Dīn led by Alghabbas Ag Intallah, the son of the traditional Ifoghas authority (Wing 2016). They were raised to the rank of unavoidable bargaining actors in the negotiations for the restoration of constitutional legality in the country (Bencherif & Campana 2017). On the same days, French soldiers were entering Kidal without the support of Malian soldiers, in order to limit the potential risk of interethnic violence (Wing 2013). This was seen as a

[9] The definition of *fluid* conflict, i.e. a war made by "actors susceptible to rapidly change and adapt to the strategic environment" seems particularly suited to describe the characteristics of the third phase of confrontation between French forces and the jihādist armed groups: "Organisational transformations broaden the range of fluid actors options. Deprived of the limits represented by a population to defend or preserve, they earn a certain freedom which enables them to target all types of objective, even the least conventional" (Leboeuf 2005, pp. 625-638).

confirmation of the existence of an agreement, negotiated and concluded by the DGSE services, between Paris and representatives of the Azawad's liberation movement. France would have taken advantage of the deep knowledge of the Adrar upland areas by Tuareg rebels and the valuable information provided by the followers of Ag Intallah on Ansār al-Dīn, in order to identify the jihādist fighters, weaken their resistance and obtain the release of the Western hostages held by them (Notin 2014). In return, the control of the town of Kidal would have been temporarily assigned to the Tuareg groups (Lecocq & Klute 2019), while members of the Malian national army would have been prevented to access the area. In the medium term, the issue of recognising the territorial autonomy to the Tuareg communities would have been taken into account.

According to Mampilly, the variation in rebel governance systems "stems from a combination of the initial preferences of rebel leaders and the interaction of insurgent organizations with a variety of other social and political actors" (Mampilly 2011, pp. 15-16). This reflects the shifting sources of legitimacy for nationalist rebel actors in North Mali. The Tuareg secular movement became politically attractive to France (Desgrais et al. 2018). It was co-opted as part of a strategy intended for identifying and killing the mujāhidīn in the massif of Ifoghas, despite the hostilities of the national political representatives and the population in Bamako against the Azawadian movements.[10] Marginalised by the jihādist groups and forced to seek refuge in the Kidal stronghold, the Tuareg insurgents laid down the conditions for a collaboration with French forces in the north, which was needed by Paris to conduct the military operations, detect and eradicate the Qaedist mujāhidīn in the Adrar n Ifoghas. France recognised the MNLA and MIA militias' right to exercise administrative and security control over the territory of Kidal, ensuring that the Malian national army would have been banned from the area until the conditions for democ-

[10] Among people in Bamako favourable to negotiations for the resolution of the crisis in the North, only a small minority (18%) was supportive of a dialogue with jihādist or Tuareg nationalist movement (MNLA) according to a Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES Bamako) survey conducted in February 2013.

racy were restored. Thus, the political recognition they obtained by cooperating with France in the framework of the military operations in the north was part of a strategy of action intended to acquire an international legitimacy functional to the pursuit of its aims. This strengthen all the while jihādist insurgents' legitimacy based on the opposition to external actors' interference in local-rooted dynamics and their nature of 'crusader' invaders.

The alliance between France and MNLA was eventually confirmed. The Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian highlighted the good intelligence relations as well as the logistical and operational coordination with the Tuareg groups, which had accompanied the French advance in the north and guaranteed some popular support for the presence of Western troops on the territory of Kidal (Shurkin 2014).

The acknowledgement of a political and military relationship with the Tuareg groups gave rise to strong criticisms in Bamako, where a large majority of people claimed that the MNLA was standing up for its own members' interests.[11] French authorities were accused of supporting the cause of the Tuareg terrorists, as the rebels were still defined, although they had distanced themselves from the jihādists of Ansār al-Dīn, AQIM and MUJWA, and declared they would have been ready to negotiate with the government. In the perception of people and political élites in Bamako, Paris was giving legitimacy to the members of insurgent groups who had been involved in conflict violence and found guilty of having triggered the crisis, undermining the integrity of the state and the sovereignty of national institutions. In particular, President Dioncounda Traoré criticised the French decision to involve the MIA rebels in the crisis management processes, stating that he did not recognise any difference between Ansār al-Dīn and dissidents led by Ag Intallah,

[11] 89% of people interviewed in Bamako accused the MNLA of defending particular interests rather than prioritising Tuareg communities' demands. 90% of the cross-section deemed that the MNLA and MIA preventing Malian army's entry to Kidal was incomprehensible (25,8%) or inacceptable (64,1%).
2013, Mali – Mètre. Enquête d'opinion « Que pensent les Maliens ? », no. 2, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/mali/10100/2013-02.pdf>

who escaped their responsibilities and dissociated from Ag Ghali and AQIM for opportunistic reasons (Boisbouvier 2013). Ambassador Rouyer warned the French authorities against the political risks of a strategy intended to promote the MIA and the MNLA insurgents as privileged partners:

> Four days after the start of the intervention, [...] there were French flags everywhere. In Bamako, people called children 'François Hollande'. It was something huge, a total reversal of the initial situation. However, I warned to pay attention, as these 'acquis' remained fragile and if ever we French gave the sense of double standards, treating Gao and Timbuktu differently from Kidal, we would have had problems. We could not give the idea of protecting the MNLA and the MIA when the aim was to fight AQIM. We needed to be clear and impose the Malian authorities on the national territory as a whole. On this point, the analyses diverged from the ones in Paris. The Government was at the forefront of the need to find an agreement on the ground. I understood the military aspect and the will of not having to deal with armed forces on the two fronts, the jihādist and the secessionist forces, but regarding the strategy of relying on the secessionist forces to fight jihādists... personally, I did not agree (personal communication, former French ambassador to Mali, 13 May 2016).

7. The MNLA and the power struggle over Kidal

The territorial integrity of Mali was formally restored with the re-establishment of the French and Malian control on the regions occupied by the Salafi armed groups. However, Kidal represented an outstanding exception. French forces delegated the security and political-administrative control of the area to the Tuareg armed movements until the conclusion of a peace deal with Bamako. Within the framework of this agreement, the FAMa (*Forces Armées Maliennes*) were prevented to entry the city in order to avoid violent clashes with rebel armed groups and possible reprisals against civilian populations.[12]

[12] In May 2013, more than a half of Bamako (69,4%) and Mopti (56,8%) dwellers stated that they didn't trust the collaboration between the insurgent groups and French forces, since they accessed Kidal together with MNLA and MIA's rebels preventing Malian army to restore their control over the town.

De facto, France recognised a special status to one of the main urban centres in the north and imposed limitations on the exercise of sovereignty by the national institutions in Mali. As explained by a diplomatic official at the French Embassy in Bamako, "in the occasion of the recapture of the north, the Malian army had [demonstrated] neither the human capacities nor the military capabilities needed to provide an effective contribution to the peace-building" (personal communication, civil servant at the French embassy of Mali, 02 December 2016). In other words, Paris gave legitimacy to a system of governance defined by the monopoly on the use of force by (former) insurgent actors, and characterised by the exclusion of political state actors, government authorities and military institutions.

The recognition of an exception regarding the territory of Kidal fed the upsurge in the conflict between local security forces and the national army. On May 17, 2014, Prime Minister Moussa Mara decided to move to Kidal in order to establish the state authority in a territory that had been outside the scope and control of the Malian institutions until that moment. This decision occurred despite the unfavourable opinion expressed by the French forces, the UN mission for the stabilization of the country (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, MINUSMA) and other members of the government, based on the assessment of a serious risk of fighting and violent demonstrations. Mara's initiative boosted the armed response of rebel militias, which led to the death of soldiers and institutional members of the government delegation.[13] On May 20, Mara ordered the armed forces to move northwards and free the city of Kidal. Many soldiers were killed or forced to flee and leave to Bamako. Several requests for Prime Minister's resignation were made, but he also obtained a form of popular recogni-

2013, Mali – Mètre. Enquête d'opinion « Que pensent les Maliens ? », no. 3, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/mali/10100/2013-03.pdf>

[13] 2014, 'Moussa Mara à Kidal: retour sur une visite mouvementée', *RFI*, 21 May, viewed 12 January 2019. <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20140521-mali-moussa-mara-kidal-retour-une-visite-mouvementee>

tion for defending the unity of the Malian nation (Wing 2014). Looking back at the events in Kidal, Mara complained about his decisions as legitimate:

> When I was appointed as Prime Minister, a governorate of Kidal was established. The Malian army was present and the Malian state worked enough. [...] Services and other functions started to be restored. The armed groups had signed the Ouagadougou Agreement, which made it possible to organise the elections. Group leaders took part in the process, and many of them are members of the National Assembly of Mali. As Prime Minister of Mali, I claimed the possibility to leave to Kidal. My visit had absolutely nothing to do with a provocation: it was just an administrative visit to make sure that the public services were at the disposal of the communities of Kidal, since we considered them as Malians as the people in Bamako. […] There should not have been any limit to the freedom of movement of the Prime Minister on the ground: for this reason, I have no regret for what I did. I would do it again exactly in the same way. The events following the visit took place rather because of a deliberate attack by the armed groups on an official delegation of the state, and I think that this is the way it should be considered and dealt with. They attacked unarmed civilian administrators and killed them, committing a war crime. Ascribing to me the responsibility for death and destruction means giving evidence of amnesia or bad faith. […] Political and public engagement must be undertaken based on principles and beliefs. The first of these principles is that we are a sovereign state that is internationally recognised and has some territories that need to be integrated. The legitimate authorities should have the right to go to these territories (personal communication, former Prime Minister of Mali, 20 November 2016).

The Kidal crisis certified the state's inability to impose its own authority on part of the national territory, showing the limitations on the exercise of its sovereignty, which had been formally re-established after the international intervention (Baudais 2015). The armed groups prevented the establishment of local authorities and prefects and the access to the territory by the armed forces. Teachers and all professional figures who were linked to the state authority were fired. In 2016, one of the main political opponents to the President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, Soumaïla Cissé, described the situation of Kidal:

> After the Prime Minister's visit, we completely lost Kidal: the armed groups came back and the administration defected all the north of the country. Schools are closed, judges have gone, administration moved to big regional capitals and big cities. Today, in Kidal, there is no representation of the national administration. The governor itself is no longer there. [...] The elections scheduled were not held, and this is not happening because people do not want, but rather because the armed groups and the criminal networks prevent it. They cheated the ballot, threatened people and confiscated electoral material. [...] There can be no sovereignty as long as the administration is not present on the territory (personal communication, member of the National Assembly of Mali, 23 November 2016).

France and the members of MINUSMA, which were angered by the initiative of the Prime Minister Mara and refused to secure his convoy on the way to the governorate, were accused of protecting the Tuareg in Kidal. French policy was confronted with its contradictions: on the one hand, Paris claimed support of the Tuareg forces in the struggle against the jihādist armed groups and for the restoration of Malian sovereignty in the north while, on the other hand, it prevented the state to affirm authority over part of its territory. In this view, the connections between special forces, political circles in Paris and Tuareg groups did produce a certain tolerance towards the MNLA members, which were legitimated by the international recognition and were enabled to further strengthen their influence and political weight in Kidal. After the signing of the Algiers Peace Agreement in 2015, the ambiguities of a convergence between French political and military authorities and the coalition of former Tuareg rebels, the CMA (Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad), fostered the consolidation of a mutual-benefitting relationship. As Marchal pointed out:

> In Mali, there have been extremely ambivalent feelings towards French intervention. On the one hand, France was celebrated, during the trips of Hollande to Timbuktu [...] while on the other side it was considered the source of any attempt to divide Mali or to install the Tuareg groups in power. What is true, since there are clearly signals to this effect, is

> [the existence of] a huge ambiguity from the Bakhane force, which needs [the collaboration] of Tuareg people to track the storages of weapons of the militant networks, and thus establishes alliance with Tuareg groups, as well as the traditional or administrative authorities. [...] This is the main reason why Barkhane is silent about the trafficking of drugs, while at the time of the intervention, in the spring of 2013, Serval took action against what it defined 'narco-jihādists' (personal communication, French senior analyst, 13 June 2016).

Therefore, the reciprocal interests of the Barkhane force – which replaced Serval in 2014, in the context of a reorganization of French military presence in the Sahelian region (Hanne 2016) – and former insurgents produced severe consequences on the definition of post-conflict security balances, guaranteeing them immunity and the ability to carry on their own illicit business (Baldaro 2018).[14]

8. Conclusion

The concept of 'legitimacy' refers to the relationship between political actors and people, specifically concerning the right of the state to impose rules on its subjects who agree to comply with them. It steers the discourse over the nature of the MNLA as a political-military organisation representative of the majority of the north-Malian populations, and the political appeal of their secessionist claims. Conversely to the alleged trans-ethnic and regional nature of its political demands, which the presumed social legitimacy was based on, the low level of representativeness of the MNLA – which is essentially perceived as the product of alliance and internal conflict dynamics within the Tuareg ethnic community – undermined its capacity to obtain popular support for the nationalist project in Azawad. The weak social and performative legitimacy of the MNLA explains its marginal role in the political dynamics of military occupation and administrative control of the Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu territories. Salafi-jihādist movements were deemed capable of

[14] The distinctions between nationalist rebel militants and narco-traffickers in Northern Mali has often been highly nuanced, depending on the political and economic interests at stake. The involvement of former insurgents or local 'big men' – or even state officials – in the trafficking networks is still a recurring feature in the region.

meeting the social needs of the populations by addressing the bad institutional governance and deficit of service delivery through the adoption of economic support measures and the provision of essential goods and services. On the contrary, the MNLA members were perceived as invaders and accused of abuse and widespread violence; the movement was largely considered the main driver and cause of the crisis in the North, together with poor state governance and widespread corruption, according to surveys (Bleck et al. 2016). Thus, to the extent that the legitimacy "turns out to be created, maintained and destroyed not at the input but at the output side of the political system" (Rothstein 2009, p. 313), the MNLA's inability to emerge as a credible political actor, failing to address the needs of local communities, illustrated its low legitimacy.

In the wake of the failure of MNLA's nationalist plans in Azawad, the trade-off between 'domestic' legitimacy in North Mali and international legitimacy provided the Tuareg-based movement with an opportunity to switch its political goals, aiming at tightening control over Kidal. Thus, the deepening of the political relations between the French diplomatic authorities and the leaders of the Tuareg insurgents has allowed the movement to gain a stronger position in the power struggle with the state. Furthermore, it fostered the consolidation of an informal governance system in Kidal, defined by the exclusion of the state actors and the monopoly over the legitimate use of force by non-state actors. In this regard, while the French intervention and the deployment of military operations Serval and Barkhane restricted the exercise of Malian sovereignty, by awarding a particular status to the Kidal territory, the Tuareg armed groups steered the political strategies of France in a direction consistent with their own political interests. Therefore, the redefinition of the legitimation strategies through a partial adjustment of their claims and political objectives, allowed the MNLA to acquire a new centrality in the regional balances and to secure an informal system of governance.

The international legitimacy acquired by MNLA as a result of the French decision to grant the secular rebel movement a privileged position in the negotiation

processes for the resolution of the crisis, finally met the resistance of political and civil society in Bamako. In this sense, the constructed nature of an 'Islamist threat', which motivated and shaped the intervention (Bergamaschi 2013), and the political use of the concept of 'terrorism', employed by France to justify its military involvement in Mali and to obtain political legitimacy from the international community (Charbonneau & Jourde 2016), was part of a strategy intended to exclude Ansār al-Dīn from any bargaining table. At the same time, the use of the concept of terrorism emerged in the mainstream discourse of the political actors in Bamako. First, the interim authorities in Bamako capitalised on the perception of a terrorist threat in order to garner international support. In addition, they took advantage of it to discredit the nationalist insurgents, who were accused of having triggered the institutional collapse of the state (Charbonneau & Sears 2014). The different claims of the Tuareg groups – the independence of the Azawad by the MNLA, and the application of the shar'īa all over the country by Ansār al-Dīn – influenced a completely divergent perception of the notion of terrorism and a different political use by the actors involved in the crisis dynamics.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Putin's World. Russia against the West and with the Rest, by Angela Stent. New York: Hachette Book Group, 2019, pp.433.

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Vladimir Putin's Russia is a source of both admiration and concern because of its renewed assertiveness in the post-soviet era as far as international affairs are concerned. More recent developments in the Kremlin's foreign policy, as well as that of Beijing, are indicative of an ongoing shift in the world order toward a new path of multipolarity. Whereas most of the West perceives Russia's increasing challenges to the liberal international order as a threat, other regions in the world look at it as an alternative model to emulate. Why is President Putin acting in this way? Which are the historical and political dynamics that may explain such an evolution in the external attitude of the once main actor within the USSR?

Angela Stent's book offers interesting answers to these questions by dealing with a plurality of aspects related to the evolution of Moscow's foreign policy with Putin. Main topics range primarily from the renewed prominent role of Russia in its "near abroad" to the effects of the Kremlin's balancing policy in the Middle East, from Moscow's conception of its relationship with European states and the UE to its interaction with the most important actors of the Far East, namely China

and Japan. The book also takes into account the controversial relationship between Moscow and Washington over the last three decades. The search for a comprehensive new order in the post-soviet space and beyond is the underlying theme that guides the reader throughout the chapters of this book. In order to understand Putin's "world" the reader should primarily take into consideration the exceptional situation in which the greatest country of the globe has found itself in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse (1991), internally and most of all externally. The author highlights how this event represents a quite unique case in history, not only because it is not the outcome of a major war directly fought by the two superpowers but also for the symbolic value it enshrines. Indeed for many Russians the dissolution of the Soviet Union was effectively "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the XX century" (p.185), as Putin once said, because of its far reaching implications. At once, Moscow suddenly ceased to be a primary actor at the international level and found itself out of the new international security architecture. Putin came into power at the end of 1999, in a situation characterized by general disorientation and uncertainty for Russia. During his tenure in office as President a new idea concerning Russia's identity and its global role has progressively got ahead. Apart from the renewed alliance and convergence between the State and the Orthodox Church, which has produced a new conservative ideology, this new pattern was essentially based on three elements according to the author: the *Eurasianism*, the *Primakov Doctrine* and the *Judo Factor*. First, Eurasianism affirms that Russia is a unique civilization, a bridge and at the same time a synthesis between East and West. Underlying assumption is that Moscow has the right to rule over adjacent territories which belonged to the Russian Empire. As a consequence, the Russian influence in its "near abroad", the Eurasian space, should progressively grow also through the indirect exploitation of "frozen" conflicts like in Georgia (2008) and in Ukraine (2014). Fur-

thermore, the Eurasian vision involves the development of new forms of economic partnership along with the nearby regions. Second, the Doctrine of the former Foreign and Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov advocates for the pursuit of alternative diplomacy together with raising great powers like China and India aimed to counterbalance the hegemony of the United States and, more generally, to provide an alternative to the West. A concrete example in that sense is the importance given to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which includes Russia, China and India, among others. Third, the "Judo Factor" refers to the sport played by Putin since he was a boy, a source of fundamental teachings for him as "in Judo a seemingly weaker practitioner can rely on inner strength and force of will to defeat a larger, more aggressive foe." (p.4) Moreover, like in a judo match before striking a winning blow, Putin has proved to be particularly skilful in taking advantage of his competitors' temporary disorientation and indecisiveness. This partly explains not only recent Russia's political gains in the Middle East, due primarily to its intervention in Syria, but also the preference for bilateral diplomacy to maximize its leverage, notwithstanding limited economic resources at disposal. Conversely to that of the West, such diplomacy is mainly characterized by a pragmatic and realistic posture in which the balance of power and the quest for absolute sovereignty play a crucial role. This is particularly evident when looking at "the gas diplomacy" of Moscow in Europe, or at the negotiations with other countries for selling nuclear technology and weapons like the S-400 system.

Stent's book has the particular and quite rare value to apply a comprehensive temporal and geographical perspective. It offers a clear explanation of Putin's strategy to restore the Great Power status of Russia and its right to be treated as an equal by the West, especially by the USA, all this being the true driver of current Russian foreign policy. There are nevertheless some main shortcomings, namely the

lack of a deeper reference to Russia's approach toward the South America and Africa, which will be increasingly important in the future, as well as toward the political evolution in the Korean peninsula as for the fundamental issue of the balance of power in the Far East. Apart from that, Stent's book is a polyhedral source of valuable insights.

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BOOK REVIEWS

A Wary Embrace: What the China-Russia Relationship Means for the World, by Bobo Lo. London: Penguin, 2017, pp. 224.

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A wary embrace: What the China–Russia relationship means for the world is a useful and concise tool to understand the multifaceted relationship between Moscow and Beijing. Drawing on what he previously labelled as a "Russian-Chinese axis of convenience," Bobo Lo elaborates on the trajectories undertaken by the two countries and disentangles a plurality of exogenous factors that pushed them towards a deeper integration.

The book is divided in four chapters: in the first one Lo traces the relations between the two countries back to the birth of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and the "unbreakable friendship" between Mao and Stalin. In the second and third chapters, the core of his analysis, the author explores the bilateral economic, military and political ties and the different understandings that China and Russia have of the world order. Finally, he outlines multiple likely scenarios that could materialize as a consequence of Donald Trump's election at the White House.

From the historical overview it emerges that despite the ideological affinity, the diplomatic relations between Moscow and Beijing soon deteriorated. The nega-

tive peak was reached with the border clashes between Soviet and Chinese troops along the Ussuri River in 1969 and the so-called Ping Pong diplomacy, with the alliance between the US and China that definitely split the Communist bloc.

Without being historically deterministic, Bobo Lo wants us to keep in mind that over the last fifty years the moments of divergence between Moscow and Beijing clearly outnumbered those marked by common purpose. This aspect is key to put in perspective and relativize the strength and solidity of the current alliance. The dynamics positively changed in the 90's when, in contrast to the scenario depicted by Fukuyama in *The End of history* (1992), Boris Yeltsin and Jang Zemin jointly invoked for a "Multipolar world. Later on, Russia and China – among others – established the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, solved border disputes, and agreed on the "One China Policy". Multiple exogenous factors more prominently pushed China and Russia towards a greater integration: first the NATO enlargement in Eastern Europe in the early 2000's and the "Pivot to Asia" doctrine of Obama, both perceived as two forms of containment by the US against Russia and China respectively. Secondly, the 2008 economic crisis which reshuffled the hierarchies and economic flows in the international system. The (relative) fall of the European demand of energy, combined with the EU sanctions after the Crimean war, brought Russia to partly re-orient the pipeline networks towards China that also launched the well-known infrastructural project of the Belt and Road Initiative across Eurasia. Nevertheless, under the surface of an economic complementarity, with Russia providing energy and arms and China selling products and building infrastructures, there are latent contradictions. The Popular Republic of China is trying to diversify its energy suppliers, especially after the fall in Liquefied Natural Gas prices, by importing gas from Middle East and Central Asia and reducing the importance of Russia for the Chinese economy. Furthermore, it reduced its foreign direct invest-

ments to Russia in favor of other countries like Kazakhstan. For its part, Moscow is trying to contain China and opts for balance of power strategies by taking sides with China's regional competitors within multilateral frameworks such as the BRICS or the SCO. In the Pacific, Russia also tries to cultivate ties with China's rivals, India and Vietnam, and play a "swing power" role in the triangle China-Russia-Japan: on the one hand it often carries out joint military exercises with China; on the other "it played-off Beijing and Tokyo against each other in negotiations over the routing of the East Siberian-Pacific Ocean oil pipeline" (p. 100).

Remarkably, China and Russia have different understandings of the future world order. Moscow strives for upgrading its "swing power" role also at the systemic level by enacting a triple-pole system where Russia fluctuates between Washington and Beijing. Differently, Beijing looks for a "new bipolarism plus" with China and the US as the two superpowers and other regional powers like Germany, Turkey or Russia.

In depicting this ambivalent relationship between Russia and China, Bobo Lo can be placed in the middle of two opposite poles within a growing and open debate in International Relations. At the extremes, some scholars argue that the alliance between Russia and China is a mere illusion (see, for instance, Friedman 2018); others maintain that these relations are increasingly consolidating (Mações 2018, Trenin 2019). The oxymoron *A wary embrace* perfectly condenses Lo's thought in between, though closer to a skeptical position.

In cautiously foreseeing different future scenarios, Lo predicts how institutional constraints, such as the Cold War interpretative schemes of the diplomatic corps and the idea of path-dependency would have hindered president Trump's potential positive attitude towards Putin. If we consider current dynamics, Putin seems to play exactly within the framework outlined in the book, trying to position Russia

as a swing power between the East and the West. On the one hand he searches for geopolitical and ideological contact points with European countries such as with president Macron's France. On the other, Xi Jinping is the counterpart that Putin has met the most during his office.

To conclude, this book is useful to understand the different layers and the complexity of the Russian-Chinese relationship. Nevertheless what could have been further elaborated is the interplay with regional dynamics, such as the cooperation/competition in Central Asia and the Artic.

Furthermore, probably influenced by his background as diplomat in the 90's, Bobo Lo implicitly sees the Russian-Chinese ties with typical Cold War lenses and compares them with strategic alliances such as the US-UK relations in that period. In so doing, he pays less attention to the structural changes occurred in international system in transition towards a multipolar order where the interactions have more diversified and fluid. Against this backdrop, one could imagine that Russia and China will continue to pursue their own foreign policy independently, without binding themselves in a traditional Cold-War-like strategic alliance, thus staying firmly connected in their "wary embrace". The changing nature of alliances has to be a key concern for Western decision-makers in order to deal with new international scenarios.

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BOOK REVIEWS

What is Russia up to in the Middle East, by Dmitri Trenin, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018, pp. 144.

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The civil war in Syria has entered its ninth year and for the time being it seems that the preservation of the authoritarian regime headed by Bashar al-Assad is going to be its final outcome. Many ask what future awaits Syria and the Middle East afterwards. In parallel, Dmitri Trenin, the Director of Carnegie Moscow Center, raises a more fundamental question about the geopolitical implications of this conflict. In his essay-turned-book *What is Russia up to in the Middle East?,* Trenin draws the reader's attention to the fact that the conflict in Syria has "global consequences" (p. 1). To him, Kremlin has intervened there not only to save a client authoritarian regime, but to assert itself in the region, which serves as a microcosm of the XXI century global politics. From the author's perspective, "for the past 25 years, Russia is unexpectedly back in the game, and with gusto" (p. 2). But is it?

To develop his argument, Trenin analyzes the new-found Russian engagement in the Middle East through four different macro-domains which are neither mutually exclusive nor have the intention of being exhaustive: "History," "War," "Diplomacy" and "Trade."

In the first chapter, devoted to what the author calls a "rich historical experience with the Middle East," Trenin aims to illustrate how Russian elites have learned from their past mistakes in the region and currently play a more nuanced strategy. To show how incomparable strategies of Vladimir Putin's administration are to their Soviet and Czarist predecessors', he takes the reader on a historical tour starting with Moscow's presumed inheritance from Byzantium in the mid-XV century, moving to Russian spiritual presence in the Levant through a Russian Palestinian Society formed in 1882, and infamous involvement of the foreign minister Sazanov in the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1915. Later on, Trenin fast-tracks through a brief Soviet-Egyptian love affair under Nasser, and then traces how, after the dissolution of USSR, Russia took a step back from the global stage and the region to return 25 years later with an intervention in Syria, taking a stand against perceived Western-orchestrated regime changes of the Arab Spring and Color Revolutions.

Though informative for first-time readers, the chapter fails in achieving its goal and substantiating how the political learning process occur and how history informs the decisions of incumbent Russian elites. Instead, at many points the chapter offers vivid, but non-substantiated generalizations and metaphors, which in fact do little to help the reader untangle the complicated causal mechanisms behind Russian involvement in the Middle East. Propositions like "sparks from the Arab revolutions could ignite Russia's geopolitical underbelly" (p. 42) often remain pundit-type one-liners without further elaboration.

On "War," Trenin traces Russian military engagement in Syria since September 2015. Here he rightfully pinpoints that saving al-Assad was instrumentalised for engaging the U.S. as peers. The author does a good job in describing how the latest Russian military campaign is different from any of the previous ones: Russia shares no direct border with Syria, fights an air war and in parallel aims to lead dip-

lomatic efforts to solve the conflict. However, some propositions found in the chapter are highly debatable. For instance, Trenin argues, that "at the cost of the equivalent of $4 million a day, the military intervention in Syria has been reasonably affordable to the Russian budget" (p. 79). Taking the ensuing domestic protests and discontent over the raise of retirement age in Russia (Kluge 2018) into account, "affordable" sounds highly questionable.

Moreover, Trenin pays no attention to private war companies in Syria (Sukhankin 2018), which misses an important aspect of modern Russian warfare and extra costs of its heightened "international prestige." Finally, Trenin misreads the situation by calling Syria Putin's "war of choice." He maintains that the likely collapse of the Syrian state and parallel victory of jihadi groups were too dangerous to be allowed in Putin's view, because he "rose to the leadership of Russia an implacable fighter against terrorist and other jihadis, ready to go all the way to do them in" (p. 58). Many would argue that this is a naïve reading of Kremlin's strategical calculations, since it has previously domesticated groups that may be perceived as "terrorist" and instrumentalised them for keeping a grip on power at home. As the most vivid example, the current administration in Chechnya is headed by Ramzan Kadyrov, a former participant in a jihad against the same Russian regime.

In the third chapter, the author looks at Moscow's diplomatic initiatives and highlights its ability to talk to conflicting sides at the same time and keep the appearance of an "honest broker." Chapter is built on a series of circumscribed case studies of Russia's (possible) involvement in main regional conflicts (such as Israeli-Palestinian conflict, disputes between Iran and Israel, Turkey and the Kurds, Iran and the Gulf States), which to a more expert readership may appear rather shallow. Trenin concludes that "the Russians with their vaunted pragmatism and a fair share of cynicism, appear well-suited for this environment" (p. 110) and suggests that

while Moscow does not have a grand strategy for the Middle East, by successfully negotiating regional divides it could deliver 'public goods' and establish itself as a true great power globally. Though thought-provoking, Trenin makes it obvious that these "public goods" would only come about as side-effects of Kremlin pushing for its own interests in the region. How these positive externalities could work in practice, remains to be substantiated.

On "Trade," in the light of poorly diversified Russian economy, the chapter focuses on four sectors (energy products, metals, timber and food) and aims to convey the added value of doing business with Middle Eastern countries after imposition of Western sanctions in return of Russia's invasion of Eastern Ukraine in 2014. Nonetheless, the overview remains more of a mapping exercise and does not flesh out any theoretical implications. However, it touches upon an interesting people-to-people linkage, encompassing diverse aspects such as political influence of Russian speakers in Israel, symbolic importance of the Holy Land for the traditionalist ideology of Putin regime, cultural and economic encounters Russians have with the Middle East by simply going there as tourists, as well as the impact of the Arab world on Russia's Muslim communities. This has so far stayed out of the mainstream academic and policy debates, concerned more with regime dynamics and interactions of political elites rather than transnational social connections, and deserves a deeper look in further reiterations of the essay.

Concluding and to some degree self-contradicting, Trenin again states that although Moscow does not have a Grand Strategy in the Middle East, it "has demonstrated that a combination of a clear sense of objective, strong political will, area expertise [...] can go a long way to help to project power onto the top level" (p. 134). For scholars of the subject, this as much as the rest of the essay, hardly provides any eye-opening arguments. However, *What is Russia up to in the Middle East?*

should serve as a good source for students and the general public aiming to orientate themselves in the nuances of the regional developments of Russian foreign policy. Hopefully, the sketch provided in the essay will be substantiated in its next reiterations, also to appeal to a more specialized audience.

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INTER DISCIPLINARY POLITICAL STUDIES