



Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union

PONARS  
EURASIA

## EUROPE'S NORMATIVE APPEAL, DE-STALINIZATION AND RUSSIAN PERIPHERAL CAPITALISM: TOWARD A RENEWED RESEARCH AGENDA?

Viacheslav Morozov  
*University of Tartu*

Policy Brief presented at the  
BEAR-PONARS Eurasia Conference  
“Between the EU and Russia: Domains of Diversity and Contestation”

April 29-30, 2022,  
Washington, DC

## Europe's Normative Appeal, De-Stalinization and Russian Peripheral Capitalism: Toward a Renewed Research Agenda?

While trying to make sense of Russia's self-inflicted catastrophe, Russian intellectuals highlight their own and the wider society's failure to resolutely "draw a line" under the Soviet past, with all its authoritarian elements. The calls to finally leave Stalinist legacies behind invokes parallels with the debates of the late 1980s, in which Stalinism was the epitome of the Soviet deviation, the opposite of "normal society" associated with Western capitalism.

However, the research on late Soviet public culture, carried out by our team at the University of Tartu, suggests that in the concrete historical situation at the turn of the 1990s, the demands for repentance were appropriated by the neoliberal discourse promoting a one-dimensional moralistic view of both the past and the future. This discourse idealized the West as the embodiment of "normality." It fed on the notion of "natural historical process," which classified the Soviet experiment as a wicked and futile deviation. The pre-1917 past was presented as the golden age, when Russia was a European empire developing alongside the rest of the world. As a replacement to the Soviet idea of progress, this discourse proposed a restorationist ideology that was supposed to reunite Russia with the rest of the white, European, prosperous part of humanity.

This restorationist impulse gained strength in the subsequent decades, while the pro-Western orientation predictably had to be abandoned. Russia remained in the semi-periphery of the world system, while a deeper integration into global neoliberal capitalism led to the development of a rent economy. Combined with weak institutions, this resulted in a model that Vladimir Gelman describes as "bad governance," in which powerful patron-client networks are channeling the nation's resources into the hands of corrupt elites.

As a result, and contrary to the expectations of the Perestroika generation, Russia's profound difference did not disappear: it remained a country in the periphery of Europe, a (nearly) indispensable supplier of raw materials and a lucrative market, but was never allowed to fully partake in the European heritage. In the absence of any serious reflection on the structural preconditions of this "hierarchical inclusion" (as Sergei Prozorov terms it), Russian intellectual mainstream ended up with an inversion of the naïve Westernism of the late 1980s. While their standard of civilization remained the same, opinion-makers began to convince themselves and the Russian public that the West was no longer in compliance with this ideal. Instead, it was Mother Russia that was the true Europe, and the restoration of Russia's greatness was imagined as a world-historical mission for the entire nation.

As Vladimir Putin's speeches and articles about Ukraine, among many other sources, clearly demonstrate, the anti-Soviet predisposition still remains essential for this discourse. He blames

Vladimir Lenin for creating the artificial Ukrainian statehood and equates “decommunization” of Ukraine with the destruction of its statehood. This alone indicates that direct parallels between Putin’s dictatorship and Soviet authoritarianism are incorrect. The point here is not to defend the Soviet project but to warn against the simplistic schemes which follow the familiar pattern of inversion in an attempt to construct a new identity for the future democratic Russia. By superficially attributing Putinist imperialism to the Soviet background of Russia’s current ruling elites, such schemes focus on “finally” leaving the Soviet past behind and equate Russia’s democratization with decommunization.

While a lot of reflection on Russia’s brutal war will be needed in the future, it is wrong to attribute this brutality to Stalinist, Soviet or any other legacies alone. Instead, the focus must be on the institutions – the bureaucracy, the army, the education system and the sciences (especially the social sciences and humanities), the media and so on. As suggested above, the decay of nearly all institutions in the twenty-first century Russia was due to the detrimental impact of the rents and the inability to organize the use of the nation’s natural wealth to the benefit of everyone rather than a selected few.

Neoliberal globalization provided plenty of opportunities for wealthy Russians to not just appropriate huge assets but also move those out of the country. They enjoyed the highest living standards available in the core, while many of their compatriots languished in the deep periphery, as the entire “civilized” world turned a blind eye to their fate. It must therefore come as no surprise that a large part of Russian society does not feel it has a stake in the values that they associate with the West. With all the necessary reservations about the complex setting of what is essentially a colonial war, in the end it is hard to expect that the exploited would show solidarity with the exploiters.

A sustainable agenda for Russia’s democratization must balance the normative appeal of Europe with a sober reflection on the structural traps of peripheral capitalism. This is a formidable task, as it is already clear that Russia will slide deeper into the periphery as a result of its aggression and the international sanctions. At the same time, at least parts of the population will probably continue clinging to the imperialist image of greatness, which has been imposed by the official propaganda for many years.

The task of understanding the specificity of Russia’s semi-peripheral colonialism and imperialism is now more urgent than ever. It must be admitted that over the entire post-Soviet period, too little had been done in this direction. In the years to come, this work will be hampered by the tendency to interpret the Russian case as completely unique, due to the particularly ruthless nature of the current war on Moscow’s part. This tendency must be resisted by relying on the existing critique of methodological nationalism, as well as the vast, and growing, body of research in such fields as postcolonial studies, global historical sociology and new imperial history, which

emphasize the perniciousness of Eurocentrism and foreground the global embeddedness of local institutions and experiences. Sadly, Russia's self-destructive imperialism is a large-scale social experiment of almost lab-level purity. It is crucial to put this experiment in a proper conceptual context, in order for its general significance to be fully appreciated.