

## ***Spheres of Influence as Negotiated Hegemony – The Case of Central Asia***

In the XIX century, as well as during the Cold War, spheres of influence were created and legitimized to pursue and sustain order in world politics, as well as to avoid direct confrontation between the great powers. Nowadays, they are considered as belonging to a past characterized by confrontation, power politics, balance of power and coercion. Yet, spheres of influence still constitute part of the present-day political vocabulary, and several regional dynamics are in fact framed and analysed by using this concept. Are spheres of influence returning, or have they simply evolved? How do spheres of influence look like in contemporary international relations? With a specific focus on Russia and Central Asia, this paper adopts an English School approach to the study of spheres of influence and offers a conceptualization of contemporary spheres of influence as structures of *negotiated hegemony* between the 'influencer' and the 'influenced' where norms and rules of coexistence are debated, contested and compromised on. The implications of this are multiple. Firstly, the approach allows for seeing spheres of influence as social structures where norms and rules of coexistence are in play. Secondly, it allows for an analysis of the implementation and the legitimacy of spheres of influence through history. Thirdly, by stressing the evolutionary character of spheres of influence, it puts the notion of their 'return' into question.

### **Introduction**

Are spheres of influence returning? Although leaders in world politics reject the very idea of spheres of influence, for 'the idea of going back to some 19th century idea of [them] makes no sense in the 21st century, [...] that's very outdated'<sup>1</sup> and 'the world can no longer be divided into blocs, or spheres of influence',<sup>2</sup> as recently stated by Andrew Hurrell 'there are certainly all too evident grounds for the view that we are witnessing a return to geopolitics'.<sup>3</sup> Alexander Orakhelashvili seems to agree as well, as according to him, even if not outspokenly, 'spheres of influence are widely practiced in international politics' even nowadays.<sup>4</sup>

This trend has also been enhanced by the progressive regionalization of world politics after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which has created opportunities for new regional powers to develop their power-projection capabilities.<sup>5</sup> The recent events in Ukraine have shown how the Russian government believes that territories contiguous to its borders remain within its competence, while Chinese actions in the South China Sea have all the elements of power-political games played within what is deemed to be Beijing's sphere of influence.<sup>6</sup> World politics seems to be marked again by the presence of weak, contested but nonetheless *de facto* existing spheres of influence in different regions.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, there is the need for addressing the return of spheres of influence both in 'international relations' as well as in 'International Relations'.<sup>8</sup>

This paper aims to show that spheres of influence do not wax and wane, come and go, leave and return in a cyclical dynamic of recurrence and repetition,<sup>9</sup> but rather *evolve and transform* according to the social, historical and legal context in which they are implemented. In particular, the central thesis of this paper is that spheres of influence in contemporary international society can be conceptualised as structural relations of *negotiated hegemony*, i.e. as a territorially-circumscribed hegemony that has to come to terms with the weaker, 'influenced' states, which play an active role in determining its degree of legitimacy and influence through its sovereign prerogatives. In this paper, 'legitimacy' is defined as the condition of being rightful, accepted via an agreement and voluntary consent rather than via imposition and fear, publicly recognized as valid and binding by the members of a given social system,<sup>10</sup> while 'influence' is defined as the ability 'to induce other

states and communities in the system to conform more closely to the purposes and practices of the hegemonic power.<sup>11</sup>

To advance such conceptualization, this paper adopts the theoretical lenses of the English School of International Relations (henceforth ES). This theoretical approach is based on the premise that states live in an *anarchical society*, i.e. a condition where despite the absence of a government or central recognized authority they are able to coexist with a minimum degree of order by respecting commonly agreed on rules, norms and institutions such as sovereignty, borders, basic principles of international law, nationalism and the balance of power.<sup>12</sup> This paper shows that an ES treatment of spheres of influence will fill two blind spots. First, it will add a further theoretical perspective to a concept that has been treated mainly through the prism of realism.<sup>13</sup> Second, by introducing the notion of negotiated hegemony, the paper will argue that spheres of influence are not a rejection of to-day world order, but can indeed be features of contemporary international society.

The case study selected for this paper is that of Russia and Central Asia, understood as the region comprising the republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. This is because of three main reasons. First, Russia has always openly considered Central Asia as crucial for its own territorial security. Already in 1993, during the Tajik civil war, Russian President Boris Eltsin referred to Tajikistan's southern border as Russia's border.<sup>14</sup> This geopolitical reading of Central Asia as related to Russia's security,<sup>15</sup> already noted by authors such as Nick Megoran and Sevara Sharapova,<sup>16</sup> has been recently reasserted by Magda Leichtova, when arguing that 'the Russian concept of its own identity is more closely connected with geographical location and the physical aspects of the existence of the Russian state.'<sup>17</sup> Second, because Russia and Russian interests have been present in the region for centuries. As Kyrgyz President Almazbek Atambayev has argued, 'we are entwined with Russia by a common history and destiny. We cannot have a future without Russia.'<sup>18</sup> Moreover, 'no one has forgotten geography, and everyone knows, that Central Asia has had contact and close connections with Russia for many centuries. We feel the interest of Russia in Central Asia and unanimously agree with it.'<sup>19</sup> Third, because despite its historical role in, geographical proximity to and civilizational commonality with Central Asia, it is still not clear, in academic debates, whether Russia has a sphere of influence in the region or not.<sup>20</sup>

The paper is structured as follows: the first section discusses the notion of spheres of influence in the IR literature and the main tenets of ES theory. The second section introduces the conceptualization of spheres of influence as structures of 'negotiated hegemony', while the third one situates the argument in present-day times, and aims to answer the question as to whether a legitimate Russian sphere of influence is being established, or has already been established, in Central Asia. In the concluding section I will discuss the implications that the analysis carried out in the previous sections has for the concept of spheres of influence and the theorization thereof, and I will suggest potential synergies between the ES and geopolitics, in particular its critical strand.

## **Spheres of influence and English School**

Spheres of influence are an essentially contested concept. Are they simply territorial arrangements? Are they mere projections of influence and control onto a given, exclusive territory? Are they tools, policies or geographical spaces? The essentially contested nature of the concept lies in the fact that there is almost no scholarship on the meaning of it, not to mention on the practices of influence in the relationships between major powers and smaller states in a given territorial domain. As Amitai Etzioni has aptly argued, 'a review of the international relations literature on spheres of influence

reveals the dearth of existing research.<sup>21</sup> What we know is that the concept carries with itself the idea of violating a state's (or states') freedom of association and its territorial integrity when there is no conformation with the hegemon's will. All is linear, univocal and uncontested.

According to Edy Kaufman, for example, a 'sphere of influence' can be best described 'as a geographic region characterised by the high penetration of one superpower to the exclusion of other powers and particularly of the rival superpower.'<sup>22</sup> Paul Keal seems to agree, defining a sphere of influence as 'a determinate region within which a single external power exerts a predominant influence, which limits the independence or freedom of action of political entities within it.'<sup>23</sup>

By looking at Soviet international relations during the Second World War, Geoffrey Roberts describes a sphere of influence as 'a zone of [...] strategic and political predominance unchallenged by any other great power',<sup>24</sup> thus highlighting the geographical and hierarchical relations between great and smaller powers mentioned above. Jan Nijman speaks of 'geographical determinism' when analysing superpower rivalries in the 30 years after the Cold War, referring to spheres of influence as unequal power relations embedded in specific geographical spaces,<sup>25</sup> elements also emphasised by Bogdan and Preda in their work at the end of the Cold War.<sup>26</sup>

Recently, Amitai Etzioni has argued that they are 'best defined as international formations that contain one nation (the influencer) that commands superior power over others.'<sup>27</sup> Following Etzioni, it can be argued that such an understanding of spheres of influence owes much to a realist understanding of international relations, which was predominant during Cold War years. This immediate understanding of spheres of influence based on geography and unequal power became a theoretical underpinning of the coexistence between superpowers and their balance of power. Therefore, he argues,

from a realist viewpoint, a given superpower has no reason to oppose other powers extending their influence by forming [a sphere of influence] over other nations, as long as these attempts do not infringe on the superpower's core interests. This is because spheres of influence tend to contribute to war avoidance, especially when the [...] boundaries are clearly defined.<sup>28</sup>

If this is the ossified, predominant theorization of spheres of influence, then two facts are evident. Firstly, the material reading of 'power' and 'influence' seems to be too narrow to capture other forms of potential control within a 'sphere', such as shaping the norms governing the regional space, or enjoying cultural preponderance within it. Secondly, such a rigid theorization of spheres of influence focuses too much on the idea of 'exclusion' (of other powers) and of 'subjugation' (of minor states) without taking into account the agency of smaller states at all. Therefore, to have a more nuanced, complex and deeper understanding of how spheres of influence look like today, I propose to consider them as *social structures* where both the influencer and the influenced are engaged in practices that ultimately shape the character of the sphere itself. In order to do so, I adopt the theoretical lenses of the ES.

As anticipated above, the ES emphasizes the fact that states, rather than competing and fighting with each other to maximize their power, seek to maintain a certain degree of coexistence between themselves relying on commonly agreed norms such as the respect for each other's sovereignty, the rules of international law and the diplomatic protocol. To ES theorists, the realm of international politics is better conceived of as a *society*, based on common interests and values, common rules and institutions shared by states on the basis of sovereign equality.<sup>29</sup> It is important to specify that a society of states can exist and work both at the *global* and the *regional* level. As the next section will make clear, this has profound implications on how a sphere of influence can be

conceptualized as a negotiated hegemony, given that a sphere of influence is by definition geographically comparted.

It should be noted immediately that the notion of 'society' is not exhaustive of the ES theoretical baggage. In fact, the ES sees world politics as the product of three different ontologies simultaneously at play: an *international system*, where security and military logics prevail; an *international society*, where norms, rules and institutions are in play; and a *world society*, where contacts between human beings, civilizations and cultures are pivotal.<sup>30</sup> With respect to spheres of influence, this tripartition is important to stress, for 'influence' can indeed pertain to all three domains. As a matter of fact, one country can extend its influence over others by military means, thus affecting the security landscape in that region via the almost exclusive provision of weapons, alliances and military training; it can exercise influence through socialization, thus inducing other states to conform to preferred norms, values and institutions; it can promote influence at the level of habits, language and culture, often relying on previous historical linkages. Therefore, an ES approach seems better equipped to capture them in a single analytical framework. More on this, however, will be said below.

The only contemporary systematic theorization of spheres of influence within the ES so far has been provided by Susanna Hast, whose book can be seen as an attempt to gather much-needed theory around the concept.<sup>31</sup> Her book is, nonetheless, a study of spheres of influence as linguistic, metaphorical constructions rather than *de facto* orders or structural arrangements. Before her, both Hedley Bull and Paul Keal theorized spheres of influences as contributing to world order thanks to 'tacit understandings' between great powers, while recently Robert Murray has written against this argument stating that spheres of influence are the product of Realpolitik rather than mutual understanding.<sup>32</sup> However, these authors have focussed on the creation and definition of spheres of influence between great powers, focusing less on the relationship between 'influencers' and 'influenced'. In his work, Keal even clearly stresses that 'the relationship between influencing powers and the states they influence is not [his] central concern'.<sup>33</sup>

With specific respect to Russia and Central Asia, we are often confronted with the absence of theorization. In most works the notion of sphere of influence is taken for granted, and left undertheorized.<sup>34</sup> As Hast puts it, '[Russia's sphere of influence] represents something self-evident, undisputed and unproblematic'.<sup>35</sup> Pouchot and Stivachtis have looked into Eurasia as an international society and Russia's hegemonic practices in it, but they have not discussed whether order in the region amounts to a sphere of influence.<sup>36</sup> Kaczmarska analyses Russia's *droit de regard* in Eurasia, focussing on its attempts to establish a sphere of influence. Yet, how this sphere of influence is implemented is overlooked.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, Shunji Cui's and Barry Buzan's latest publication hints at the existence of spheres of influence conceptualized as regional orders structured around a single great power.<sup>38</sup> Yet, this theoretical argument is not explored any further.

What is therefore evident is that, as noted above, several scholars and pundits do still understand conflicts, unequal relations as well as unilateralism and *Realpolitik* in Eurasia in terms of spheres of influence. However, we still do not know *how spheres of influence look like*, in analytical terms, after the Cold War.<sup>39</sup> In particular, the relationship between the 'influencer' and the 'influenced' is still to be theorized.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, rather than making claims about Russia's sphere of influence, I concur that 'it would be more interesting to ask what *kind* of sphere of influence the country pursues'.<sup>41</sup> The next section introduces the concept of 'negotiated hegemony', and provides an analytical model to understand how spheres of influence can be theorized in contemporary international relations.

## The notion of 'negotiated hegemony' and the structure of contemporary international society

Despite neglecting the role of spheres of influence in international society, ES authors have nonetheless been interested in elements of *hierarchy and hegemony*, which are implicit in the notion of spheres of influence.<sup>42</sup>

Within the ES tradition, hegemony is indirectly, albeit inherently, linked to the institution of great power management, which generally 'serves to simplify the processes of international politics.' It does so because of the inherent power differentials that characterize it.<sup>43</sup> Yet, in his reading of international society, Hedley Bull argued that great power management served the scope of preserving a plurality of communities. Martin Wight, too, contemplated the possibility of hegemony in international society, but as a deviation of the preferable, anarchical plurality of states.<sup>44</sup>

Adam Watson provided one of the first, if not the first, thorough discussion of hegemony in ES theory. He does so by conceptualizing the structure of relations between political communities as movements of a pendulum, or points on a spectrum.<sup>45</sup> On one extreme end, there is full independence, while on the other extreme there is empire (no independence). Between these two ideal-types (for 'they are theoretical absolutes, that do not occur in practice'<sup>46</sup>) there are hegemony, suzerainty and dominion. According to him, hegemony occurs when

some power or authority in a system is able to "lay down the law" about the operation of the system, that is to determine to some extent the external relations between member states [of the system], while leaving them domestically independent.<sup>47</sup>

A hegemonic system, in Watson's thinking, differs from a suzerain system in that the latter involves political control over the unit(s) constituting the system. Suzerainty 'is a vaguer concept',<sup>48</sup> which refers to a condition where one state exercises political control over another. Finally, a dominion is an arrangement in which 'an imperial authority to some extent determines the internal government of other communities, but they nevertheless retain their identity as separate states and some control over their own affair'.<sup>49</sup> These categories, as the images of the pendulum and spectrum convey, are not fixed, but evolve over history.

For example, the institutionalization of spheres of influence in Eurasia over the course of the XIX century demonstrates how international society at that time was openly hierarchical. Given the *occasional* violation of sovereignty that they imply, spheres of influence did not amount to colonialism, although they could be the basis for it.<sup>50</sup> Yet, they created and legitimized an international order that was the reflection of the hierarchical status of the different powers in the system, involving 1) *prestige*, 2) *economic preponderance/expansion* and 3) *responsibility* in diffusing civilization and government, with the latter often used instrumentally to justify the former two.<sup>51</sup> This was possible because the 'constitution' of international society at that time allowed for the implementation of legitimate spheres of influence, recognizable in the fact that such practice was *mutually accepted* among the great powers and dealt with the instruments of diplomacy, congresses and international law.<sup>52</sup>

Conversely, within the contemporary international context, the norm of sovereign equality is deeply entrenched, to the extent that it can be characterised as a bedrock institution of contemporary international society.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, the overt creation of a sphere of influence would mean going against the 'constitutional pact' of the society of states.<sup>54</sup> While great powers still strive to impose their will and power onto other states, especially within their respective regional domains, justifications have to be sought in order to have a 'green light' from the international community and regional states as well. This is evident, for example, in discourses around humanitarian

intervention or the war on terror. In sum, differently from the past, the consent, the legitimacy of the 'influenced' must be obtained, so as not to incur in accusations of revisionism and outdated power-politics. In other words, nowadays there are two dimensions of legitimacy: not just *external* (coming from other great powers) but also *internal* (from within the sphere). This proves that a sphere of influence changes *qua* structure based on practices and norms, and has evolved from the XIX century when only the external dimension was necessary, being the sphere of influence imposed on weak/inferior polities at best or *terra nullius* at worst.<sup>55</sup>

It is exactly because of these normative changes that I conceive of contemporary spheres of influence as social structures involving relations of 'negotiated hegemony.' The element of negotiation, meant as the process through which a state, through its sovereign prerogatives, *accepts, accommodates* and even *resists* different conditions posed by the hegemon,<sup>56</sup> is crucial in the treatment of spheres of influence offered in this paper. As a matter of fact, in contemporary international society a sphere of influence as conceived of in the XIX century would be *legally* and *morally* unacceptable given the importance of the principle of sovereign equality among states. Therefore, in order to justify a sphere of influence, it is necessary to negotiate it and have some sort of legitimacy and recognition from those states within the sphere as well.

The negotiation is conducted between all actors in the sphere by adhering (or, even more accurately, claiming to adhere) to those institutions of contemporary international society that are inherently opposed to spheres of influence, such as nationalism, sovereignty, international law and the balance of power exactly to accommodate a potential excess of influence, which would make the sphere illegitimate by resulting in direct political control and suzerainty. Watson himself implicitly acknowledges this, when saying that 'hegemonies [...] involve continual dialogue between the hegemonial authority and the other states, and a sense on both sides of the balance of expediency'.<sup>57</sup>

Watson's pendulum provides a useful methodological tool to distinguish between negotiated hegemony and more intrusive forms of influence, such as suzerainty or dominion. The key element is that of sovereignty. In a negotiated hegemony, sovereignty is in play as the smaller country is still politically independent and actively accepts the influence of the hegemon. Yet, when an assertion of sovereignty runs against the hegemonic influence, that is a sign that the hegemony is not negotiated anymore, but rather is resisted. Conversely, when the smaller country loses its political independence, then we are in the realm of suzerainty or dominion.

As anticipated above, a sphere of influence conceptualized as a territorially-circumscribed negotiated hegemony can be seen as operating within the following three domains, based on the ES ontological tripartition introduced in the first section: provision of security (international system), broad normative influence (international society), cultural/civilizational cohesion (world society).<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, it involves three analytical components: actors, practices, and discourses. The actors are those people whose actions create, sustain, undermine, counter, endorse the sphere of influence. These are, usually, policy-makers, state representatives (be they presidents, ministers or ambassadors), lawmakers. Ordinary citizens and businessmen also play a role in creating or undermining the sphere of influence, by providing (or denying) legitimacy to it through discourses of acceptance (or resistance/hostility) and setting up/closing up economic relations that may turn to be unequal. Practices, defined as embodied, materially interwoven actions centrally organized around shared understandings,<sup>59</sup> are meetings, conferences, summits, treaty signatures, endorsements of declarations, mutual support in international organizations, copy/pasting of domestic legislation, all of which sustain and give shape to the sphere of influence. Discourses are rhetorical indicators of the acceptance/rejection of the sphere of influence, and can be found at the official level as much as the

level of ordinary citizens as mentioned above. Narratives of ‘friendship’, ‘historical ties’, ‘protection’, ‘ensuring security’ all play a role in legitimizing a sphere of influence, while discourse relying on ‘patronage’, ‘dependency’, ‘intrusion’, ‘preponderance’, ‘bullying’ indicate a resistance to, or at least a contestation of, the sphere of influence. Examples of actors, practices and discourses are featured in the next section of the paper.

The analytical components of a sphere of influence as a negotiated hegemony in the security, normative and cultural spheres identified above are summarized in Table 1:

[INSERT TABLE 1]

As will be shown later in the paper, the element of negotiation brings into the picture the fact that smaller states (read: the elites) within the sphere of influence can push for material as well as ideational gains, thus skilfully bending the structure of a sphere of influence to their own advantage. In my opinion, this makes for a much more nuanced (and realistic) view of spheres of influence when we do not see the influenced states only as victims but as having agency and interests in their role as ‘influenced’.<sup>60</sup>

A negotiated hegemony is therefore different from mere ‘primacy’ exactly because an element of *social recognition* is necessary to guarantee the establishment and the functioning of a sphere of influence. In arguing this, I follow Ian Clark and his conceptualization of hegemony.<sup>61</sup> To him, one should avoid conflating hegemony and primacy (or ‘predominance’), being the latter the mere superiority in material terms over a group of units.<sup>62</sup> A main analytic theme is then that hegemony does not reside simply in indices of concentration of material power, taken in isolation from societal responses to it. Instead, to find proper hegemonic behaviour, one should look for episodes ‘where a concentration of power, at the very least, has not elicited counterbalancing coalitions, or active policies of resistance from other states,’<sup>63</sup> such as those identified in Table 1.

This helps clarify the following theoretical conundrum. The reader may recall that a society of states can be global or regional. Yet, if a regional international society is a society of equals (i.e. sovereign states), is a sphere of influence conceptualized as a negotiated hegemony a negation of it? To be sure, a sphere of influence is *not* a negation of a regional international society. Rather, it is a specific configuration of it, where the regional great power exercises a degree of exclusive indirect control on the military, normative and cultural aspects of the region with the acquiescence of other regional states, which retain their sovereign prerogatives but align them to the preferences of the regional great power.<sup>64</sup> It is a regional international society in which the institution of great power management occasionally binds, without breaking/violating, the institution of sovereignty (as it would be the case with suzerainty or dominion) with the consent of regional states themselves. When the hegemon breaks the limits imposed on the influence it can deliver, such as imposing a Presidential candidate or by sending troops without the request of a regional state, the sphere of influence moves from a negotiated hegemony to suzerainty or dominion, and thus becomes illegitimate.

Having introduced the notion of negotiated hegemony and elaborated on it, identifying its analytical components and its conceptual boundaries, the next section discusses such conceptualization of spheres of influence with reference to contemporary relations between Russia and the Central Asian states, i.e. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

The argument is based on news articles (in English and Russian, from international, Russian and local sources), diplomatic documents and secondary literature, corroborated by excerpts from elite interviews conducted in English by the author with diplomats and experts in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in the period October 2013-May 2014. The interviews, conducted at the time of the Ukrainian crisis, were about the broad topic of international relations and norms in Central Asia, and the excerpts used in this paper refer specifically to the role of Russia as a great power in the region. Furthermore, such interviews were conducted with the belief that the words of those who 'do' international relations in the region, if appropriately triangulated with additional material, can shed light on dynamics of power and legitimacy underpinning the establishment of a sphere of influence. In this respect, I should stress that political events unfolding in the region when conducting the interviews did not seem to have an impact on the respondents' openness, as they were rarely mentioned.

### **A Russian sphere of influence in Central Asia?**

The former section defined contemporary legitimate spheres of influence as negotiated hegemony within a regional international society, where a hegemon exercises a degree of influence that is legitimated by other regional states. Following the tripartition introduced above, such negotiated hegemony can be seen in three different domains: security, norms and rules, and culture. The remainder of this section will look at the three domains and at the acceptance of/resistance to hegemonic practices in each of them.

#### *Provision of security*

In security terms, Russia is the legitimate security guarantor in the region. This has to do with security as much as with identity/status reasons. As argued by Tsygankov, Russia's goal is to secure its status as a regional great power so to aspire to be a global power.<sup>65</sup> For example, at the bilateral level, Kazakhstan imports of arms from Russia have risen, up from \$50 to \$412 million between 2010 and 2015; in 2010, Russian arms transfers to Kyrgyzstan (\$109k) made up 27.9% of overall arms transfers, and in 2015 (at \$505k) they made up 50.3% of total arms transfers to Kyrgyzstan indicating a growth in both absolute and proportional terms, while Tajikistan spent \$496.7k to buy weapons from Russia in 2013, to then spend \$8m in 2015.<sup>66</sup> While these figures clearly represent different economic conditions and possibilities for military investments, they also show an upward trend in importing Russian weapons in the region. In addition, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan still host permanent Russian military bases on their territory,<sup>67</sup> and there is the chance to establish more, specifically an airbase in Tajikistan and another one in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, all states in the region enjoy a strategic partnership with it, and consider its role in the security realm as 'a priority' or 'a factor of peace and stability'.<sup>69</sup> In relation to the notion of spheres of influence, it is important to underline that a 'strategic partnership' often involves privileged access/provision of security, economic and military assistance, exchange of secret information and documents, frequency of meetings at the high political level, privileges not shared with other states.<sup>70</sup>

From a multilateral perspective, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) is the main vehicle for Russia's influence. The CSTO depends on Russia for its hardware, and the Kremlin has agreed to sell military equipment to its CSTO partners at the same subsidized rate paid by the Russian military.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, Art. 17 of the CSTO Charter suggests that Russia has an institutionalized hegemony within the organization. The article foresees that the Secretariat (i.e. the

‘permanent working organ of the Organization’) ‘shall be composed of nationals of the member states (officials) according to a quota based on the proportion of a member State’s contribution to the Organization’s budget’. Given that Russia contributes with more or less 50% of the total budget, it is easy to see a hegemonic position here.

In addition, and in line with the theoretical framework outlined above, there is an element of external legitimacy in play, too: recognized as an official multilateral regional arrangement *ex Art.* 53 and 54 of the UN Charter on regional arrangements, the United Nations General Assembly conferred observer status on the CSTO in 2004,<sup>72</sup> while UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon and his CSTO counterpart Nikolay Bordyuzha issued a joint statement in March 2010 affirming their shared commitment to the supremacy of the UN as a source of international legitimacy and committing the UN to help the CSTO improve its peace and security promotion capabilities in the region while *de facto* recognizing Russia’s preeminent role in the region.<sup>73</sup>

Art. 7 of the CSTO Charter is also important because it includes a provision of ‘exclusivity’ of the alleged sphere: ‘The member States shall adopt a decision on the stationing of groupings of forces in their territories and of military facilities of States which are not members of the Organisation after holding urgent consultations (coordinating) with the other member states’, thus *de facto* leaving Russia with a veto power on the issue, given that this clearly applies to member states other than Russia and given Russia’s voting quota mentioned above. This is important because it shows, again, how in contemporary international society a sphere of influence can be negotiated through the establishment of regional security organizations based on international law. As noted by Orakhelashvili,

regional organizations can serve the purpose both of projecting the regional influence of a great power of that region, as well as excluding the influence and presence of other extra-regional great powers. Regional unity in geopolitical attitudes makes more efficient to maintain spheres of influence or interests, or keep external influence out. This corresponds to the consensual nature of international law, as opposed to unilateral approach in determining spheres of influence.<sup>74</sup>

All in all, the CSTO Charter represents the clearest document that represents the notion of ‘negotiated hegemony’ dealt with above, with Russia acknowledging the role of other partners in carrying out CSTO’s duties and activities but *de facto* retaining the lead, stressing in each document or communiqué elements of ‘stability’ and ‘responsibility’.<sup>75</sup> This is fully in line with what has been said earlier in the paper, i.e. that nowadays under regional arrangements ‘great powers abandon claims to intervene unilaterally in their sphere of influence, in return for the chance to play an important role in a regional arrangement’.<sup>76</sup>

Yet, exactly because of the ‘negotiated’ character of Russia’s influence, there are also elements that somehow run against an outspoken Russian military dominance in the region, showing that ‘the consensual nature’ of international law is in this case based on weak foundations.<sup>77</sup> One example can be the proposal that the Kazakh government made in 2011 to have a Shanghai Cooperation Organization military force as well, promptly blocked by Russia.<sup>78</sup> In fact, it is not by chance that recent talks over a NATO-like force for Central Asia, strictly under Russian command, have been revamped again, with Russian President Vladimir Putin proposing a joint task-force of Russia and Central Asian states to defend the region’s borders from the Taliban based in Afghanistan.<sup>79</sup>

A second example can be Uzbekistan pulling out of the CSTO in 2012, allegedly due to the overly Russian character of the organization.<sup>80</sup> The fact that Russia could do nothing to prevent Uzbekistan from leaving and the fact that Uzbekistan passed a new foreign policy concept in the same year prohibiting the establishment of military bases on its territory show the fact that Russia has to conform to the current constitutional dictates of international society, *viz.* coercion shall not be.<sup>81</sup> It is important to note that also the new Uzbek President, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, has announced that Uzbekistan will continue to stay outside the CSTO legal and military framework.<sup>82</sup>

Furthermore, after the events in 2010 in the city of Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan, where Kyrgyz and Uzbeks were involved in inter-ethnic clashes that caused almost 500 dead, Uzbekistan managed to prevent the opening of a new Russian military base in southern Kyrgyzstan, exactly to curb excessive Russian influence in the region and preserving the regional balance of power.<sup>83</sup> While scholars refer to the unwillingness of Russia to intervene in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 as a sign of 'failed hegemony',<sup>84</sup> it is forgotten that 'Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan did not want that to happen so to not create a precedent. Also, the majority of the people and of politicians was against.'<sup>85</sup> This, again, shows that a legitimate sphere of influence should not lead to military intervention and a violation of sovereignty, unless specifically foreseen by international legal documents and agreements. Otherwise, the legitimate sphere of influence would turn into a suzerain system, and therefore illegitimate according to contemporary international standards, as Russia has learnt from the sanctions imposed on it after the events in Crimea.<sup>86</sup>

In addition, when it comes to disputes between two or more Central Asian states, Russia's hegemony is kept at bay. For example, when Tajikistan turned to Russia in order to resolve border problems with Kyrgyzstan in 2012, this caused protests both in Bishkek and Tashkent. Indeed,

this was seen as a bad act in the region, both by Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. If you turn to a third party, you don't recognise equality, you break the deal, you acknowledge a big brother. You infringe equality; you create a hierarchy. No one liked the move, you don't do this in Central Asia.<sup>87</sup>

This shows, again, how Central Asian states 'embroil' Russia's military and security influence and preponderance by relying on the institutions of sovereignty, non-interference and balance of power when it comes to regional affairs.

Lastly, in 2013 Tajik President Rahmon did not renew automatically the contract for the Russian 201<sup>st</sup> Military Base in Tajikistan, but rather negotiated it for months at the highest level in exchange for better provisions for Tajik migrants in Russia and support in the presidential elections.<sup>88</sup> This examples demonstrates, again, how despite clear imbalances of military and economic power, the Central Asian states are actively participating in defining the contours and the intensity of the sphere of influence, taming Russia's hegemony by relying on their rights as sovereign states and dictating some conditions as equals, too.

### *Normative influence*

With respect to normative influence, meant as the ability to shape norms and rules of conduct, Russia has been considered the fiercest promoter of 'Westphalian values' in Central Asia, as well as of authoritarian practices.<sup>89</sup> This can be said both from an international and a domestic viewpoint.

From an international viewpoint, previous research has shown the high similarity and convergence in voting between the Central Asian republics and Russia at the UN General Assembly.<sup>90</sup>

In particular, strong emphasis on sovereignty, non-interference, respect for borders and acceptance of the authority of the UN are the normative keystone of this group of states, with Central Asian states happy to bandwagon normatively with Russia to shield themselves from pressures over human rights protection and democratization. In addition, this normative convergence is enhanced by Arts. 8, 9 and 10 of the CSTO Charter, stressing the need to find common positions on matters of international politics and security.

From a domestic viewpoint, and especially over the last five years, Russia has often legitimized restrictions on human rights, NGOs operations as well as practices cracking down on opponents for the purpose of 'order and stability'.<sup>91</sup> As has been noted, 'Russia is more repressive than it has ever been in the post-Soviet era,' and this has had an impact also on the 'near abroad.'<sup>92</sup> Russian political scientists and lawyers are said to have had an impact on several legislative practices in the Central Asian countries, and the latter are often quite willing to look at Moscow for new laws to pass.<sup>93</sup> As Mirsuljan Namazaaly, a political economist in Bishkek, said, 'many laws [in Kyrgyzstan] are just copying the laws from Russia; presidents and members of parliament always look at Russia and do what Russia can approve.'<sup>94</sup>

In addition, state visits often work as domestic 'legitimacy-boosters' for the presidents. As a matter of fact, a subtler aspect of the normative dimension of a sphere of influence is the legitimacy bestowed on leadership in smaller countries from the hegemon. A quick survey of trips of Central Asian leaders to Russia reveals not just that Russia is by far the place most visited by Central Asian presidents *overall*,<sup>95</sup> but also it is the usual destination as the *last* trip before presidential elections or the *first* after them.<sup>96</sup> This can signal that ultimately Russia is the depository of the legitimacy of the system at play in Central Asia in terms not just of government but also of governance. It is in Moscow that the Central Asian *raison de système* finds its legitimation. This is mostly evident in the words of a Kyrgyz official:

Russia ensures that it plays a decisive role. They cannot give an official recognition, they can attempt to obstruct, they can attempt to provide some guarantees, for example, if a situation arises in the sphere of security. [Nevertheless], the most important source of recognition, support and legitimacy [for the Kyrgyz government] is Moscow.<sup>97</sup>

As a matter of fact, the special place of the region in the foreign policy priorities of the Russian Federation is still supported by the high intensity of political interaction: during the year of 2015 there were 25 meetings held at the higher and 19 held at the high levels.

However, again, there are signs of the necessity of negotiate some of these norms and their interpretation, in particular sovereignty. Russia's recent actions in Crimea have made Central Asian states warier about its intention in the region, especially given Moscow's interpretation of sovereignty as a political capacity and not as a legal right.<sup>98</sup> In particular, Uzbekistan voiced its concerns especially with respect to 'threats to sovereignty' and respect of international law in an official communiqué immediately after the events in Crimea.<sup>99</sup> Putin's recent comments on Kazakhstan's limited experience of statehood generated a harsh rebuttal from Kazakh President Nazarbayev, who said Kazakhstan will not be part of organizations that pose threats to its independence.<sup>100</sup> In fact, Kazakh Foreign Minister Idrisov was quick in drafting a bilateral Russia-Kazakhstan border delimitation document to submit it to the United Nations, arguing that this was a necessary step to enhance Kazakhstan's security.<sup>101</sup>

Normative resistance has also been encountered at the domestic level, when the Kyrgyz Parliament rejected earlier this year a controversial bill aimed at controlling the activities of NGOs

operating on Kyrgyz soil registering them as 'foreign agents' allegedly to please international partners other than Russia and therefore responding to balance-of-power logics. This bill was modelled on a Russian bill that had been passed in 2012, and Moscow is said to have put pressure on several lawmakers and politicians to achieve the same outcome in Kyrgyzstan, promising investments in much-needed hydro-power projects. When it was clear that the investments would not be made, the Kyrgyz Parliament rejected the bill.<sup>102</sup> Once again, this shows how Central Asian states can indeed resist Russia's hegemony when it becomes too intrusive and when it does not come with benefits, be they material or reputational.

Furthermore, different considerations of equality, balance of power and sovereignty show how even the establishment of military facilities in the Central Asian republics are subject to presidential scrutiny, have to be agreed with them and sometimes can be used as bargaining chip (as the case of Tajikistan discussed above suggests), or vocally opposed as the late Uzbek President Karimov did with the prospects of a new base in southern Kyrgyzstan as noted above. Again, this relates to the fact that now the Central Asian republics are more aware of their condition as independent states, the multiplicity of opportunities that the international environment offers in terms of diversification of foreign policy and their active role in any negotiations involving hegemonic activities in the region.<sup>103</sup>

### *Civilizational cohesion*

The two forms of influence discussed above are underpinned by a strong civilizational and cultural affinity between Russia and the Central Asian states *qua* former Soviet republics. It should be remembered that cultural or civilizational difference from culturally- or civilizationaly-defined world regions is one of the prerequisites for the existence of the geopolitical view of international relations, and Russia is by no means exception in this.<sup>104</sup> As noted by Gadzhiev, 'geopolitics does not research only international relations between sovereign states. It allows us to understand the whole complex of relations between nations, regions, cultures, historical-cultural circles, national economies etc.'<sup>105</sup> Civilizational and cultural terms do give rise 'to a pursuit of milieu goals, a corollary of great power status and spheres of influence.'<sup>106</sup>

An example of how the different strands of influence are tied is seen in how, for example, in multilateral and bilateral military treaties between Russia and the Central Asian republics, as well as in the course of bilateral meetings, there are constant references to elements of common past, heritage, civilization and brotherhood. In addition, according to M-Vector, a Central Asian polling and consulting firm, Russian media make up approximately 90% of the media consumed by Central Asians every day.<sup>107</sup> This illustrates a powerful ability on the part of the Kremlin to shape within the region's public perceptions of Putin and of the various Central Asian leaders (which provides the Kremlin with a powerful point of leverage over the governments of the region), as well as to denigrate Russia's major competitors in the region, particularly China and the United States.

A couple of figures illustrate the point. In 2012, the approval rating of Putin within Kyrgyzstan stood at 90% - a figure even higher than Putin's approval rating within Russia, which was 85% in July according to the Moscow-based Levada Center. Putin's approval rating in Tajikistan similarly stood at 85%. People in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan also both overwhelmingly perceive Russia to be a more powerful world actor than the United States. In 2012, in Kazakhstan, the vast majority of the population agreed that Russia should be the top-priority foreign country (64.5%), while almost

73.9% of the population had a positive perception of Russia in the security, economic and cultural spheres.<sup>108</sup>

As in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, Russian television (although not print media) also dominates in Turkmenistan, a media market that is likely the least trusted in the region in terms of having respected, solid content. Yet, also in this case, there are signs of a negotiated hegemony and resistance. While Turkmenistan has been friendly to Russia on the surface, Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov is wary to share the loyalty of his people with Vladimir Putin. The Turkmen government, while not openly contesting Russian presence in the media, is attempting to force consumers to switch from satellite television, which gives the public a wide range of information sources, to cable television, which his regime can more easily control.<sup>109</sup>

Overall, though, not everything that Moscow does or is willing to do in Central Asia is without hurdles. Once more, the cultural/civilizational influence of Russia is 'negotiated' with the Central Asian republics. For years, there have been tense negotiations between Russia and Turkmenistan with respect to the issue of double-nationality,<sup>110</sup> while Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have started a process of Latinization of their alphabet,<sup>111</sup> and Tajikistan has started removing Russian names from villages to replace them with Tajik ones.<sup>112</sup> One very recent case, again pertaining to Tajikistan, is the suspension of the Russian newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* after derogatory remarks on the country were made in it, showing once again that the reputation of Central Asian presidents is not negotiable in the establishment of a sphere of influence in the region.<sup>113</sup>

Furthermore, while Russian remains the common language between elites, all Central Asian states are developing policies aimed at fostering national languages as means to cement nationalism. As published recently in a policy report in Kazakhstan, Russian is still the *lingua franca* within the region because of historical, diplomatic and bureaucratic reasons. Yet,

with the departure of the old guard, in the person of Rahmon, Nazarbayev and Karimov, the Russian authorities will find it very hard to maintain 'friendship' with the Central Asian countries on the old terms: the fairy tales about [common] traditions and striking the cord of us having similar mentalities will have to be backed up with specific political and economic moves.<sup>114</sup>

This is not to say that Russian, as a *lingua franca*, will disappear, as if speaking one or more languages was a zero-sum game.<sup>115</sup> Yet, with the advent of the new generation of Central Asians, national languages, English,<sup>116</sup> and Chinese,<sup>117</sup> are also likely to develop as means of communication, thus undermining Russian predominance.

Such careful considerations and moves also in the cultural sphere can be explained both with nation-building processes in the Central Asian republics (and therefore with emphasis on the practices of nationalism, sovereignty and balance of power) as well as with Russia's attitude toward Central Asia as ambivalent, sometimes considering them as sovereign states, sometimes as 'not quite foreign'. It will be remembered that already in the early 1990s, Boris Yeltsin argued Russia's ties with the Central Asian republics were 'closer than traditional neighbourhood relations; rather, this is a blood relationship.'<sup>118</sup> More recently, Putin stated that most people in Kazakhstan wanted closer relations with Russia and to remain part of the 'big Russian world,'<sup>119</sup> having added previously that 'the situation in [Central Asia] directly impacts the national security in Russia, the well-being of over 5 million [Russian] compatriots [sootechestvenniki] living [there].'<sup>120</sup> Despite being based on elements of affinity and commonality, remarks of this sort put Central Asian states on the defensive,

stimulating an adversarial balance of power and thus de-legitimizing Russia's hegemony in the region and favouring a multi-vectoral foreign policy towards China and the US, i.e. a foreign policy that seeks to develop good relations with more than a great power with the aim of balancing them.

## Conclusions

This paper has made the case that spheres of influence as conceived in the past are not returning. In fact, to maintain their legitimacy as social structures they have evolved and have had to come to terms with institutions of international society that, in principle, are tension with them, such as sovereignty, international law and nationalism. When such institutions are violated or dismissed, as in the Crimean case, legitimacy is lost and political costs to maintain the sphere rise exponentially.<sup>121</sup>

The case of Central Asia well demonstrates how hegemonic influence and the sphere coming out from it are 'constrained and limited by the rules and institutions of any organised system, and more strongly by an international society whose rules are reinforced by shared codes of conduct and beliefs. Hegemonic pressures inside a system inevitably provoke some degree of anti-hegemonial resistance'.<sup>122</sup> And this despite the fact that Russia cannot feel secure surrounded by unfriendly countries and will try to have a definitive voice in structuring the region's security architecture.<sup>123</sup> Such anti-hegemonial moves have been summarized in Table 1. As far as the security dimension is concerned, they include diversification of weapon supplies, military drills with other powers, joining/forming other blocs or leaving the hegemonic bloc, and strategic partnership agreements with extra-regional states. With respect to norms and rules, anti-hegemonial moves can be considered the endorsement/adoption of norms and rules that run against the hegemon's interests/actions, and/or outspoken condemnation of the hegemon's actions in the region from a normative viewpoint. Furthermore, anti-hegemonial moves from a cultural perspective include diversification of language policies, priority to local media and news outlet, limitations imposed on the hegemon's media, and emphasis on nationalism and nation-building.

Having in mind the ES triad of international system, international society, and world society outlined in the first section of the paper, Russia's influence in Central Asia is visible in all three domains (system, related to security; society, related to norms; world society, related to culture), and as a regional great power it has received recognition and legitimacy. As the late Uzbek President Karimov noted, 'Russia has been in this region, and, I believe, will remain there. There can be no two ways about it.'<sup>124</sup> This presence, as was discussed above, has been recognized also at the international level at the UN, thus conforming to international law. Yet, this by no means amounts to a primacy imposed unilaterally as it was in the past. Through the institutions of balance of power, nationalism, international law and sovereignty, the Central Asian states accommodate Russia's influence while at the same time diversifying their foreign policies and seeking other international partners, developing their own understandings and practices of international norms and combining Soviet cultural legacies with local and national histories and narratives. In other words, the regional consensus over Russia's influence is existent but not fixed, constantly negotiated, based on 'restrained dissonances' and pragmatic 'acquiescence' based on the elites' interests.<sup>125</sup>

The numerous examples of hegemonic practices as well as counter-hegemonic practices in the three fields identified as parts of a sphere of influence in Central Asia (security, norms, culture) have shown that nowadays spheres of influence do not involve mere material primacy over a given, exclusionary territory anymore, as was more the case in the past. Rather, they now involve negotiations and tensions, meanings and understandings, all of which have to be researched if theorists are to make full sense of contemporary attempts to create and maintain spheres of influence. Scholars need to avoid assuming the meaning of spheres of influence as fixed and

immutable. As they are the product of social practices, their meaning and their operation have to be constantly negotiated and redefined according to the prevailing logics of legitimacy of international society at a given time.

The ES analysis of spheres of influence offered in this paper, emphasizing discourses, negotiations, and practices of statecraft, echoes critical approaches to geopolitics and their focus on geopolitical representations of territory and spatiality. For example, the way Russian officials adopt notions of 'security' and 'responsibility' in Central Asia in order to form a security community under Russia's aegis, and the way in which the Central Asian governments negotiate the limits of such community, well parallel critical analyses of geopolitical discourses of strategic regionalisation and regional identity.<sup>126</sup> At the same time, the civilizational elements of the sphere of influence highlighted in the paper, emphasizing a common language, a common past, but also the role of rising nationalism and cultural diversity, aptly lend themselves to critical studies of the geopolitics of cultural communities.<sup>127</sup> More synergies between the ES and critical geopolitics are welcome not just with respect to spheres of influence, but to regions more widely. A fruitful avenue of research, for instance, may be that of looking at how specific regional international societies, as well as the boundaries and the members thereof, are meaningfully constructed, rather than treated as essentialized, by specific political agendas and ideas, based on specific territorial and geographical understandings and narratives.

In conclusion, this paper has aimed to humbly provide an additional conceptualization of the constitution and implementation of spheres of influence, which intends to be complementary to those already present in the literature. To be sure, there is still much to be done at the theoretical and empirical level. For example, the notion of sphere of influence calls into question the status of sovereignty as a primary institution of international society. Can the ES still claim that sovereignty is a primary institution, if in fact it is sometimes relative to an outside power's demands?<sup>128</sup> Yet, the hope is that the conceptualization offered in this paper, based on the notion of negotiated hegemony and on the consideration of the institutional structure of contemporary international society, will foster further comparative work to see whether in other regions other examples of spheres of influence as structures of negotiated hegemony are to be found, and how different institutions of international society, such as sovereignty, international law and nationalism are reinterpreted within regions to accommodate and resist hegemonic practices.

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  86. Katzenstein and Weygandt (note 15).
  87. Interview with Official Uzbek source, Tashkent, October 2013; interview with Mars Sariev, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, May 2014.
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  93. Interview with legal practitioner in Astana, Kazakhstan, May 2014. This practice is enhanced by Article 20 of the CIS Charter as well, which emphasizes the importance of 'coordination of national legislations.'
  94. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/18/russia-tightens-control-over-kyrgyzstan>. For example, Kyrgyzstan, faced arguably in fear of Moscow, abstained from voting in February, 2014 on a U.N. resolution that declared Crimea's referendum illegal.
  95. <http://www.osce-academy.net/upload/CADGAT/CADGAT7.pdf> for the period 1991-2013.
  96. For example, Nazarbayev visited Moscow in 2015 immediately after his re-election, Rahmon met Putin in Sochi after his re-election in 2014, Berdimuhamedov met Putin in December 2011 before his re-election and Atambayev met Putin five times between 2011 and 2012. Karimov paid a visit to Moscow in 2008 two months after his re-election but in 2015 he visited Astana.
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128. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this thoughtful observation.