

## Opinion – Decolonization Is Decisive in the Confrontation with Russia

Written by Dario Mazzola

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DARIO MAZZOLA, APR 12 2023

“Right now there are changes the like of which we have not seen for 100 years. And we are the ones driving these changes together”. Xi Jinping’s farewell to Vladimir Putin echoed Lenin’s statement that “There are decades where nothing happens; and there are weeks where decades happen”. Recent weeks have indeed been replete with pregnant events in world politics: the risk with such overabundance is a relative scarcity of analysis, especially of a study broad enough to encompass the vastity of these phenomena without neglecting their links. The one issue to be examined here is the relevance and the features of de/anti/coloniality in the context of the confrontation between Russia and the West. This topic is closely related to other relevant elements – say Russia’s special partnership with China and the latter’s reworking of its Maoist ideological heritage – that are too complex to be considered at once. Finally, as recalled below, the topic might even be uncomfortable for Western analysts, which explains both why it is underrecognized in public debate *and* why it is urgently necessary to treat it.

Soviet Marxist-Leninist ideology was rich in anti-colonial concepts that were dramatically expressed in foreign policy and diplomacy, as most iconically exemplified by Khrushchev banging his shoe on his desk at the UN General Assembly during a heated exchange of accusations of colonialism between him and the representatives of the Philippines, Lorenzo Sumulong. The gesture is praised in Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*.

Of course, realpolitik implies that lofty and idealistic calls for decolonization – from any side – often cover the mere substitution of the countries interfering with the affairs of the colonized in practice. In the 1990s, the collapse of the Soviet Union and defeat in the Cold War attracted Russia toward the Western block, and this latter began leading a unipolar phase of basically uncontested globalization. At the ideological level, the abandonment of Marxism-Leninism contributed to the dismissal of Russia’s anticolonial stance as powerfully as the balance of power and material interests. Russia was busy enough with the problems and forms of its own survival. The reconciliation with NATO culminated symbolically in the agreements signed in Pratica di Mare in 2002.

Since 2014 and, most acutely, the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the opposite has become the case. The only chance for Russia’s economy is rerouting/rotation of its ties toward the non-Western world: as Timofei Bordachev put it, the “turn to the East”, however hard to achieve, is no longer a choice, but “a necessity”. The clearest example of this is perhaps the recent 400% growth in export to India, already the world’s largest importer of Russia’s military equipment, covering alone one-fifth of Russia’s arms export. To meet these “necessities”, Russia’s foreign doctrine has recovered themes and tones from the Soviet times:

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. [...] While we – 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 (Vladimir Putin 30.09.22).

In order to help adapt the world order to the realities of a multipolar world, the Russian Federation intends to make it

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a priority to: 1) eliminate the vestiges of domination by the US and other unfriendly states in global affairs, create conditions to enable any state to renounce neo-colonial or hegemonic ambitions (The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation 31.03.23).

The above concepts are reflected in various propaganda imagery targeting African and other countries, as displayed by Russian embassies, including “table diplomacy” showing Putin in close proximity to Senegalese President Macky Sall when he was also President of the African Union.

It is widely known that the Russia-sponsored Wagner group has been expanding its operations from the Central African Republic to other contexts in the region. This has been masterfully studied by Samuel Ramani together with Russia’s growing investment in the continent. However, the Xi-Putin meeting has somewhat obscured the encounter between Putin and delegations from more than 40 African countries just the day before. On the occasion, Russia wrote off \$20 billion of debts, discussed free delivery of grains – of which Russia is a prominent exporter, and which are obviously vital to many African countries – and “warmly recommended” getting rid of the dollar in international transactions. Russia is also promoting African-Russian forums in Saint Petersburg: in 2019, this saw the participation of 47 heads of state.

Of course, neither Russia’s anticolonial rhetoric nor its attempts at elbowing Western states out of the Global South would be relevant were they completely unsuccessful. But are they? Again, these days, the *Economist Intelligence Unit* has updated its monitoring of where the global population stands in the West-Russia confrontation. Their results are doubly interesting because not only do they reveal that since the very beginning Russia was less isolated than Western policies tried to make it, but also that Russia’s influence has been measurably *increasing* over one year of conflict. By *the Economist’s* standards, 9 countries stopped condemning Russia and 6 entered the Russia-leaning camp over one year. Russia extended its influence with sudden developments in the Sahel (Burkina Faso and Mali). But what is more telling is that a country in a position of economic, cultural, and diplomatic leadership in the continent, that is, South Africa, also moved closer to Russia, to the point of banning arms sales to Poland to avoid them being used in the Ukrainian conflict.

A soberly realistic approach refrains from forecasts, but there are at least two scenarios that invite monitoring. First, Chad is firmly entrenched in the French sphere of influence. Nonetheless, the country’s politics seem to be evolving recently, with the nationalization of Exxon’s assets, the expulsion of the German ambassador, and a warm invitation to the country’s leader – Mahamat Idriss Deby – to the next Russian-African with a dedicated package of events. On its part, US intelligence attributes to Russia an assassination plot against the same Deby. Second is the turn of events in Tunisia. A country with solid ties with the Western sphere, as evidenced by its hosting of the “Festival de la Francophonie” and by Kais Saied’s friendly words to Antony J. Blinken during a trip in which the Tunisian strongman had invested high hopes (some say: only to be disappointed). The difficult economic, social, and political situation in Tunisia has now led him to reject further support from the IMF. Unsurprisingly the government seems to be exploring support from the BRICS as the only viable alternative. It should also be added that Saied’s rule has been explicitly legitimized by neighboring Algeria, which in turn has evident and established credentials of leaning toward Russia.

It would be an exaggeration to say that developments of this sort are ignored by commentators. The Saudi-Iran rapprochement, with all it implies in broader scope (Saudi Arabia has just welcomed a visit by the first Russian military frigate), is being thoroughly discussed. Nonetheless, in the confrontation with Russia (and China) about the future world order, the West’s insistence on a “status-quo” defense of the “rules-based order” that dominated since the early 1990s lacks inspiration for many countries in the Global South. If Russia (and China) are seen as a source of change and innovation, a “global opposition” of sorts, their appeal could grow.

Indeed, the unipolar globalization of recent decades might seem valuable from the point of view of a Western academic: quite less for a working-class Westerner, and all the least when considered by destitute Chadians or Tunisians. The West needs to articulate its own anti-colonial agenda in both rhetoric and actions and deliver on the post-pandemic promises of “Building Back Better” that had been targeted for their vacuousness as soon as they were uttered. Perceiving political moves outside the West and the East as “secondary” would be a most dangerous delusion. In our rapidly changing, increasingly globalized, and multipolar world, this assumption is unsubstantiated

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and grounded mostly if not exclusively in “civilizational” suprematism. Yet this kind of hubris is just the worst counselor one can get in politics.

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### **About the author:**

**Dario Mazzola** is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Bergen and a lecturer at the University of Geneva. He specializes in the political theory of asylum and migration and works on the theory of international politics, with particular attention to issues of realism.