

Russia's Narrative of Sovereignty: What Makes It So Enticing for the Global South?

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Abstract

Russia's recent foreign policy, following the breakdown of its relations with the West, have highlighted its connection with the Global South in a common struggle against imperialism, colonialism, and Western hegemony. Along with continued insistence on sovereignty and rejection of the West's aspirations for dominance, a new narrative and strategy of 'wooing the Global South' has emerged. Although it has met a mixed reception in the Global South, it has widened the space for political maneuver there, and revealed a new ideological divide between sovereign internationalism and liberal globalism. While often construed as conservative, the emphasis on sovereignty is associated with radical European political philosophy and with the concept of freedom as self-determination, in opposition to the liberal concept of freedom. It thus has great potential to feed the new movement for sovereignty that is unfolding across the Global South.

Keywords: Global South, Russian foreign policy, globalism, sovereignty, self-determination, freedom, sovereign internationalism, anti-colonialism.

The main conflict of our time is arguably between liberal globalism and sovereign internationalism. Liberal globalism is the Western projection of neoliberal globalization, and of the 'rules-based order,' that is, essentially U.S. hegemony, while sovereign internationalism protects state sovereignty as outlined in the UN Charter. The latter is manifested both as a defense against uninvited foreign or interference/intervention, and as the framework for a state's popular democracy. The collapse of Russo-Western relations is a result of the tension between these two paradigms, and is itself rearranging global affairs.

China, though typically seen as the main contender to U.S. hegemony, has not openly challenged that hegemony as Russia has. Several scholars have analyzed the deterioration of Russo-Western relations as a gradual but growing realization of worldview incompatibility (Cohen, 2019; Sakwa, 2014, 2017; Tsygankov, 2019). At issue are competing visions of the post-Soviet European security order and the global order in general, especially regarding NATO/EU expansion and Russia's pursuit of the OSCE-based concept of indivisible security.

Russia's foreign policy has been characterized variously, from protection of Orthodoxy or traditional values to a Eurasian geoeconomic strategy (Petro, 2015; Diesen, 2017). Still, as late as 2018, Fyodor Lukyanov (2018) argued that post-Soviet Russia's foreign policy compensates for an ideational deficit with the pursuit of national prestige and a state of emergency.

However, since 2022, when diplomatic and economic relations with the West broke down completely, Russia has promoted relations with countries outside the West, through bilateral trade arrangements and new global institutions such as BRICS, the EAEU, and the SCO. To support this turn, Russia no longer seeks to identify with Europe or

the West, but instead emphasizes a common struggle for sovereignty against Western colonialism/imperialism.

This article identifies the new Russian narrative in speeches by President Vladimir Putin, made from February 2022 through 2024, and in Russia's 2023 Foreign Policy Concept. It then examines the narrative's reception in the Global South, specifically in Africa and in terms of how freedom is conceptualized. Finally, the article argues that we see a new ideological divide here, with a geopolitical conflict, though cloaked in a new ideological language, rooted in the radical neo-Roman/republican tradition in European political philosophy of conceptualizing freedom in terms of self-determination. This concept of freedom was mobilized in the 16th-18th centuries, but is again summoned today as a radical alternative to Western (neo)liberal globalization.

WEST, EAST, AND SOUTH

The Global South here refers broadly to the 134 members of the G77, and those countries identified in the UN Office for South-South Cooperation. Although the concept largely encompasses low-to-middle-income countries with a history of European colonization, it (unlike the "Third World") can also refer to all those sharing the negative effects of capitalist globalization, regardless of location (Mahler, 2018, Ch. 5). The latter will be relevant to our discussion below.

To some extent, the great-power rivalry of the Cold War allowed the Global South greater room for maneuver (Frank, 1981). Such space contracted during the 'unipolar moment' (Krauthammer, 1990) but began to increase again, e.g., in Africa with the rise of China as a real development alternative (Sörensen et al., 2010). It has been argued, for example by Matias Spektor (2025), that today it is again increasing for countries like Brazil (see also reference in Ikenberry, 2024).

John Ikenberry (2024) argues that Russia's Special Military Operation (SMO) has accelerated the world's split into the West, East, and South. He sees Westphalian sovereignty as undergirding this new order and predicts lengthy competition in which both East and West seek to woo the South, with the West having an advantage in that.

However, there are several problems with Ikenberry's analysis. He has been criticized for lumping Russia and China into an 'Eastern' faction (if not bloc), thereby reproducing a Western "false theoretical bias" that conceals the Sino-South relationship, South-South cooperation, and North-South conflict (Jiulin, 2024).

Ikenberry's division of the world is very much reminiscent of the Cold War, but with the 'Second World' (including both Russia and China) re-labeled as the 'East.' Nevertheless, Ikenberry is right that the Ukraine war can be seen as part of a war for the new global order, and a struggle in which support from the Global South has become crucial.

The latter is recognized by Russia. Such support depends on ideological messaging to the Global South, to which we now turn.

RUSSIA'S MESSAGE TO THE GLOBAL SOUTH

The conflict with the West has propelled a rethinking of Russia's identity and foreign policy. Oleg Barabanov (2023) argues that geopolitical revisionism, articulated in Putin's 2007 Munich speech, was followed by value revisionism and a search for a non-Western identity, embodied in the creation of BRICS.

The concept of a Russian civilization-state, introduced in the 2023 Foreign Policy Concept, attempts to describe a unique Russian identity with Russia at the center of the "cultural and civilizational community of the Russian World." The Concept does not mention the term 'Global South,' but emphasizes the USSR's contribution to ending colonialism, as well as the current global inequalities resulting from the colonial appropriation of resources in Asia, Africa, and the Occident (Concept, 2023).

With international and especially Global Southern audiences in mind, Moscow has increasingly abandoned the attributes of Westernization, and emphasized commonality with the Global South against Western imperialism, colonialism, and hegemonic aspirations.

In July 2022, Putinspoke of the struggle between the West's 'golden billion'—seeking total domination—and the Rest (Putin, 2022a). In essence, this is a struggle against racism and neo-colonialism: "Why should this 'golden billion,' which is only part of the global

population, dominate everyone else and enforce its rules of conduct that are based on the illusion of exceptionalism? It divides the world into first- and second-class people and is therefore essentially racist and neo-colonial. The underlying globalist and pseudo-liberal ideology is becoming increasingly more like totalitarianism and is restraining creative endeavor and free historical creation” (Ibid).

He then emphasized the need for a new development model: “... the West is simply unable to offer the world a model for [a] future of its own. Indeed, it was no accident that the ‘golden billion’ attained its gold and achieved quite a lot, but it got there not because it implemented certain concepts. It mainly got to where it is by robbing other peoples in Asia and Africa. ... India was robbed for an extensive period of time. This is why the elite of the ‘golden billion’ are terrified of other global development centers potentially coming up with their own development alternatives” (Ibid).

Note the strategic references to colonial exploitation and India. Putin then claimed that this pattern must be broken to restore sovereignty: “No matter how much the West and the supranational elite strive to preserve the existing order, a new era and a new stage in world history are coming. Only genuinely sovereign states are in a position to ensure a high growth dynamic and become a role model for others in terms of standards of living and quality of life, the protection of traditional values and high humanistic ideals, and development models where an individual is not a means, but the ultimate goal. Sovereignty is about freedom of national development, and thus, the development of every individual. It is about the technological, cultural, intellectual and educational solvency of a state...” (Ibid).

This framing of the world is repeated in numerous speeches, but most fiercely in that which was made at the 30 September 2022 signing of the treaties of accession of Lugansk, Donetsk, Zaparozhye, and Kherson to the Russian Federation (Putin, 2022b). Clearly meant to legitimize Russia's actions, it also sent a message to the Global South and the non-Western world, attacking the West's colonialist and imperialist past *and present*: “...total de-sovereignization is in their interest. This explains their aggression towards independent states,

traditional values and authentic cultures, their attempts to undermine international and integration processes, new global currencies and technological development centers [that] they cannot control. It is critically important for them to force all countries to surrender their sovereignty to the United States.” Invoking memories of colonialism, Putin states: “In certain countries the ruling elites...voluntarily agree to become vassals; others are bribed or intimidated. And if this does not work, they destroy entire states, leaving behind humanitarian disasters, devastation, ruins, millions of wrecked and mangled human lives, terrorist enclaves, social disaster zones, protectorates, colonies and semi-colonies” (Ibid).

Putin then claimed that Russia, like the Global South, is defending itself from Western colonialism and domination. “They do not want us to be free; they want us to be a colony. They do not want equal cooperation; they want to loot. They do not want to see us a free society, but a mass of soulless slaves” (Ibid).

Notably, there is no reference to Russia’s own imperial history or that of other non-Western empires: “Western elites not only deny national sovereignty and international law. Their hegemony has pronounced features of totalitarianism, despotism and apartheid. They brazenly divide the world into their vassals—the so-called civilized countries—and all the rest, who, according to the design of today’s Western racists, should be added to the list of barbarians and savages. False labels like ‘rogue country’ or ‘authoritarian regime’ are already available, and are used to stigmatize entire nations and states, which is nothing new. ...deep down, the Western elites have remained the same colonizers. They discriminate and divide peoples into the top tier and the rest” (Ibid).

He then drew a parallel between racism and Russophobia, and pointed to the continuity of Western colonialism: “We have never agreed to and will never agree to such political nationalism and racism. What else, if not racism, is the Russophobia being spread around the world? What, if not racism, is the West’s dogmatic conviction that its civilization and neoliberal culture is an indisputable model for the entire world to follow?” (Ibid).

He further emphasized colonial continuity with direct reference to India, Africa, and China, placing them all, together with Russia, on the same non-Western side against colonialism: "It is worth reminding the West that it began its colonial policy back in the Middle Ages, followed by the worldwide slave trade, the genocide of Indian tribes in America, the plunder of India and Africa, the wars of England and France against China, as a result of which it was forced to open its ports to the opium trade. ... We are proud that in the 20th century our country led the anti-colonial movement, which opened up opportunities for many peoples around the world to make progress, reduce poverty and inequality, and defeat hunger and disease" (Ibid). This framing portrays the SMO as a continuation and part of the anti-colonial struggle that the Global South countries have waged for centuries. The narrative was clearly designed to gain support in the Global South, with carefully selected references to India, China, and Africa.

The inept diplomatic statements by some Western leaders—such as EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell's October 2022 description of the EU as a "garden" and the rest of the world as a "jungle," or U.S. President Biden's open contemplation of sanctions on India for purchasing Russian S-400 systems in 2021 and for not joining anti-Russian sanctions in 2022—unintentionally played into this division.

At the Valdai Club plenary session on 27 October 2022, Putin denounced contemporary liberal ideology as a distortion of its original tradition, and noted a commonality between Africa, Latin America, Asia, and the East, as featuring diverse traditions (Putin, 2022c). "It may be worth revising the structure of the United Nations, including its Security Council, to better reflect the world's diversity" (Ibid).

He claimed bonds with Africa, Latin America, and Asia: "You can see Russian flags in many African countries... The same is happening in Latin America and Asia. We have many friends. We do not need to impose anything on anyone. It is just that many people—politicians and ordinary citizens—are tired of living under external dictate." And he emphasized that Russia is not against the West, does not seek conflict or even to challenge Western elites, it wishes only to defend its own sovereignty and rights, and "will not become a new hegemon [itself]."

This wooing of Africa and the Global South continued in Putin's article (2023) published ahead of the Russia-Africa Summit in July 2023.

The same anti-colonial message was earlier conveyed in an article by Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (2022), published on 22 July 2022 in several African newspapers (in Egypt, Congo, Uganda, and Ethiopia): "...there is no doubt that Africa, along with Asia, the Middle East and Latin America, will take its worthy place... and finally free itself from the bitter legacy of colonialism and neo-colonialism, rejecting its modern practices. ... Russia welcomes the rising international authority of individual states as well as Africa as a whole, their desire to make their voices strongly heard and to take the continent's problems into their own hands. ... Our country has not stained itself with the bloody crimes of colonialism, it has always sincerely supported Africans in their struggle for liberation from colonial oppression. Today we stand in solidarity with the African demands to complete the process of decolonization and support relevant initiatives on the UN platform."

Economic decolonization and independence were also on the agenda of the July 2023 Russia-Africa Summit in St. Petersburg. The African Union's Chairman and President of Uganda, Yoweri Museveni, in his speech on Africa's colonial history, stated that African countries "still face the bottlenecks and distortions of the colonial era," referring to Africa's export of raw materials as part of "modern slavery" (Museveni, 2023). The solution, he claimed, was manufacturing in Africa, for export. In the final press statement, he said: "We have truly achieved success both for President Putin, who invited us, and also for all of us Africans. If Russia wins, Africa wins with it." He referred to the historical relationship, saying that Russia always helped Africa and was among "the first countries to help us fight against colonization, apartheid and slavery" (Press Statements, 2023). These statements go beyond mere diplomatic courtesy.

RECEPTION IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

The reception of this diplomatic drive in the Global South has been mixed.

The principles of sovereignty and non-interference, strongly supported in most of the Global South, were violated by the SMO. Yet invasions, military interventions, and economic sanctions are a regular practice of the U.S. and the West. So, when the Global South was pressured to take a side in 2022, the response was weak.

Beyond NATO/EU, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand, sanctions were not imposed, and Russia's trade outside the West mostly remained stable or even surged. In UN voting, Southern countries took various positions (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2022). The overall impression was of either a pivot to Russia or the emergence of a new non-aligned movement (Fial, 2022; Asia Times, 2023).

Public opinion surveys also show mixed results. In a 2024 Pew survey of 35 countries, negative views of Russia/Putin outnumbered the positive, but many of the selected countries are Western, and some Asian and African populations were largely positively-inclined (Fagan, Gubbala, and Poushter, 2024). By contrast, a 2022 Cambridge study found that, of 6.3 billion people in 137 non-Western countries, 66 and 70 percent were positively inclined towards Russia and China, respectively (Foa et al., 2022).

Krishen Mehta (2023) argues that this reflects a perception in the Global South that the West does not understand or empathize with its problems, and is essentially a regrouping of the old colonial powers (whereas Russia and the USSR oppose(d) colonialism). The South does not believe in the Western-imposed 'rules-based order,' and now has other options outside the West.

China's economic rise has created new opportunities and an actual development alternative (Sörensen et al., 2010), which have been magnified by BRICS. Russia's economic role is much smaller, but it has gained increased influence in Africa through the Wagner Group, and now Africa Corps, in Sudan, Libya, the Central African Republic, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, etc.

Russian presence across the Sahel benefited from a wave of anti-French and anti-colonial sentiment that erupted there around 2020, including through coups in Mali (2020), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023). This sentiment contrasts starkly with the welcome given

to French troops who were deployed in 2012 to combat the rise of Islamic jihadists after the Western destruction of Libya in 2011.

The failure of French operations (Serval in Mali in 2012-2014, Barkhane centered in Chad in 2014-2022) can partly explain the invitations to Wagner and the series of coups (Aina, 2022). But anti-colonial and anti-French sentiments had been on the rise for years. In 2016, a group of African and European economists published a book titled (in translation) *Liberate Africa from Monetary Slavery: Who Profits from the CFA Franc?*, which sparked a debate about economic neo-colonialism (Samba Sylla, 2017). The target was the CFA Franc, through which France has retained an economic grip on the region.

To the south, Russia has good relations with South Africa, bilaterally and through BRICS, and joint military exercises have been held between Russia, China, and South Africa in 2019 and 2023 (Blank, 2023).

These developments signify not necessarily a 'pivot' to Russia and China, but the emergence of a new political space where African leaders have begun to take a more confident stance against Western leaders and international financial institutions. BRICS, and its promise of new trade opportunities and mechanisms, is something of a successor to the Non-Aligned Movement and similar anticolonial efforts of the 1960s. These efforts, which culminated in the UN declaration on the establishment of a new international economic order (NIEO) in 1974, have since been gradually reversed by neoliberal globalization and structural adjustment programs (Harrison, 2004, 2010; Bush, 2007).

The emerging multipolarity and great-power rivalry appear to have reigned in the U.S.'s subjects in Europe, yet simultaneously enlarged the Global South's room for maneuver.

THE NEW IDEOLOGICAL DIVIDE

Russia's anticolonial rhetoric plays into a deeper current of self-determination in the Global South.

Superficially, that current may not seem to constitute much of an ideological challenge to the West. It does not propose an alternative model in domestic politics or political economy. But it—just like the Western division of the world into 'democracies' and 'autocracies'—

does map onto the present geopolitical conflict, and its power should not be underestimated.

National self-determination (essentially sovereignty) underlaid Woodrow Wilson's approach and the redrawing of Europe at Versailles, and then the U.S.'s support for decolonization and the breakup of the European colonial trading blocs after World War II (e.g., Smith, 2003). Now, a new sovereignty movement could be built on self-determination as foundational for freedom.

This conception is directly linked to the "neo-Roman" or republican theory of freedom, which originated in Italian Renaissance political philosophy and predates liberalism (Skinner, 1978, 1998, 2002; Pocock, 1975; Pettitt, 1999; Bock, Skinner and Viroli, 1993). Political thinkers like Machiavelli and Guicciardini rediscovered and rearticulated the ancient Roman ideal of self-determination at a time when the Italian city-republics had lost their freedom to authoritarian princes. But in 16th-17th century northern Europe, the idea challenged monarchies, leading to the Dutch revolt and English civil war, and then inspired the French and American revolutions in the 18th century (Pocock, 1975).

The liberal theory of freedom was developed to contain this dangerous influence and came to emphasize freedom in a negative sense, as an absence of restraint (physical and later other restraints). Quentin Skinner (2002) has analyzed the tension, between the republican and liberal concepts of freedom, at length, illustrating it with the example of a slave's relation to his master. Hypothetically, in the liberal concept of freedom, there could be a slave with a master that allows him to do whatever he wishes, who is kind to him and never hinders him. Since he is not hindered in any action, the slave is free. But in the republican theory this would be an absurdity since self-determination or autonomy is the precondition for freedom. There can be no such thing as a free slave.

The liberal theory of freedom was developed to counter the radical republican influence and preserve the monarchies. But what kind of freedom could liberalism offer? In Domenico Losurdo's history of liberalism, the latter spawned both liberalism and slavery, where empowerment of some (the bourgeoisie) was used to disempower

others (slaves, servants, women, and workmen), reaching its golden age in the plantation colonies of the New World (Losurdo, 2011). And for most of the 20th century it coexisted with the U.S.'s Jim Crow laws and effective apartheid.

Yet the language of self-determination was used again during the American revolution and early republic to mobilize against British imperial dominion. For American founding fathers like Alexander Hamilton and Benjamin Franklin, "to be excluded from political decisions, to be subject to laws imposed from without, however reasonable and liberal, was synonymous with political slavery or, at any rate, represented the onset of it" (Losurdo, 2011, pp. 105-106).

The choice is thus between self-determination or political slavery.

The American revolution and its language of self-determination, itself deriving from the European republican tradition, greatly inspired liberation movements in Latin America in the early 19th century, and in Africa and worldwide in the 20th century. But, while these efforts were supported by the U.S. (to free the world from European colonialism), economic dependency endured, and a new critique of it emerged. The 1940s and 1950s saw the development of 'early structuralism' in Latin America (Raul Prebisch; the UN Economic Commission for Latin America). This was a Marxian-inspired critique of global capitalism and the periphery's dependence on the core. In the 1960s, it developed into the dependency school, regarding former colonies' economic exploitation even after political independence (Frank, 1967; Wallerstein, 1967; Rodney, 1972).

Dependency theories, and the concept of economic decolonization, were widely adopted and promoted by several of Africa's foremost anticolonial leaders and theorists, such as Amilcar Cabral and Kwame Nkrumah. The latter, inspired by Marx and Lenin, considered economic independence to be necessary for true independence from neo-colonial Western capitalism (Nkrumah, 1965). Cabral defined sovereignty as 'self-direction,' and saw colonialism mainly as economic domination: "Colonialism or imperialist domination in the first place seeks to dominate other people's economically" and thus "the [principal] objective of our resistance and struggle... is to liberate our

land economically, although beforehand we have to pass through political liberation” (Cabral, 2016, pp. 91-92). Cabral particularly believed that a country could not be free so long as its natural resources were under foreign domination.

It is this deep-rooted historical, structural, and cultural strain of anti-colonialism into which multipolarity breathes new life and into which the Russian narrative feeds. Thus, while Russia is perceived as a conservative stronghold against Western liberalism (on Russian conservatism see Robinson, 2021; Diesen, 2022), it has also an ideological message to offer the Global South, namely that it can both be radical in its critique against imperialism and economic exploitation *and* socially conservative in the sense of preserving its own cultural values.

This is an explosive mix. Self-determination is a radical concept, whether applied to the individual or the state, and in the present global situation it becomes a weapon against the existing imperial order. Importantly, it is not confined to ex-colonies but may speak to all those “sharing the negative effects of capitalist globalization” (Mahler, 2018, Ch. 5). For instance, it is central to the tensions within the EU between supranationalism and neoliberalism (promoted by EU institutions and the Franco-German axis), versus nation-states’ self-determination and social welfare programs. This tension has erupted, for instance, in Greek anti-austerity protests and French ‘yellow vest’ marches, and manifested itself in social cleavage in the very heart of the West, with marginalizing and labeling “the toothless” in France and “deplorables” in the U.S. Worldwide resistance to neoliberal globalization is paralleled by European resistance to austerity and neoliberal supranationalism (Sörensen, 2021, Ch. 2-5).

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The ongoing restructuring of international relations is partly an immediate result of unresolved tensions that emerged after the end of the Cold War. Competing visions of the post-Soviet European security framework and global order have exacerbated and ideologized the geopolitical divide.

The Western narrative division of the world into ‘democracies’ and ‘autocracies’ is opposed by the Russian narrative in which the (neo) colonial-imperial West is contested by Russia and the Global South, jointly struggling for sovereignty and a fairer world without anyone’s dominance. Post-Soviet Russian foreign policy has been consistent in rejecting U.S./Western hegemony. While relations with the West were long in decline, the 2022 crisis created (and exposed) a complete breakdown. This forced Russia to fully abandon its long-existing strain of Westernization, more forcefully articulate a new identity and foreign policy orientation and promote relations with the Global South.

Meanwhile, the new great-power conflict and emerging multipolarity have increased the Global South’s room for maneuver. Here, resistance to neoliberal globalization has been growing for some time. Russia’s 2023 Foreign Policy Concept introduced the concept of a ‘civilization-state’ and the protection of states’/civilizations’ uniqueness from external homogenization efforts. This conservative concept may be received favorably in the Global South. Russia’s foreign policy narrative juxtaposes sovereignty against the West’s persisting colonial-imperial mentality.

By combining the protection of national cultural values with a critique of (neo)colonialism, the Russian narrative invites the Global South to fight for self-determination as an expression of freedom. The critique of Western colonialism/imperialism resonates with Marxist and critical political economy, dependency theories, and world-systems theories. These approaches have a strong foundation across the Global South, which has seen growing pushback against the neoliberal reforms imposed since the 1980s-1990s. The rise of China and BRICS offer new opportunities to the Global South. By positioning itself as an anti-colonial contender in alliance with the Global South, rather than as a ‘European power,’ Russia’s foreign policy narrative feeds directly into the reawakened global hunger for sovereignty.

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