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Post-Soviet Dependence with Benefits? Critical Geopolitics of Belarus’s and Tajikistan’s Strategic Alignment with Russia

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ABSTRACT

The 2022 invasion of Ukraine has stimulated a debate on Russia’s relations with states which were part of the Soviet Union. Our article contributes to this discussion by focusing on Russia’s two ‘strategic partners’, Belarus and Tajikistan, and exploring these countries’ perspectives. We develop a critical geopolitics framework which accounts for time, multi-level power dynamics and culture. The article provides a new understanding of the dynamics of geopolitical knowledge beyond the West, analysing how Belarusian and Tajik political elites’ decision-making towards Russia has evolved from the late Soviet period until now. While both governments appear to be dependent on Russia and, consequently, generally supportive of its politics in the global arena, the article argues that this alignment has been highly strategic. Throughout the years, Belarusian and Tajik decision makers have skillfully navigated power and economic asymmetries with Russia by using their geographical location and Russia’s neo-imperial mindset to their benefit.

Introduction

Russia’s full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022 has stimulated a vivid debate on Russia’s relations with states which, until 1991, were part of the Soviet Union and, after its collapse, did not join either the European Union (EU) or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). One prominent topic in this discussion concerns Russia’s ‘imperial mindset’ (Nixey 2022) vis-à-vis other post-Soviet states, whose territories are seen by Moscow as its ‘near abroad’. After a decade of post-imperial influences, in the 2010s Moscow’s behaviour towards these states acquired a predominantly neo-imperial character. This was reflected in Russia’s attempts to influence these states’ domestic and foreign policy choices, often by relying on coercive methods (Sagramoso 2020). Building on Soviet legacies, Russian political elites endorsed the idea

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that Moscow’s rule over the Eurasian territory in the past rightfully translated into a say over its neighbours’ domestic and foreign policy choices in the present. Consequently, Russia applied both positive and negative incentives to achieve this goal.

This article contributes to the debate on Russia’s relations with the states of the former Soviet Union by shifting the focus from Russia to two of its ‘strategic partners’: Belarus in Eastern Europe, and Tajikistan in Central Asia. Such decentring allows for a critical investigation of these strategic partnerships from the perspective of subordinated actors. Belarus was one of the Soviet socialist republics between 1920 and 1991, whereas Tajikistan was also one between 1924/29 and 1991. While in late Soviet times Belarus was seen as a model Soviet republic, considering economic indicators and cultural characteristics, the exact opposite could be said of Tajikistan. Despite these striking differences in the Soviet era, the two countries have followed a somewhat similar path after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Unlike several other post-socialist and post-Soviet states which have turned partially or completely away from Russia (most notably the Baltics states), throughout their independence both Belarus and Tajikistan have embraced close relations with Russia. This was manifested, for instance, in a supportive approach towards Russia-led international organisations and global initiatives, up until the present-day war in Ukraine.

From the classical geopolitics perspective, which draws on realist International Relations (IR) (Agnew 2016, 21–22), Russia’s interest in Belarus and Tajikistan could be explained by their space and resources, and the meaning they gain for Russia. From Russia’s standpoint, Belarus’s territory is a transit corridor to Europe. Moreover, cross-border value chains have been connecting thousands of enterprises in the two countries. In terms of resources, Belarus is both an agricultural producer for the Russian market, and consumer of Russian resources, most notably oil and gas. Tajikistan’s territory, in turn, used to be the Soviet Union’s border area with Afghanistan. As for resources, Tajikistan is the provider of a cheap labour force for the Russian market, as more than 10% of Tajikistan’s population are labour migrants in Russia. Classical geopolitics would thus hold that space and space-related factors are decisive in how Russia interacts with Belarus and Tajikistan, and vice versa. In this article, however, we give primacy to the critical geopolitics approach (Koopman et al. 2021; Ó Tuathail and Dalby 1998). We highlight the meanings that Moscow has attached to these spaces over the last years, seeing Belarus as a geographical and symbolic buffer zone with the West which Russia perceives as a threat; and viewing Tajikistan as a similar, both geographical and symbolic buffer zone protecting Russia from an Islamist spill-over. In our analysis, we place Belarus and Tajikistan at the centre and explore how they have navigated their subordination to Russia. The critical geopolitics lens, rooted in political geography, enables us to see geopolitics as
a practice enacted by political actors, which involves strategic framing of geography and power games (see Ó Tuathail and Dalby 1998, 2). However, unlike many critical scholars of geopolitics, we do not dismiss the classical geopolitics approach as environmentally deterministic. Instead, following Haverluk, Beauchemin, and Müller (2014, 32) we see the two angles as complementary, recognising the value of a holistic approach which accounts for geopolitics as simultaneously terrain-induced and constructed in a political and cultural way. Given that the critical geopolitical lens is methodologically suitable for capturing this complexity, we draw on this literature and contribute to it by demonstrating the agency of a major power’s ‘subordinated’ partners. To do so, we assemble our own critical geopolitics framework which accounts for time, multi-level power dynamics and culture. We also enter in the conversation with post-colonial scholarship and bring in insights from the Global East to the critical geopolitics literature, with the aim of generating a new understanding of the dynamics of geopolitical knowledge beyond the West. Relying on our conceptual toolkit, we demonstrate that contrary to the common view, Belarus and Tajikistan are far from being passive and submissive to Russia. Instead, they actively co-construct the meanings attached to their geographical space and thus actively exercise agency in steering Russia’s policy towards them.

The article unpacks the decision-making processes of the ruling elites of these two countries towards Moscow between the late Soviet era (the 1980s) and 2024. Exploring how they navigated Russia’s geopolitical dominance, it analyses shifting perceptions of Russia, which influenced discourses and practices of interaction with this country, and, eventually, adopted policy directions. We focus on political elites, referring to a small circle of influential people who hold political power, wealth and privilege, and who in both countries have been gathered around the presidents who have been in power since the early 1990s. Both Belarus and Tajikistan are presidential republics, characterised by top-down, centralised governance (Nourzhanov and Bleuer 2013; Wilson 2021). By seeking to uncover the underlying attitudes and expectations informing the elites’ conduct, the article opens the black boxes of states and recognises elites’ agency in shaping their countries’ relationships with Russia. Comparing two countries which, despite many differences, interact with Russia from a subordinated position allows us to identify common trends in the critical geopolitics of their engagement with Russia. Albeit both Belarus and Tajikistan appear to be dependent on Russia, and consequently supportive of its politics in the international arena, we show that both elites resorted to strategic balancing and bargaining attempts to mitigate economic and political power asymmetries with Russia.

The article presents the evolution of Belarusian and Tajik political elites’ attitudes towards Moscow by identifying, describing and comparing five phases of engagement, between the late Soviet period and the beginning of
Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In each phase, we deploy a critical geopolitics methodological toolkit inspired by Müller (2008), analysing both discourses (overall frameworks of engagement with Russia which reflect Belarusian and Tajik political elites’ perceptions of Moscow and expectations from it) and practices (the way these elites act towards Moscow, simultaneously obeying and resisting it). We draw on the review of existing literature on political, economic and social developments in Belarus, Tajikistan, Russia and the broader former Soviet Union, including debates among Belarusian and Tajik scholars. The analysis is also grounded in observations from our long-term fieldwork in Belarus and Tajikistan which, by way of political ethnography (Schatz 2013), provided us with contextual understanding of local political and social worlds.

Overall, we find that Belarus’s and Tajikistan’s asymmetric power relations with Moscow, as a former, Soviet-era metropole, were maintained and reproduced after 1991, following a pattern that can be observed in multiple post-imperial settings around the world (see Chafer 2018; Reis 2019). At the same time, the article advances the argument that both states’ strategic alignment with Russia is neither a manifestation of the elites’ passive response to Soviet-era legacies and entanglements nor a result of factual dependencies on Russia. Instead, since 1991 Belarusian and Tajik political elites have actively sought to shape these dependencies to their advantage. They played an active role in contributing to the perpetuation of a dependent relationship with Moscow, with their own interests in mind, and were able to utilise the Russian elite’s imperial approach towards Belarus and Tajikistan to their benefit. They did it primarily by reframing geography: the Belarusian elite has managed its relations with Russia by positioning Belarus as a crucial transit corridor to Europe and as a fellow Slavic nation committed to resist the West in its attempt to expand its influence in Russia’s ‘backyard’; whereas the Tajik elite has constructed an image of itself as a reliable provider of cheap labour and a secular government of a Muslim country and an indispensable security partner serving as a buffer zone protecting Russia from a spillover of religious extremism.

**Critical Geopolitics of Belarus’s and Tajikistan’s Relations with Russia**

*Time, Multi-Level Power Dynamics and Culture*

Originating in the early 1990s in the post-cold war context (Agnew 2016), contemporary critical geopolitics is not a theory but rather a diverse research programme (Koopman et al. 2021). What unites its different strands is an interest in the hidden politics of geographical knowledge, that is how the ‘truth’ about the importance of some locations is constructed and established. Scholars of critical geopolitics point out that geopolitical power relations are not a matter of international reality. Instead, it is individuals within states who,
by acting within the specific institutional circumstances in which they are embedded, create geopolitical relations by constantly reframing geography (Agnew 2016, 20). This observation invites us to shift the focus from Russia to Belarus and Tajikistan, to investigate how these countries navigate and to some extent co-construct geopolitical framings created by Russia. Focusing on three specific aspects, namely time, multi-level power dynamics and culture, we construct a critical geopolitics framework which informs the empirical analysis.

First, drawing on Wallersteinian modern world-system theory, critical geopolitics recognises the importance of time. As geopolitical power relations are not fixed in time, the analysis should account for the speed and motion (Kelly 2006, 41–42). Historicising geopolitical relations enables us to see how hegemonic states rise and fall (Agnew 2016, 24), and it might seem that this was also the case of Russia’s hegemony vis-à-vis Belarus and Tajikistan after the Soviet Union’s collapse. However, post-colonial scholarship points to a persistence of colonial-era hierarchies in the views of local elites in the former colony (Fanon 1963). The case of former Soviet republics does not fully fit either account. To capture a unique type of post-Soviet transformation in this region, we do not analyse Belarus’s and Tajikistan’s relations with Russia only at the present time, but explore why and how these relations have gradually evolved since the Soviet times. In ‘classical’ Western empires, for instance in Great Britain and France, local rulers in colonies ‘were given their share of governing’ (Mirsy 1997, 1), but they would always remain excluded from the imperial elite of London and Paris. In contrast, the republican leaders in the USSR (including in Soviet Belarus and Tajikistan) were an integral part of the Soviet ruling class. Local elites were essentially co-opted, as the central authorities in Moscow provided economic benefits to the republics: funding could be spent by local elites as they wished, as long as citizen compliance in each republic under Soviet rule was ensured (Bremmer 1993). Smith et al. (1998) called this relationship ‘federal colonialism’, while Mirsky (1997) noted that, as a result, local communist elites were firmly entrenched and overall satisfied with their lot, until the turbulence brought about by Gorbachev’s reforms in the mid-1980s. Notably, this type of relationship between local political elites and Moscow did not change overnight with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In both Belarus and Tajikistan former communists either remained in power or soon regained power, and the way they viewed Russia largely reflected Soviet-era patterns, as we show in the next section.

Second, as a post-structuralist approach, critical geopolitics pays attention to multi-level dynamics of power (Kuus 2010, 5). Correspondingly, at the micro level our analysis unpacks the black box of the state and accounts for governance structures and leadership characteristics, seeing them as important domestic determinants of Belarus’s and Tajikistan’s decision-making towards
Russia. Although neither Alyaksandr Lukashenka in Belarus nor Emomali Rahmon in Tajikistan belonged to the highest echelons of power in the late Soviet era, they nonetheless used to be active participants of the Soviet governance system at the local level. Consequently, according to some scholars from the very beginning of their presidential careers (Lukashenka starting from 1994 and Rahmon 1992/1994) their approach to politics has been characterised as a mixture of Soviet and personalist authoritarian practices (Feduta 2005; Thibault and Lemon 2018). Both countries are presidential republics and, as far as relations with Russia are concerned, these are portrayed not only as official but also as personal in official national communication platforms, because of the leaders’ friendship-based relations with Vladimir Putin. At the macro level, we account for broader structural features which shape the two political elites’ space to manoeuvre vis-à-vis Russia. On the one hand, economic dependence constitutes an important factor of both countries’ subordination towards Russia. This refers to economic support in the case of Belarus, and, in the case of Tajikistan, to both aid and trade as well as remittances sent from Russia by Tajik labour migrants. On the other hand, submission to Russia results not only from objective economic asymmetries, but can also be seen as a deliberate policy goal of Belarusian and Tajik political elites, especially in the early years of independence. Similar to classical post-colonial contexts, as noted by Koplatadze (2019, 478), ‘postcolonial societies, especially the elites, often recognise the benefits, however relative, of colonial influence’ (emphasis added). As the next section illustrates, in the case of Belarus and Tajikistan these benefits were economic, but also concerned ideology and prestige. Moreover, in terms of stability, Russia remains an important security guarantor for Belarus and Tajikistan, both of which are members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which is a Russia-led counterpart of NATO.

Third, the critical geopolitics lens allows us to account for the importance of culture in how Belarusian and Tajik elites spatialise their countries’ relations with Russia. As argued by Dalby (1990, 173), ‘geopolitics is about [the] ideological process of constructing spatial, political and cultural boundaries to demarcate the domestic space as separate from the threatening Other, to exclude Otherness and simultaneously discipline and control the domestic political sphere’. This is why we contextualise Belarusian and Tajik elites’ discourses and practices of interactions with Russia by explaining the socio-cultural background. The cultural experience of Soviet governance (and the Russian Empire prior to that) on the territories of contemporary Belarus and Tajikistan considerably differed from one another. Carey and Raciborski (2004) argued that from the perspective of cultural (dis)similarity, only the Muslim republics in Central Asia and Transcaucasia within Russia, i.e. Tajikistan but not Belarus can be classified as colonies. In contrast, Riabchuk (2013) and Oskanian (2021) pointed out that although Belarussians (and
Ukrainians) were indeed perceived by Moscow as fellow Orthodox Slavs (and to some extent, Europeans), they were considered as backward and inferior in comparison to Russians. As the following section shows, these cultural debates gained a new importance after 1991 in the process of constructing new, non-Soviet national identities in Belarus and Tajikistan. At the same time, Soviet-era legacies did not disappear. In present-day Belarus, there are two official languages, Belarusian and Russian, whereas in Tajikistan, besides the official Tajik, Russian holds an official status as a ‘language of interethnic communication’. Moreover, as part of its geopolitical strategy, Russia has been actively promoting the Russian language and culture and a broadly conceived Russian identity in these countries to maintain and legitimise its dominance there, in addition to using the argument about shared history. Such shared cultural identity has been a common strategy of former European colonial powers’ attempts to maintain influence on the territories of their former colonies (see Reis 2019, 49). As for reception of these efforts, to some extent the Belarusian and Tajik elites played along. For instance, in both countries the Soviet past (and particularly the victory in the Second World War) has usually been discussed in a positive light, which is perceived favourably in Russia. However, the processes of post-Soviet nation-building in both countries also imply reframing cultural links with Russia. Our analysis thus highlights the role and meaning of culture in geopolitical power relations, showing how Belarusian and Tajik elites increasingly demarcate boundaries of Russia’s influence on cultural terms. They do it by presenting their countries as spaces characterised by unique, ‘non-Russian’ historical, cultural or linguistic features.

**Global East, View from the Periphery and Post-Colonial IR**

Besides assembling our own critical geopolitics conceptual framework which accounts for time, multi-level power dynamics and culture, we also contribute to the critical geopolitics scholarship in three ways. First, we aim to add to a growing body of literature which explores the dynamics of geopolitical knowledge beyond the West. Most critical geopolitics scholarship has focused on the West, and particularly the US, as a state that has been actively using geopolitics in its foreign policy: against the Soviet Union in the cold war context, and in the 21st century to justify its interference in the Middle East (Toal and Koopman et al. 2021, 7–8). However, as argued by Kuus (2010, 11), ‘if critical geopolitics is about geographical context, then it must be empirically and theoretically firmly grounded in contexts outside North America and Western Europe’. Following emerging contributions on Russia (Toal and Aka Ó Tuathai 2017) and other parts of post-Soviet space (Megoran 2005; Omelicheva 2018), we apply this lens to examine geopolitics in and within the Global East (Müller 2020), by unpacking interactions between Russia and its
two (seemingly) subordinated partner states. Our article follows the calls to explore interconnections between actors and geopolitical practices (Agniew 2007) and examine how geopolitical knowledge is produced beyond the West (Jeffrey in Koopman et al. 2021, 6). We show that instead of a wide range of actors, including think tanks, academics and commentators who are often involved in foreign policy decision-making in Western contexts, in Belarus and Tajikistan geopolitical discourses and practices depend on the personal backgrounds, interests and identities of leaders and the loyal political elites gathered around them.

Second, both classical and critical geopolitics scholars have mostly dealt with powerful core states which exercise geopolitical power over others, with the aforementioned US as the most prominent example (Dalby 1990; Kelly 2006, 49). This article, however, focuses on states which navigate the geopolitical relations which are exercised upon them. We thus show how geopolitical knowledge is enabled, constrained and produced in subordinated contexts. Simultaneously, we embrace Kuus’s (2010, 13) call that ‘we need not look at “marginal perspectives” as such, but to flesh out the relationships between centers and margins’. Looking from a marginal (Belarus’s and Tajikistan’s) perspective at the core (Russia) allows us to provide a new light on the latter’s dominance in the region. It disrupts the commonsense narrative about Russia’s dominance as a natural geopolitical order, which is a Russia-centric, classical geopolitics assumption that underlies much of IR research on the region. By shifting the attention to the periphery and small states, we show that Russia’s dominance is not an objective fact. Instead, it is largely an effect of a deliberate and strategic co-construction of inferiority by Belarus and Tajikistan, whose political elites benefit from hierarchies. This shows that, counterintuitively, obedience can be a sign of an ongoing counter-hegemonic struggle.

Third, critical geopolitics developed as a field of political geography, drawing on various strands of critical theory (Frankfurt School, Foucault and Derrida). Our critical geopolitics analysis, however, is largely informed by post-colonial IR. To contribute to ongoing efforts to decolonise Russian and what is often called post-Soviet area studies, we explore Belarusian-Russian and Tajik-Russian relations not only in the context of the Soviet past, but also referring to the literature on former colonies’ relations with past metropoles, especially France and Sub-Saharan African countries. Besides pointing to continuity in Soviet-era and post-Soviet entanglements between local political elites and Moscow, we also suggest that Belarus’s and Tajikistan’s relations with Moscow resemble the interactions between former colonies and European imperial metropoles. The literature on such interactions points to the preservation of cultural, economic, and political links, especially in the first decades of independence (e.g. Fanon 1963). Four aspects of European post-colonial relations are particularly noteworthy for our analysis: economic
dependencies, the notion of a shared cultural identity endorsed by both the former metropole and the elites of the ex-colony (Chafer 2018), management of bilateral relations based on informal links between presidents of former colonies and metropoles (Reis 2019, 48), and a pronounced military/security nature of cooperation. These insights help us analyse Belarusian and Tajik political elites’ perceptions of Russia and expectations from Russia in both the post-Soviet and broader post-imperial contexts. In what follows, we explore these relations through comparative periodisation.

**Late Soviet Era: Mutual Accommodations Between the Centre and Periphery**

**Belarus**

After suffering heavily in the Second World War, the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) came to be known as an ‘undeniable Soviet success story’ (Ioffe 2004). The republic witnessed rapid development of both heavy and light industry, including high-tech consumer goods, and its agricultural sector was modernised. Between 1940 and 1972, Belarus’s industrial output grew 15-fold (Chernyshova 2022). According to Wilson (2021, 115) the republic’s economic boom occurred thanks to its strategic location in Eastern Europe, at the border of new Soviet satellite states (it emerged as one of the hubs of the Comecon system), as well as the local elite’s ability to exert resources from the central government in Moscow. In the late Soviet Union, Belarus was indeed ranked high in the hierarchy of Soviet republics with its own seat in the UN Security Council and nuclear weapon bases (Chernyshova 2022).

Belarus’s industrial modernisation and urbanisation was accompanied by cultural and societal change. Belarus was among the most economically advanced republics, but it was the most ‘backward’ in terms of national and civic identity (Potocki 2002, 145). The high degree of Sovietisation (and, most authors would argue, Russification) was enabled by the predated weakness of national identity. According to the 1989 census, ethnic Belarusians made up 77,9% of the republic’s population (Wilson 2021, 121). Yet according to a poll conducted in 1991, Belarusians were the most likely to identify as citizens of the USSR (69%) rather than citizens of their republic (24%) – in Russia, the figures were 63 to 25% respectively and in Ukraine 46 to 42% (Wilson 2021, 142). In the 1991 new union treaty referendum, 83,7% of Belarusians voted for the preservation of the USSR (in comparison to 73% in Russia and 71,5% in Ukraine).

As for the governance structure, during the final years of the USSR the Belarusian political elite remained centred around the Communist Party of Belarus. It did not split into ‘reformist’ and ‘conservative’ wings before 1991
and did not really disappear afterwards, being banned only for three months in late 1991 (Wilson 2021, 142). A political opposition movement for sovereignty and, later, independence, emerged in the form of Belarusian People’s Front (BNF). Like other popular movements at the time, the BNF was focused on exposing Soviet era atrocities and pushing for democratic reforms and national sovereignty, but it was weaker than in other Soviet republics in Eastern Europe. The Belovezha accords of 1991 that dissolved the USSR were signed in Belarus, but they were the initiative of Boris Yeltsin of Russia and Leonid Kravchuk of Ukraine, not the Belarusian head of state: physics professor and moderate opposition figure Stanislau Shushkevich.

Although the Belarusian political scene looked calm in comparison to its neighbours, an intra-elite political struggle was taking place behind the scenes. Since the early 1980s, power had been shifting from the post-war fraction of ‘partisans’ to a rivalling elite collective called the Minsk City Industrial Group, led by future prime minister Viacheslav Kebich who was a political rival of president Shushkevich. According to Urban (1989, 132), the group’s economic power was ‘structured on a Minsk-Moscow axis’, which explains the closeness of ties between Belarusian communists and Moscow and the former’s pro-Russian stance before and after the collapse of the USSR. As the Prime Minister of first the Belarusian SSR and then independent Belarus, Kebich promoted a Russia-oriented policy, while making some concessions to the nationalist BNF party which was Belarus’s strongest opposition force in the early 1990s.

**Tajikistan**

If in the late Soviet period socio-economic indicators in Belarus exceeded those of Russia, Tajikistan was far behind Russia – with life expectancy of almost 62 years in 1990, as compared to nearly 70 years in Belarus (UN 2022). Belarus was strategically located in Eastern Europe, which translated into significant investment in this Soviet republic. In contrast, Tajikistan occupied a rather peripheral place due to its geographical remoteness from the centre and location at the southern flanks of the Soviet Union, between Afghanistan and China, as well as the scarcity of arable land due to 93% of the territory being covered by high mountains. In Soviet public discourse, Tajikistan was often described as a ‘subsidised’ republic (in contrast to Belarus as the ‘prosperous republic’), even if research shows that this was not the case: central budget funds were not *donated* but *directed* to Tajikistan in exchange for locally grown cotton (Scarborough 2018, 51–53). This is because in the Soviet centralised economy, Tajikistan’s territory served as a provider of this raw material, which was later processed in other republics. Such a space
and resources ‘distribution’ mechanism, where interdependence guaranteed obedience, was often observed in colonial relationships around the world.

Even with socio-economic indicators behind other Soviet republics (Sievers 2003, 50–69), since the 1960s the quality of life in Tajikistan had been steadily improving, with housing, schools and industrial workplaces expanding every year (Kalinovsky 2018, 117–143). An overall positive social attitude was somewhat reflected in the outcomes of the all-union referendum on the fate of the Soviet Union in March 1991, where the population of the Tajik SSR overwhelmingly voted in support of the preservation of the union, with 96.2%. As in Belarus, during the perestroika period there were no pronounced demands for Tajikistan’s independence. In the late 1980s, some groups started to organise themselves to demand more recognition of the Tajik language (and not only the official Russian), and the local culture in general (Suyarkulova 2011). Overall, however, their postulates were not oppositional but rather in line with Gorbachev’s political and economic reforms (Scarborough 2016, 151–153).

In terms of relations with Moscow, Tajik political elites were comfortably positioned within the Soviet framework, much like their Belarusian counterparts. It is symbolic that during the meeting in the Belavezha forests in December 1991, which eventually resulted in the abolition of the USSR, Tajikistan’s president Qahhor Mahkamov called Yeltsin to plead for a stronger Union (Scarborough 2018, 207–208). If the Soviet consolidation in Tajikistan in the 1920s and 1930s was characterised by widespread resistance against the Soviet power, this changed after the second world war. Top officials who previously were dispatched from Moscow to govern in the Tajik SSR were gradually replaced by local cadres (Nourzhanov and Bleuer 2013, 121). In the 1970s, a distinct local political class was already consolidated. As for the governance style, the Tajik nomenklatura skilfully combined the formal rules of the Soviet system with informal practices of both the Brezhnevite and local patron-client system, accommodating potentially mutually exclusive Tajik (Muslim) and Soviet (secular) features of their identities. Unlike the Belarusian Communist Party, which was a ‘tight-knit group without any real inferiority or guilt complex’ (Wilson 2021, 143), the relations within the Tajik Communist Party were more complex. Regional affiliation, and consequently competition between regions, were central informal aspects of local governance. The Tajik Soviet political elite was thus dominated by politicians of Leninobodi (now called Khujand) origins (Mullojonov 2015, 64–67). The representatives of southern regions, who eventually took power in the 1990s, were back then considered the least influential fraction in the government (Mullojonov 2015, 69).
Soviet-Era Bases of Post-Independence Geopolitical Relations

This description of structural relations with Moscow and internal governance dynamics in Soviet Belarus and Tajikistan provides important insights for our understanding of how Soviet-era dynamics influenced geopolitical relations with Russia after 1991. When juxtaposing Belarus and Tajikistan in the late Soviet era, several structural differences become visible and they form an important material basis for future geopolitical representations (see Agnew 2016, 24). Because of their geographical locations and resources, the two republics were characterised by different economic orientations and, consequently, different types of economic links with Moscow. Among all Soviet republics, Belarus was a champion of light and heavy industrialisation, as well as agricultural production, functioning as one of the Soviet trade routes to Europe, which made it a strategically important republic. Much more peripheral Tajikistan was mainly ascribed the role of a provider of raw materials (cotton) to the Union and was considered subsidised and procured by Moscow. Geographical differences resulted in economic disparities. These, in turn, were accompanied by varying socio-economic indicators and various levels of perceived cultural Sovietisation, making Belarus the most Soviet republic and Tajikistan the least Soviet one.

Despite these differences in the geographical and socio-economic context, several similarities become visible with regard to both political elites’ relations with the central branch of the Communist Party in Moscow, which were highly positive. This happened despite internal differences in the local elites’ cohesion. Although there were some dividing lines within the Belarusian elite, it was generally characterised by more unity than that of their Tajik counterparts. Decision-making in Tajikistan was more fragmented, with highest-level posts controlled by elites of the northern origin, whereas other parts of the government were divided among the remaining regional groups. Both republics’ relations with Moscow were symbiotic, even if the Minsk-Moscow axis was based on a congruence of Soviet practices and values, and the Dushanbe-Moscow one on pragmatic mutual accommodations. In both republics there was no strong push for independence in the late Soviet period, and no widespread anti-Russia sentiments. Local elites were satisfied with their lot within the USSR and did not consider their republics to be locked in colonial dependency, subjected to exploitation by an imperial elite in Moscow.

Overall, looking at these predicaments of present-day geopolitical relations with Russia, we can draw two conclusions. The first concerns centralised decision-making and the crucial role of Soviet socialisation of political elites, both in Soviet
times and afterwards, in discursive framing of relations with Moscow. Secondly, geopolitics is not so much a matter of geography, as an ideological process of active construction of spatial and political boundaries, and in this case political loyalty towards Moscow.

**The 1990s: Reinstating Soviet-Era Legacies**

**Belarus**

The BNF party, while in opposition, succeeded in strengthening Belarusians’ national identity on a symbolic level, for instance by adopting new state symbols inspired by pre-Soviet history. Already in January 1990, Belarusian was proclaimed as the only official language in Belarus, while Russian was given the status of ‘a language of interethnic communication’ (Zaprudski 2007).

Despite this new cultural and linguistic demarcation, the Belarusian elite at large was not trying to cut ties with the ex-metropole: a pro-Russian stance was a rule rather than an exception among the political elite, apart from those affiliated with the BNF. When Shushkevich, Belarus’s head of state from 1991 to 1994, refused to sign a Belarusian-Russian collective security treaty in 1992, he was confronted by Kebich and his parliamentary faction. Shushkevich noted that while Belarus was indeed seeking closer economic integration with Poland ‘and other countries’, the fact that the country was importing most of its raw materials from Russia meant that it could not ‘worsen relations with it in an artificial manner’ (Shushkevich quoted in Burant 1995, 1133). Indeed, the first economic integration documents between Belarus and Russia had already been signed in 1992. Such integration enabled rent-seeking through importing affordable oil and gas from the East and exporting it in a both refined and unrefined form at a higher price to the West (Dobrinsky et al. 2016). Taking benefits from its geographical location in the new, post-Soviet context empowered the Belarusian elite to delay economic reforms proposed by the West, before rejecting them completely.

Lukashenka, infamously winning Belarus’s first and last free and fair presidential elections in 1994, continued along the track set by his predecessor. Lukashenka, despite being characterised as a ‘completely Soviet man’ (Feduta 2005, 21), was not a member of the Belarusian Soviet elite, but had served merely as the director of a sovkhoz, a state-owned farm, in Horodets, Eastern Belarus. In 1990, he was elected to the Belarusian parliament, and in 1993 appointed as the head of a much-publicised parliamentary anti-corruption committee as a compromise candidate between the two powerful political rivals, Kebich and Shushkevich. Lukashenka managed to sideline both, and eventually won the presidency on a pro-Russia anti-corruption platform. Meanwhile, the BNF with its nationalist agenda was marginalised. Writing in 2001, Kuzio (2001, 347) argued that at that time Lukashenka had perceived
Belarusians as ‘a regional branch of Russians’ and did not view Russia as a former imperial power. This view was largely shared by the elite and the general population (Trantidis 2021).

It would not be accurate to say, however, that Lukashenka was blindly obedient to Russia. His own geopolitical strategy towards Russia was based on leveraging resources from Moscow in exchange for political concessions. In 1995, Belarus signed a Friendship and Cooperation Treaty with Russia which cemented this country’s military presence in Belarus and strengthened Belarus’s role as a major trade transit corridor between Russia and Europe. Soon after, Belarus’s $1 billion debt to Russia was written off and the country could purchase Russian oil and gas at heavily subsidised prices (Wilson 2021, 172). In Russia, Yeltsin used this tangible integration process to argue against his political opponents who blamed him for the disintegration of the USSR. In fact, Wilson (2021, 168) even argues that ‘Yeltsin needed Lukashenka just as much as the other way around’. Lukashenka was also interested in integration with Russia because of his personal political ambitions: assuming that it would allow him to play a role not just in Belarusian politics, but in Russian politics, too (Balmaceda 1999; Potocki 2002).

Lukashenka’s geopolitical rapprochement with Russia was accompanied by a turn away from the West. The 1995 referendum put forward four questions, three of which were about Russia: granting the Russian language equal status with Belarusian; (re)introducing the Soviet style flag and state emblem; and deepening economic integration with Russia. The turnout was 64.8% and voters expressed overwhelming support for all three issues (Wilson 2021, 174). The subsequent 1996 referendum enabled Lukashenka to monopolise power vis-à-vis parliament but was deemed non-binding by Belarus’s still independent Constitutional Court. This referendum was perceived as a coup d’état, and no Western state recognised it (Lenzi 2002). As a result, Western countries and institutions halted all substantial collaboration with Belarus, leaving Russia as Lukashenka’s primary partner.

The consolidation of power in Lukashenka’s hands impacted the composition of the Belarusian elite. It resulted in sidelining Lukashenka’s many early supporters, the so-called ‘Young Wolves’, who believed that Lukashenka was ready to marginalise the old communist elite (Ryzak 2021). However, despite his populist anti-elite rhetoric, Lukashenka opted to build a cohort of loyalists from the old nomenklatura (Wilson 2021, 170). The illegal enrichment of this elite, centred around Lukashenka’s Presidential Administration, was largely enabled by alcohol and cigarette smuggling across the open border with Russia as well as a range of dubious business schemes in the energy and arms trade sector (Balmaceda 1999; Wilson 2021, 185–9). In fact, while Lukashenka’s relations with Russia’s political elite were good because he was a ‘Russian
nationalist-lite’ (Wilson 2021, 171), he was less popular among Russia’s new business elite. Their interest in taking advantage of Belarus’s territory and resources, and gaining a share in the country’s economy, ran against Lukashenko’s plans to eliminate all alternative sources of economic power in the country (Balmaceda 1999).

**Tajikistan**

Tajikistan’s independence occurred in a much less peaceful way than in Belarus, as it started with an economic collapse and a social disorder which quickly led to a civil war (1992–1997) (Epkenhans 2016; Mullojonov 2015). The conflict had a clear geographical dimension: the fighting fractions involved former communists from the northern and southern regions, against oppositional forces composed of Islamist insurgents from the north-east and liberal democratic reformers from the east. During the war, Tajik former communists looked at the Russian government, led by Yeltsin, with hope, trying to mobilise its support (Kluczewska 2024a), which resembles post-colonial patterns between, for instance, Algeria and France during the Algerian civil war 1992–2002. Unlike in Belarus, where due to its geographic location independence from the Soviet Union opened a window towards Europe, for the Tajik elites Russia was the only feasible option, especially as China only became interested in Central Asia’s territory and resources in the 2010s (Hofman, Visser, and Kalinovsky 2020).

These hopes materialised due to the Soviet 201st motorised rifle division which had been stationed in Tajikistan since the 1940s. When the Soviet Union collapsed, like many other joint assets, the division was reinstated under Russia’s direct control. With the permission of Yeltsin, the 201st division backed the Tajik pro-government forces. With Moscow’s approval, Uzbekistan also provided heavy equipment and army units (Nourzhanov and Bleuer 2013, 328). This allowed the Tajik pro-government fraction to gain an upper hand against the pro-opposition forces. We thus see here further similarities with European post-colonial relations and ‘natural’ military alliances between former metropoles and ruling elites in former colonies.

Simultaneously with these events, a reshuffling was slowly taking place within the pro-government fraction, with southern elites taking over the northern. In 1992, Emomali Rahmonov (who later changed his surname to the de-Russified Rahmon), a people’s deputy from the Kulob region, was elected as a de facto head of state. In 1994, he became the president of Tajikistan, a post that he still occupies today. Rahmon, born in a peasant family in Danghara in the southern Khatlon region in 1952, had a very ‘Soviet’ background, like Lukashenka. An electrician by training and with a degree in economics, he worked in Danghara in the late Soviet period, eventually becoming a sovkhoz director. While Rahmon came to power as a weak president, throughout the 1990s he managed to strengthen his position
through a divide and rule logic, by playing the warlords against each other (Driscoll 2015, 145–159). The creation of a loyal network, mainly of southern origin, was also possible thanks to the shock therapy and economic liberalisation promoted by the West, which provided an emerging political elite with privileged access to state assets (Nakaya 2009). The network of loyal apparatchiks which formed around Rahmon viewed Russia as Tajikistan’s main partner.

As in Belarus, the geopolitical strategy of Rahmon’s government consisted of a rapprochement with Russia (Heathershaw 2007). Besides joining the Commonwealth of Independent States in 1991, Tajikistan signed the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance with Russia in 1993, and in 1996 also joined the Russia and China-led Shanghai Five (and in 2001 its successor, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation). This shows that Moscow continued to be seen locally as Tajikistan’s territorial protector and security guarantor. The Russian government agreed to this role due to its own geopolitical considerations – fearing that the Tajik Islamist opposition could join the international jihadist movement, which might have had an impact on Russia’s territories inhabited by Muslim populations (Mullojonov 2015, 359). Dushanbe, for its part, actively promoted the threat narrative to its benefit (Driscoll 2015, 147), in this way co-creating geopolitical relations with Russia (see Agnew 2016, 10).

Because of the civil war, not only the political elite but also Tajikistan’s society of 5.5 million people underwent tremendous changes. The destruction caused by the war resulted in the mass emigration of highly qualified citizens (particularly from education and healthcare sectors), as well as 320 thousand people belonging to ethnic minorities whose families (mainly Russians and Ukrainians) moved to Tajikistan in Soviet times (Mahmadbekov 2012, 80). The majority moved to Russia, which additionally cemented this country’s position as the main reference point of Tajikistan’s domestic and foreign policy. Because of the tragic war experiences, many citizens, including politicians, glorified the country’s Soviet past, seeing Russia as an extension of that period (Kluczewska 2024b, 1–3). Subordination to Russia was thus largely seen as the best and natural option.

**Old-New Geopolitical Actors and Framings**

Belarus and Tajikistan embraced independence in diametrically opposite ways. In Belarus, the post-communist transformation was peaceful and throughout the 1990s the country was relatively stable economically thanks to trade with Russia and Europe. Tajikistan’s independence, in contrast, started with a bloody civil war and a major economic crisis. Nonetheless, from the critical geopolitics perspective striking similarities emerge between the two countries.
Because geopolitical claims are socially constructed, critical geopolitics explores institutional circumstances in which geopolitical relations are formed (Agnew 2016, 20). As for decision-making actors, the formation of the two political elites occurred in a similar way. Both Lukashenka and Rahmon, around whom the new Belarusian and Tajik political elites were formed, used to be lower-level officials in Soviet times. Their ‘upgrade’ to high-level politics in the 1990s came as a surprise and had to do with domestic power games. In Belarus’s case, Lukashenka was a non-partisan member of parliament promoted to lead the corruption committee in 1993, a post which helped him become president in 1994. Similarly in Tajikistan, Rahmon became a de facto head of state in 1992 because he was seen as a compromise candidate between the old nomenklatura dominated by northern elite and the oppositional forces. Lukashenka and Rahmon both opted for top-down governance and managed to centralise power in their hands by skilfully playing different domestic fractions against each other: liberals, communist nomenklatura and emerging businessmen in Lukashenka’s case; and warlords, southern politicians and old communist nomenklatura in Rahmon’s case. The governance style developed by both presidents confirms the argument that geopolitics is a largely masculinist practice (Sharp in Koopman et al. 2021, 2). The formation of the two political elites and the decision-making practices which characterised them impacted on how the leaders reinstated post-Soviet linkages with Moscow by spatialising international relations with Russia in the post-cold war context.

The new Belarusian and Tajik political elites had a clear pro-Russia orientation, which was visible for instance in the signing of similar treaties of friendship and cooperation with Russia. In both cases, the pro-Russia stance was an outcome of both a genuine normative preference for Russia and a simultaneous instrumental strategic alignment with Russia by the leaders. Personal and institutional interests overlapped in how they perceived Moscow. Fostering their countries’ integration with Russia and having Russia’s support allowed the two presidents to strengthen their position at home and sideline oppositional parties and opposition within their own circles. This shows that geopolitical actors and practices are interconnected (Kuus 2010, 12–13), and, in the case of Belarusian and Tajik leaders, the personal is political. While the new political elites of Belarus and Tajikistan needed Russia, they also made sure that Russia needed them – and this is where geography was reframed to serve the two elites. Lukashenka made clear to Russia that by supporting him Belarus would serve as a reliable trade transit corridor from Russia to Europe through its territory. The Tajik elite did not have many bargaining chips but to gain Yeltsin’s support it played on the Russian government’s fear of a spillover of the jihadist movement from the territory of Tajikistan towards Russia (Omelicheva 2018, 327). This argument recalled Tajikistan’s Soviet-era position as a border state with
Afghanistan, where the Soviet Union fought a protracted war (1979–1989). Additionally, it played to Russia’s contemporary fears, as the Russian government was facing the First Chechen War (1994–1996) against Chechens whom it viewed as Islamist separatists. This is why the discursive framing attributing Tajikistan’s territory with new importance became effective. Overall, from the very beginning of independence, the loyalty that Belarusian and Tajik elites developed towards Russia was largely strategic. Even if power asymmetries vis-à-vis Russia were already visible in the 1990s, the two elites exercised their agency to the maximum by actively spatialising relations with Russia.

**The 2000s: An Explicitly Geopolitical Decade**

**Belarus**

The Belarusian-Russian relations witnessed overall turbulence in the 2000s and resources played an important role in this. Russian businessmen close to Putin had funded Lukashenka’s election campaign in 2001, but Lukashenka broke his promises to open the Belarusian economy to them afterwards (Hall 2017). Moreover, in contrast with Yeltsin the newly elected president Putin wanted to build relations on a more pragmatic economic standing, reducing what his administration saw as the unrewarded subsidisation of the Belarusian economy. For example, the ‘energy grant’ (oil and gas subsidy) from Russia made up 23% of Belarusian GDP in 2000 (Kruk 2016, 97). Bilateral tensions escalated in 2002, when Russia cut off its gas exports to Belarus for the first time in an attempt to exert pressure on its Western neighbour. Although Belarus was dependent on heavily subsidised Russian gas and oil, its control over the pipelines on its territory, the profitable oil refinery industry, and its strategic geopolitical location as a transit corridor from Russia to Europe continued to yield it some coercive power in the relationship. Russia’s gas cut-offs of 2002, 2004, 2007 and 2010 as well as the two ‘oil wars’ of 2007 and 2020, surprisingly, only slightly affected the subsidisation regime (Kruk 2016; Wilson 2021, 200). But amidst the never-ending rows over the energy deals, Belarusian-Russian integration slowed down considerably.

Meanwhile, as for decision-making in Belarus, Lukashenka continued centralising power, which affected his relations with the rest of Belarus’s political and economic elite. Regional officials were reshuffled to prevent the emergence of regional elite groupings (Matsuzato 2004) and targeted repression was applied to some elite members. According to Feduta (2005, 535), Lukashenka doubted the trustworthiness of some of his cadres, and thus created an inner regime of loyal individuals. This also aimed to prevent an emergence of the Russian faction within the Belarusian elite. Lukashenka acted pre-emptively to resist the emergence of alternative centres of power, and even
restricted Russian mass media in the country (Wilson 2021, 201). Paradoxically, energy trade with Russia enabled the consolidation of his regime by enabling a skilful application of co-optation and repression. Still, it did not yield much leverage for the Russian elite vis-à-vis their Belarusian counterpart that remained fiercely loyal to Lukashenka.

Nonetheless, the Russian elite close to Putin and the Belarusian elite subservient to Lukashenka were ideologically aligned in their view of the West. From the perspective of the Russian political elite, and Putin in particular, Belarus was geographically and symbolically in Russia’s legitimate sphere of influence, which the West (the EU and the US) were trying to chip away. Between 2000 and 2005, the so-called ‘colour revolutions’, namely the toppling of ruling autocrats because of peaceful mass protests, took place in Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan (Ó Beacháin and Polese 2010). Although there were major differences between these turnovers of government, they were all interpreted in the Kremlin as Western meddling in Russia’s backyard. Lukashenka in Belarus shared this discourse, as the Orange Revolution in neighbouring Ukraine sent shockwaves not only to Moscow but also to Minsk. Since his conflict with the EU and the US over the 1996 referendum, Lukashenka genuinely shared Moscow’s distrust towards the West.

However, this mistrust did not stop Lukashenka from adopting a balancing policy with Western actors when relations with Russia soured over the energy disputes. In fact, Moshes and Nizhnikau (2020) argued that improving relations with the West was a way of bargaining with Russia. After the 2008 Russian-Georgian war, Lukashenka refused to recognise the independence of Georgia’s Russian-backed breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Instead, he sought to reset Belarus’ problematic relationship with the West, which was welcomed without hesitation regardless of Lukashenka’s authoritarian mode of governance. In 2009, the EU was pleased to see Belarus join the Eastern Partnership, its new flagship initiative for the six former Soviet states located between itself and Russia Moshes and Nizhnikau (2020). The Eastern Partnership was designed to support these states’ gradual integration with the EU and came under heavy criticism from Russia (Zagorski 2011). Until Lukashenka’s relations with the West cooled off again in the aftermath of the electoral fraud and repressions of 2010–2011, the Belarusian president would speak highly of the EU and its assistance that had helped him withstand economic pressure from Russia Moshes and Nizhnikau (2020).

**Tajikistan**

While the Belarusian elite tried to balance between Russia and Europe, the Tajik government manoeuvred between Russia and the US. For the West in the 1990s, Tajikistan was mainly a recipient of humanitarian and development aid (Heathershaw 2009). However, because of the 9/11 attacks and the
subsequent global war on terror which started from a US-led military intervention in Afghanistan, with whom Tajikistan shares its entire southern border, its territory became of strategic importance for the West (Cooley 2012). As a result, the country become the West’s ally. The Tajik elite quickly realised the potential benefits of these developments. Tajikistan’s terrain became an important transit point for the US, NATO and allied countries, which relied on it to transfer equipment, fuel and troops to Afghanistan. The new international interest in Central Asia broadened Tajikistan’s options beyond Russia.

In 2002, the Tajik government adopted an ‘open door’ foreign policy which reflected a new multi-vector approach (Rizoyon 2020, 123–136). Moreover, the government started actively framing Tajikistan’s international importance through the so-called ‘Islamist factor’ (Saidov and Rizoev 2011), again turning the country’s proximity to Afghanistan into a bargaining chip. In the absence of other resources, Tajikistan’s declared ‘proximity to conflict-prone regions, to sources of terrorism, fundamentalist training centres and drug production zones’ (Republic of Tajikistan 2015) became its main foreign policy asset. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs started portraying the country as a necessary player to stop ‘the expansion of terrorist and extremist groups, fundamentalist parties and movements in the region’ (Republic of Tajikistan 2015). In this way, Tajikistan learned to play the global game using the local rules (Cooley 2012, 16): managing demands of different partners by maintaining a position of authority thanks to its location which gained a new geopolitical significance.

Yet even if, as the then Tajik Minister of Foreign Affairs Hamrokhon Zarifi (2011, 118) wrote, ‘with the beginning of the antiterrorist operation in Afghanistan relations with the United States have shifted to a new level’, Russia continued to come first. In the foreign policy concept of Tajikistan, the cooperation with Russia has always carried the status of a ‘strategic partnership’ and has been presented as ‘an important factor of regional peace and stability’ (Republic of Tajikistan 2015).

This was not only rhetoric. Tajik policymakers have never dared to play Russia against its Western partners. Fierce in its loyalty, Tajikistan joined the CSTO (alongside Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) in 2002; and between 2000 and 2014 was part of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Community (EEC). Tajik policymakers appreciated that their cooperation with Russia, predominantly concentrated in the field of security, was not accompanied by Russia’s interference into domestic affairs. This was not always the case of Western partners and donors who on the one hand needed Tajikistan’s territory, but on the other treated the country as a legitimate target for their liberal peacebuilding and democratisation efforts (Heathershaw 2009). It also needs to be mentioned that, unlike in the case of Eastern Europe (especially Belarus and Ukraine), in the early 2000s Russia did not view the US in Central Asia as its rival. Rather, the US presence helped Russia enhance its own
international prestige (Cooley 2012, 51). This tolerance for Tajikistan’s deals with the US shows that in the 2000s Russia did not (yet) display neo-imperial ambitions in the Central Asian region.

Although Tajikistan’s international security cooperation was thriving, in the late 2000s the consequences of economic dependence on Russia started becoming visible. Russia was not only an attractive foreign policy option for the Tajik elite, but it was also an appealing destination for Tajik labour migrants who were not able to find jobs at home (Samadov 2023). In the late 2000s, already more than 800 thousand people (or 10% of the country’s population at that time) used to work in Russia (Mahmadbekov 2012, 89). While it could be argued that in the field of security cooperation Tajikistan had an upper hand over Russia due to its location and its strategic framing, such economic dependence put the country in an increasingly subordinated position.

**Pluralising Geopolitical Tangents**

Throughout the 2000s, the Belarusian elite consolidated under Lukashenka had a more conflictual relationship with Putin and his entourage than its Tajik counterpart. While members of the former openly criticised Russia, the latter did not dare to provoke it. Another significant difference concerned two different geopolitical tangents along which the two countries’ cooperation with Russia developed: economy in Belarus and security in Tajikistan. This differentiation reveals the pluralisation of meanings that geopolitics gains in international relations (see Ó Tuathail and Dalby 1998, 2).

In terms of geopolitical actors and decision-making processes, the governments led by Lukashenka and Rahmon continued centralising power and were soon joined by Putin (elected as president in 2000) in this style of governance. Russia continued displaying post-imperial rather than neo-imperial characteristics in how it approached Belarus and Tajikistan. Thus, rather than resisting Russia, as occurred in the next decade, both political elites willingly progressed in further integration with Russia. This happened through participation in Russia-led international organisations such as the CSTO and EEC, which generated additional benefits without seriously limiting their room for independent policymaking. A maintenance of the pro-Russia course could be observed in both cases, despite a simultaneous extension of international partnerships by both Belarus (towards the EU and the US) and Tajikistan (the US). Precisely this process, particularly in the case of Belarus, facilitated direct bargaining with Russia.

The described dynamics in Belarus and Tajikistan in the 2000s illustrate the validity of the main critical geopolitics assumption in the Global East: rather than a matter of reality, geographical relations are enacted and performed. They are sites of continuous production of meaning, where boundaries and
dangers are spatialised (Ó Tuathail and Dalby 1998, 5). Although Belarus and Tajikistan are not well endowed in natural resources, their elites managed to make themselves important to Russia by ‘selling’ their non-tangible resources. In the case of Belarus, this was largely about presenting the country as an ideological buffer zone between Russia and Europe (that in Russia’s view was exporting colour revolutions), which allowed the Belarusian elite to benefit from Russia’s growing ideological resistance to Europe. In Tajikistan, it was the discourse on danger, reframed from the threat of jihadist movement with participation of Tajik Islamists to a threat of an insecurity spillover from Afghanistan, that spoke directly to Russia’s imaginaries (Omelicheva 2018, 328). The two governments made sure that Russia was aware that supporting them was also in Russia’s interests. Despite their marginal positionality in world politics (see Kuus 2010, 10), the two governments managed to benefit from the return of classical geopolitical thinking in the international arena in the context of 9/11. As a result, Belarus’s economic recovery continued thanks to energy rents, and Tajikistan’s post-conflict reconstruction thanks to development aid from Russia.

**The 2010s: Resisting Moscow’s Neo-Imperial Ambitions**

**Belarus**

The global financial crisis hit Belarus in 2009–2011. The collapse of the prices of gas, oil, and potassium as well as the sharp decrease in the demand of Belarusian exports to Russia had dramatic effects on the Belarusian economy (Wilson 2021, 250). Lukashenka’s administration reacted by borrowing heavily not just from Russia and international financial institutions (like the International Monetary Fund), but also China. Belarus’s location between the EU and Russia was ideal for China that sought to reach European markets both before and after the inception of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013. While Minsk’s rapprochement with Beijing could be seen as an attempt to balance against Russia, Rinna (2021) suggested that Lukashenka’s aim was to increase Belarus’s importance in regional politics by becoming a facilitator between the BRI and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), thus echoing Ramon’s policy in the security sphere in the early 2000s.

Relations with Russia improved somewhat in late 2011, when Putin’s administration agreed to bail out the Belarusian economy and provide $1–2 billion for foreign reserves, cheaper gas and a new $10 billion loan. However, the subsidisation regime was not as generous as it had been before (Wilson 2021, 258). Moreover, Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea and a proxy war in Donbas generated a newfound sense of vulnerability in Lukashenka vis-à-vis Russia. The low level of national consciousness in Belarus and the country’s past as a part of the Russian Empire were identified as factors that could justify...
Russia’s control over Belarus and potentially even annex territories in Eastern Belarus. As a result, Lukashenka adopted the policy of ‘soft Belarusianisation’ which emphasised Belarus’s divergence from Russia. This process, interpreted by Marin (2020a) as ‘anti-colonialist’, from the critical geopolitics perspective can be seen as a boundary producing geopolitical performance (see Dalby 1990, 173). In contrast to earlier episodes of nation-building, soft Belarusianisation was not elite-driven but elite-enabled: it was a bottom-up process stemming mostly from civil society (Marin 2020a). In practice, the policy consisted of the promotion of the Belarusian language, cultural symbols, and pre-Soviet and generally non-Russian history of statehood. Criticism of Russian policy towards Belarus became commonplace also in the government media, for instance in response to the ‘Medvedev ultimatum’ in 2018, under which Russia’s economic aid to Belarus would only be maintained if Lukashenka agreed to unfreeze the two countries’ integration process within the Union State. Lukashenka replied by saying that Belarus’s sovereignty was ‘not for sale’” and allowed anti-Russian street protests to be organised freely, in addition to suggesting that the EU could take over Russia’s role as the subsidiser of Belarus’ economy (Marin 2020b; Rudkouski 2017). Russia responded by reducing its energy subsidies, without withdrawing them completely.

This form of ‘geopolitical blackmailing of Russia’ (Marin 2020b) revealed Russia’s now dominant mode of neo-imperial policy vis-à-vis Belarus (Sagamoso 2020). It proved successful because the West was indeed eager to normalise its relations with Lukashenka’s Belarus and support the country’s sovereignty vis-à-vis Russia. Marin (2020b) argues that Lukashenka ‘knew how to exploit Putin’s neo-imperialist syndrome’ by joining Russia-led institutions of integration (such as the EEU in 2014) while at the same time resisting deeper integration and loss of sovereignty, which, in turn, was positively viewed and materially rewarded by Western actors. By hosting peace talks between Ukraine and Russia, Lukashenka could pose as a contributor to regional peace and stability despite continued authoritarian politics at home (Marin 2020b). The ‘pragmatic’ policy of increased interaction with the West was arguably popular among Belarus’s political and economic elite, given that despite turbulent relations the Belarusian business had become ‘very well implanted’ in neighbouring EU countries (Jarábik and Marin 2014).

**Tajikistan**

Despite a significant economic recovery after the war, in terms of socio-economic indicators Tajikistan remained the poorest country of the former Soviet Union, whereas Belarus was placed just after Russia which came first. In 2013, the World Bank ranked Tajikistan as the most remittance-dependent
country in the world, with remittances sent home by Tajik migrants in Russia corresponding to 52% of the country’s gross domestic product (World Bank 2014, 9). Considering the scale of labour migration and its impact on the country’s social fabric (Samadov 2023), since the 1990s the dominant discourse about Russia in both academic and political circles in Tajikistan presented Russia as a ‘rescuer of Tajik people’ who ‘took Tajik people into its arms’ (Abdulkhaev 2016, 255).

In the 2010s, however, the Russian government, driven by its neo-imperial attitude (Sagramoso 2019), started using migrants to influence decision-making in Dushanbe. This was possible because Tajik policymakers feared that a potential mass return of over one million people from Russia might cause destabilisation in the country. Negotiating migration-related arrangements with Russia from a subordinated position proved difficult for Tajikistan, as Russia clearly had the upper hand in these discussions (Kluczewska and Korneev 2022, 142). Despite these developments, the politics of geographical knowledge in Tajikistan remained unchanged. Whenever international partners of Tajikistan were mentioned, the Tajik government always placed Russia first. They used a classical geopolitics justification that partnership with Russia was of particular importance for Tajikistan ‘given the position of the Russian Federation in the world and region’ (Republic of Tajikistan 2015). The official discourse also relied on a cultural geopolitical framing, mentioning ‘traditionally friendly relations’ with Russia (Republic of Tajikistan 2015). The nature of the shared Soviet past (as either colonial or emancipatory) was never explained more specifically.

But despite the discourse, resentment was growing in decision-making circles. Besides a realisation that the Russian government was playing the migrant card against Tajikistan, the structure of power in Tajikistan was undergoing internal changes. As in Belarus, the political elite was gradually consolidating and centralising power, and the counter-terrorism discourse allowed oppositional voices to be sidelined – which was denounced by many Western observers as authoritarian consolidation (Thibault and Lemon 2018). Simultaneously with the political elite consolidating and becoming the most, if not the only, powerful domestic actor, Tajikistan’s nation-building made progress. The construction of the new national identity was characterised by Tajikisation, whereby the country’s history, present and future has been redefined as exclusively Tajik (Blakkisrud and Nozimova 2010). This kind of nation-building was not driven by active de-Sovietisation attempts, rather de-Sovietisation was its byproduct, which was somewhat similar to the aforementioned ‘soft Belarusianisation’. In an attempt to form a new historical consciousness, the Somonid Empire started being portrayed as the first Tajik state, which constituted a shift from the Soviet-era narrative of Tajikistan being a product of the Soviet Union (in Belarus, official historiography started to put emphasis on the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in a similar manner). Although
Tajikistan’s independence in 1991 started being celebrated as the biggest achievement in the history of Tajikistan (Fattohzoda 2016), the country’s Soviet past has been neither condemned nor re-defined in this process. So far, Tajik political scientists and historians have been unsure how to interpret it (Rizoyon 2020, 225), and so they have ignored it.

Gradually, Tajikistan’s nation-building started having implications for the perception of Russia as a geopolitical partner, as it provided a new, nationalist cultural framing which implied distancing from Russia. Tajikistan was formally invited to join the EAEU in 2014, but against all expectations it did not do so, despite the fact that the Belarusian and Kazakhstani leaders had made sure to minimise the union’s political scope (Kluczewska 2024a). Russia did not insist on Tajikistan’s membership because it cared more about the accession of bigger and symbolically more important states, namely Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine. But, arguably, this defiance from the pro-Russia course was also possible because Tajikistan suddenly gained a new, alternative geopolitical partner. Within just a few years after the adoption of the Belt and Road Initiative by China in 2013, China became Tajikistan’s largest source of investment and a top economic partner (Umarov 2015).

Creating Cultural Boundaries to Redefine Geopolitics

In the 2010s, significant differences between Belarus’s and Tajikistan’s relations with Russia became apparent. Despite the country’s undeniable economic dependence on Russia’s resources, the Belarusian elite continued to play Russia according to its own interests, whereas the Tajik government became more subordinated to Russia. Despite the negative consequences of the global financial crisis on the Belarusian economy, the political elites continued capitalising on the country’s strategic geographical location between the EU and Russia, positioning it as a necessary partner for Russia and also China. The bargaining power of the Tajik government, in contrast, decreased because of the country’s deepening vulnerability vis-à-vis Russia due to the mass scale labour migration. Although Russia’s economy was becoming increasingly dependent on Tajikistan’s main resource, i.e. cheap imported labour, Tajikistan was not the sole ‘provider’ of the labour force to Russia and thus could not capitalise on it.

From the critical geopolitics perspective, policy-making is never emotionally neutral and detached from subjectivities of political actors. Moreover, these subjectivities are not given, but rather are formed through decision-making practices (Agnew 2007; Kuus 2010, 6). The Belarusian elite could clearly perceive some satisfaction about how they handled their relations with Russia, whereas there was a growing sense of humiliation and resentment among Tajik policymakers. In connection with emotions, the cases of Belarus and Tajikistan also illustrate the performative nature of geopolitical relations. As argued by Ō
Tuathail and Dalby (1998, 4) ‘states are perpetually constituted by their performances in relation to an outside’ Although the Belarusian government continued formally integrating with Russia, for instance by joining the EAEU in 2014, it tried to downplay this cooperation in practice to promote an image of itself as the party who was in control of this relationship. Meanwhile, Tajik policymakers continued stressing the importance of their country’s partnership with Russia, but de facto slowed down the cooperation, for instance by avoiding joining the EAEU without explicitly rejecting the invitation.

Despite different foreign policy strategies towards Russia, what the two countries had in common in this decade was the deployment of culture to create geopolitical boundaries vis-à-vis Russia. In both countries, nation-building accelerated in the 2010s, albeit the cycles of cause and effect were different. In Belarus, the political elite’s newfound awareness of Russia’s neo-imperial assertiveness fed demands for more independence from Russia and accelerated the construction of Belarusian identity as separate from Russian. This drive towards cultural autonomy led to a geopolitical redefinition, with Russia’s influence in the country being portrayed as imposed and threatening rather than natural and benign. In Tajikistan, in contrast, Tajik-centred nation-building made the elite re-evaluate their country’s relations with Russia. This resulted in a growing resistance towards an unequal partnership in which Tajikistan had to listen and obey.

Moreover, China emerged as an important geopolitical partner for both countries and to some extent offered an alternative to Russia – albeit the way the two governments perceived China was not the same. For the Belarusian power circle, China was a perfect foreign policy partner to balance Russia because of its geographical distance, even if relations with this country were based on pragmatic economic cost-benefit calculations rather than gratuitous subsidisation. In turn, the Tajik government embraced a deeper partnership with China through investment, aid loans and joint projects, which allowed China to become Tajikistan’s main investment and trade partner. This entanglement with China, despite the risks of strings being attached to this seemingly mutually beneficial cooperation, can be seen as a silent attempt to disentangle from what was turning into an extremely subordinated relation with Russia. By embracing collaboration with China, Tajikistan and Belarus were thus contributing to the shifting of geopolitical centres in the region.

**Amidst Russia’s War in Ukraine in 2022: Divergencies in Relations with Russia**

**Belarus**

In 2020, Lukashenka’s balancing act between the West and Russia came to an end, as internal events in the country impacted on its geopolitical relations.
Facing unprecedented mass protests against his re-election as the country’s president, Lukashenka applied equally unprecedented violence to suppress Belarus’s ‘revolution without a name’, as it became known. Russia’s support during the crackdown and afterwards was crucial, as without Moscow’s political, diplomatic and financial support Lukashenka’s regime would have likely collapsed (Leukavets 2021; Moshes and Nizhnikau 2023; Stykow 2023). Since 2020, the previous policy of ‘soft Belarusianisation’ has been de facto cancelled, domestic repression has gained new heights, relations with the West have collapsed, and Russian influence in and over Belarus has started to grow considerably, thus strengthening the previous asymmetry in bilateral relations (Moshes and Nizhnikau 2023). Power has remained centralised in Lukashenka’s hands, but his position has become weaker than before given the weakening of his domestic support base.

In February 2022, the new state of the Belarusian-Russian relationship became evident. Part of the Russian troops engaging in the full-scale war against Ukraine came from Belarusian territory, thus making Belarus an aggressor state alongside Russia, even if Belarusian troops have not so far been involved in the invasion. Belarus’s support for Russia has taken many forms, as it has for instance provided logistical support, training and medical care for Russian troops. In the international arena, Belarus has supported and justified Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and abandoned its earlier functional relations with Kyiv. At the same time, however, Lukashenka has voiced his readiness to mediate between Russia and Ukraine (Ioffe 2023), probing whether it would be possible to return to the practice of bargaining with Russia by suggesting that rapprochement with the West was a possibility. Although it appears unlikely that the EU and the US would be willing to reset relations anytime soon, Astapenia (2023) argued that this should indeed happen because it is in the West’s security interest to avoid Russia’s absorption of Belarus.

The post-2020 crackdown has also left a mark on the Belarusian elite. In the previous decade, opinion polls recorded an overall rise in public support for liberal political and economic values, a tendency that was also seen in Lukashenka’s appointments (Krawatzek and Langbein 2022). A relatively large number of regime insiders appointed in the 2010s were seen not just as Lukashenka loyalists but also as pragmatic and moderate technocrats, if not outright liberals. After the 2020 revolution, however, those who were considered reform proponents lost their offices, while the number of officials with ties to the security services increased (Shraibman 2020). At the same time, Nizhnikau (2022) suggested that the links between the Belarusian and Russian elites were becoming stronger. In the past, Lukashenka had deliberately obstructed the formation of personal links between the Belarusian and Russian political elites and acted as the main allocator of Russia-sourced rents in Belarus, but after 2020 was no longer able to do so due to increased...
pressure from Moscow. In effect, the Belarusian elite gained new access points to Russia and Russian resources. At the same time, the complete break with the West, marked by the introduction of tougher sanctions against Belarus, has ‘deepened the discontent in the ranks of the Belarusian nomenklatura’ (Nizhnikau 2022) due to the loss of the Ukrainian and European markets, as well as the closing of transit routes. Although the elite that remains in the country is still loyal to Lukashenka, it seems that Russia, and not the Belarusian president, is now seen as the guarantor of their future (Nizhnikau 2022). Potential reorientations of the economic and political elite’s loyalty from Lukashenka to Moscow would constitute a major shift in how geopolitical relations between Belarus and Russia have been constructed so far.

**Tajikistan**

While Belarus supported Russia’s war, becoming a co-aggressor, the Tajik government went against Russia’s expectations and decided to ignore the war in Ukraine. This came as a surprise, as Russian high-level politicians considered Tajikistan its natural ally. On numerous occasions of bi- or multilateral meetings, they alluded to a personal relationship between Rahmon and Putin and, consequently, expected that the country would support Russia’s war (see TASS 2022). From the very beginning, Tajik policymakers decided to remain silent about the Russo-Ukrainian conflict.

Such silence was different from neutrality, as the latter would imply at least an acknowledgement that a conflict was taking place, followed by taking a neutral position. However, Tajik policymakers avoided making any statements on the war, not even mentioning it in any announcements directed at both domestic and international audiences. As argued by Dadabaev and Sonoda (2023), such silence should be seen as a ‘strategic narrative’. On the one hand, silence can be interpreted as a lack of agency, as it showed that Tajikistan lacked foreign policy options and avoided taking sides, realising that any stance, pro or against Russia, would result in their isolation and cuts in aid by either Western partners or Russia. On the other hand, silence can be understood as an expression of agency because policymakers avoided the pressure to take sides and chose what they saw as the safest policy option: a luxury of manoeuvring that Lukashenka did not have in this situation. Regardless of the interpretation, Tajikistan’s stance revealed a major change: an undeclared but visible distancing from Russia (Kluczewska 2024a).

Western sanctions against Russia and the consequent economic crisis in this country had a negative impact on the earnings of Tajik labour migrants, as well as on the Tajik economy which remains largely dependent on imports from Russia. As a result of the changing position of Russia in world politics and its isolation from the West, the Russian government ceased to be perceived by the Tajik elite as a reliable partner and desirable patron of Tajikistan. This explains
why at the Russia-Central Asia summit in Astana in October 2022 Rahmon unexpectedly deferred from his speech and spontaneously addressed Putin by criticising Russia’s approach to Central Asia. He said: ‘You’ll have to forgive me for saying this, but then [in Soviet times] just like now, no attention has been paid to the small republics, the small countries’ (AKIpress News 2022). He demanded more ‘attention’ to his country, understood as both funding and respect, implying that in the new geopolitical constellation in the region Tajikistan’s support for Russia should no longer be taken for granted and would not be unconditional (Kluczewska 2024b, 8–9).

**Geopolitical Reconfigurations Amidst Russia’s Full-Scale War Against Ukraine**

The new international geopolitical context, provoked by Russia’s war on Ukraine, proved to be a critical juncture in Belarus’s and Tajikistan’s relations with Russia. In the face of Russia’s isolation by the West and introduction of several rounds of sanctions against Russia, the value of Belarus and Tajikistan as Russia’s partners increased automatically. This, as it might seem, increased their autonomy. However, Russia’s aggressive quest for geopolitical domination in the Global East revealed the scale of Russia’s neo-imperial approach to countries which it sees as its peripheries (see Sagramoso 2020).

Contrary to previous trends, Belarusian and Tajik political elites responded to Russia’s war in different ways: Belarus by complying and Tajikistan by ignoring it. As the literature of critical geopolitics suggests, the determinants of these diverging perspectives are to be found in practices of statecraft. Foreign policy strategies are largely made possible by domestic practices because they set boundaries for decision-making actors (Ó Tuathail and Dalby 1998, 3). While both countries have a similar, subordinated relation with Russia, their divergent responses to Russia’s war in Ukraine can thus be explained by different degrees of stability of political elites in both countries.

The 2020 revolution in Belarus destabilised Lukashenka’s regime not only because it demonstrated a lack of domestic legitimacy, but also because it resulted in heightened surveillance and repression within the elite, marginalisation of pro-Western voices, and a growing Russian leverage. Belarus’s isolation from the West accelerated the government’s policy towards further integration with Russia, which in turn translated into explicit support for Russia in the Ukraine war and, consequently, even tougher Western sanctions against Belarus. China’s interest in the country has waned, too, since the closure of the transit corridor to Europe due to sanctions. As a result, the Belarusian elite has been deprived of an access to markets abroad, fuelling internal discontent and regime reconfiguration away from Lukashenka and towards Moscow. In Tajikistan, in contrast, the government has remained stable and has not faced any significant internal or external threats. Given that for years Tajikistan has been
intensively building its multi-directional foreign policy partnerships with Russia (without questioning its primacy), the West and ‘alternative’ partners and development donors ranging from China to the Persian Gulf countries, it had more international options than Belarus. Realising how much was at stake and that some partnerships would inevitably suffer if the country either supported or condemned Russia’s war in Ukraine, Tajik policymakers decided that completely ignoring the war, without positioning itself at all, was the safest option. This is why silence can indeed be interpreted as a strategic geopolitical discourse.

**Conclusion**

Regardless of whether the Soviet past of Tajikistan and Belarus can be described as colonial or not, as there are different scholarly views on this matter (Kalinovsky 2018; Oskinian 2021; Riabchuk 2013), these countries’ relations with Russia in the 1990s and early 2000s resembled relations between former colonies and metropoles, especially Sub-Saharan countries and France. Like in the case of post-colonial relations, post-Soviet international relations also largely relied upon economic dependencies, the idea of a shared cultural identity, informal management of bilateral relations and a security-focused cooperation. In the first two decades after the Soviet collapse, Russia’s post-imperial integration efforts in the former Soviet space were relatively soft, ranging from language and culture promotion to informal regime security provision and economic collaboration offers that were hard to turn down, practices that are well documented in the literature of post-colonial relations (see Chafer 2018; Reis 2019). However, in the 2010s, Russia’s policy began to acquire neo-imperial traits, marked by economic blackmailing and expansionist rhetoric and deeds. Russia’s geopolitical quest in the Global East, i.e. its attempts to control territories and resources since the Russo-Georgian war in 2008, cannot only be explained by political realism and classical geopolitics. This neo-imperial shift was fuelled by new meanings attributed to its neighbours by Russia (Omelicheva 2018; Sagramoso 2020).

Engaging with academic literature on how ex-colonies spatialise their relations with former European colonial powers inspired us to shift the focus from Russia to Belarus and Tajikistan, and explore how geographical knowledge is produced, constrained and reappropriated in subordinated contexts in the former Soviet Union. Consequently, in this article we have examined Russia’s neo-imperial shift from the perspective of states upon whom Russia projects its geopolitical power, i.e. investigating the power of the disempowered. Using the critical geopolitics perspective, we investigated how political elites in Belarus and Tajikistan have navigated geopolitical relations with Moscow since the late Soviet period until now. Focusing on decision-making dynamics and perceptions, the article has
analysed what the two political elites expected from Moscow, and how they adjusted and geopoliticised their strategies to achieve their goals. By juxtaposing Belarus and Tajikistan, and analysing them in a comparative perspective, we unpacked what could be defined as post-colonial geopolitical relations within the Global East, in this way contributing to the critical geopolitics literature that has largely focused on production of geopolitical knowledge in the West (Jeffrey in Koopman et al. 2021, 6). The argument which emerges from this analysis is that far from being submissive to the Russian government, which clearly had the upper hand over them in the classical geopolitical reading of space and resources, Tajik and Belarusian elites have been advancing their own interests by tapping into both Russia’s state interests and its (first post- and then neo-) ‘imperial mentality’. They co-created relations of strategic alignment with Russia by framing geography and attributing new importance to their location and resources. Embracing a marginal perspective in critical geopolitics (Kuus 2010, 13) allowed us to disrupt the common-sense narrative about Russia’s dominance in the post-Soviet region due to Russia’s power and its ‘junior’ partners’ powerlessness.

Since its origins in the 1990s, internal power and decision-making dynamics have always been of crucial importance for a critical geopolitics analysis (Ó Tuathail and Dalby 1998, 3). In this article, we assembled an analytical framework which highlights three specific dimensions – and which, as we argue, can be used by scholars to examine critical geopolitics in other contexts. First, paying attention to time and historicising geopolitical power relations between states allows researchers to account for continuities and changes in these relations, as well as highlight hidden, long-term patterns of subversion by the subordinated parties. Second, recognising multi-level power dynamics can help us to recognise a simultaneous importance of micro (e.g. governance structure) and macro (e.g. the global capitalist system) level dynamics in the construction of geopolitical knowledge. Third, zooming in at the role of culture reveals that geopolitical relations are not only spatial, but also involve constant demarcating of cultural boundaries vis-à-vis the Other.

Applying this framework to analyse Belarus’s and Tajikistan’s relations with Russia, we see that since their independence in 1991, the political elites of both countries had similar expectations from Russia. They actively looked for Moscow’s support for their countries, which they de facto equated with support for the narrow political circles surrounding the presidents. In addition to symbolic support, there has always been a tangible component – with Belarusian power circles, as Russia’s clients, waiting for rent from the transit of trade, and their Tajik counterparts expecting Russian aid to counter security threats. Moreover, the two elites expected Russia to accept the non-exclusivity of these relationships: they wanted some degree of freedom to enter
partnerships with the EU, US, China, and others. Besides having similar expectations from Moscow, both political elites made sure that the Russian government also saw them as necessary partners, and they used geopolitical arguments to achieve this. Belarus had positioned itself as a trade corridor to Europe, a symbolic and physical buffer zone shielding Russia from the EU and NATO, and a fellow Slavic nation in the ‘russkiy mir’ (Ru. Russian world). Tajikistan, in turn, portrayed itself as a necessary security partner to counter a potential threat of the international jihadist movement coming from Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Throughout their independence, Belarusian and Tajik elites maintained an overall pro-Russia perspective. In both cases, positive relations with Russia were presented to domestic audiences as an achievement of the political leaders as individuals (Lukashenka and Rahmon) rather than institutions (heads of state or multilateral organisations). There was thus a big focus on the leaders’ personal friendship or, if needed, tough, equal relations with Putin. However, some differences can be identified regarding how the two power circles navigated relations with Moscow in practical terms. Belarus had significant bargaining power due to its strategic location between Russia and Europe and so the Belarusian government could adopt a more assertive strategy between Russia and Europe, with several attempts to play Russia according to Lukashenka’s wishes and interests. Lukashenka clearly wanted to be, and be seen as, a master strategist who was not Putin’s puppet, and so relations between Belarus and Russia witnessed constant ups and downs. Tajikistan, in turn, had fewer bargaining chips and, subsequently, Tajik political elites behaved in a humble way towards Moscow, never openly arguing or contradicting it. At the same time, however, they were slowly and steadily building durable relations with other international partners.

In the long term, the differences in internal power dynamics and strategies adopted by Belarusian and Tajik political elites proved to have implications for how they positioned themselves towards Russia after it launched its full-scale invasion against Ukraine in 2022. The Belarusian government, isolated internationally after the wave of repression at home in 2020, had no alternative but to support Russia. While it is still trying to return to its earlier forms of balancing and bargaining, a deep-rooted and multi-sited integration with Russia has been progressing on the ground. Surprisingly for Russia, the Tajik government did not take any stance on Russia’s war in order not to jeopardise its relations with Western partners. In this way, Tajikistan, as a seemingly weaker actor than Belarus, managed to maintain more independence from Russia.

A critical geopolitics analysis, which accounts for internal decision-making dynamics, the role of culture and the historical dimension, challenges common realist assumptions about geopolitical dominance as
a prerogative of the most powerful states. It shows how ontological claims are constructed and enacted through discourses and practices (Kuus 2010, 5). With this article, we want to encourage further discussions on how geopolitical relations in and within the Global East are forged, and especially how they are co-produced, framed, navigated, resisted and reappropriated from the periphery.

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**Data Availability Statement**

This study is based on the use of secondary sources. A full list of the sources is available in the reference list.

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