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Iain Ferguson & Susanna Hast

To cite this article: Iain Ferguson & Susanna Hast (2018) Introduction: The Return of Spheres of Influence?, *Geopolitics*, 23:2, 277-284, DOI: [10.1080/14650045.2018.1461335](https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2018.1461335)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2018.1461335>



Published online: 21 Jun 2018.



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Introduction: The Return of Spheres of Influence?

Iain Ferguson^a and Susanna Hast^b

^aInternational Laboratory on World Order Studies and the New Regionalism, National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia; ^bUniversity of the Arts, Theatre Academy Helsinki & The Finnish Centre of Excellence in Russian Studies, Aleksanteri Institute, Helsinki, Finland

In March 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea, relations between Moscow and the West descended into their deepest crisis since the end of the Cold War. For the rest of that year and into the next, the Ukraine crisis made headlines around the world. It emerged as the most urgent security challenge facing Western nations. The response to this crisis, from Western leaders in particular, is key to understanding why ‘spheres of influence’ are the subject of political discourse today, and why this discourse alters our understanding of the past, present and future.

Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor, was the first leader to articulate the significance of this concept for explaining events in Ukraine. Three days after the referendum that initiated Crimea’s (re)unification with Russia, she addressed a packed Bundestag. In her speech, she accused Russia of attempting to reinstate ‘spheres of influence’ in the post-Soviet space.

First in Georgia back in 2008 and now in the heart of Europe, in Ukraine, we are witnessing a conflict about *spheres of influence* and territorial claims of the kind we know from the 19th and 20th century, but we thought we had put behind us. It is very evident from the news... however, that this is not the case. (The Federal Chancellor 2014, emphasis added)

Her position was strongly endorsed by the leadership of the United Kingdom (Cameron 2014), the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Rasmussen 2014), and most vocally of all, the United States. Not long after Merkel’s speech, President Obama was making his way to the first summit of the reformulated G7 of the world’s leading nations. Russia had just been suspended from this group for its actions in Ukraine. The seven other members had decided to pull out of a planned G8 meeting in Sochi, on Russia’s Black Sea coast, and convene in Brussels instead.¹

Before he arrived for this summit, Obama made a point of stopping off to meet the newly appointed president of Ukraine, Petr Poroshenko. Later, in a press conference in the Royal Palace in Warsaw, Obama accused Russia of

using ‘dark tactics’ (Obama 2014) to undermine Ukraine’s sovereignty. He added:

The days of empire and spheres of influence are over. Bigger nations must not be allowed to bully the small, or impose their will at the barrel of a gun. (Obama 2014)

Obama continued to criticise Russia’s ‘spheres of influence’ policy when back in Washington. He also warned about the consequences Russia’s policy would have on its domestic and international standing. Two years on from his ‘dark tactics’ speech, he said:

Putin acted in Ukraine in response to a *client state* that was about to slip out of his grasp...And he’s done the exact same thing in Syria, at enormous cost to the well-being of his own country. (Obama 2016, emphasis added)

When Obama left office in 2017, many in Moscow and around the world, expected a change in tone from the United States (US). But under President Trump, the rhetoric about Russia’s geopolitical ambitions has actually been much the same. The new administration’s first National Security Strategy claimed that: ‘Russia seeks to restore its great power status and establish spheres of influence near its borders’ (United States, and Donald Trump 2017, 25). And that this was just the beginning. Russia intended to extend its influence to ‘interfere in the domestic political affairs of countries around the world’ (United States, and Donald Trump 2017, 26).

As we can see from these statements, concerns about spheres of influence are at the centre of a rising Western anxiety over Russia’s political policies and objectives. A general consensus has formed among leading Western nations and in Western-dominated international organisations like NATO, the G7/8 and the European Union (EU). Not only have spheres of influence returned in the twenty-first century, but they have come back because of Russia’s desire to disrupt the post-Cold War peace. Russia’s initial policy goal, it is said, has been to reclaim control over the post-Soviet space. Its larger goal has only become obvious in the period since the Ukraine intervention: to extend the Kremlin’s influence deep into established liberal democracies so as to divide and destabilise the Western alliance. These (alleged) ambitions of Russian foreign policy are at odds with foundational principles of the contemporary international order, like sovereign equality and territorial integrity.

Yet the most revealing aspect of this discourse is not what it has to say about Russia *per se*, but rather the Western geopolitical imagination on the role Russia plays in world politics. Spheres of influence have emerged as a defining symbol of what the former US President referred to as Russia’s ‘dark

tactics' (Obama 2014) and what the foreign policy analyst, Mark Galeotti, has suggested is the Kremlin's 'dark power':

Dark power is the shadowy counterpart to 'soft power'. If soft power is the ability of a state to get its way by attraction and positive example, then dark power is the capacity to bully...In the long term, dark power is dangerous and self-destructive, but in the short term, it seems to work...Russia seems to a large extent to be getting away with behaviours antithetical to the world order, thanks to its dark power. (Galeotti 2018, emphasis added)

In this Western narrative about spheres of influence, Russia is undoubtedly cast as the main villain. One influential magazine's front page placed Putin's head on an octopus with tentacles stretching out to 'meddle in Western democracies' (How Putin meddles in Western democracies 2018). And the character that emerges from statements of Western leaders and policy makers has the outlines of a monster, too. Not from the sea, but from the Bible; Putin's Russia as the 'dark prince' of international affairs.

A Return to Darkness?

'No light, but rather darkness visible
Served only to discover sights of woe'
John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667, ln. 63)

As the crisis in Russia-West relations begins to intensify once again, this seems like a good time to reflect on this narrative and what might be wrong with it. Dark mutterings about 'spheres of influence' are not exactly new. The present discourse contains several recycled tropes and symbols from the Cold War. Indeed, perhaps the clearest evidence of *return* when it comes to spheres of influence is in this Western narrative: spheres of influence are depicted within a cyclical story of the threat Russia has posed in the past, poses in the present and is likely to pose in the future to the West and the wider world.

There are two axiomatic assumptions, or certainties, to this grand narrative that deserve closer scrutiny. First, that spheres of influence are the product of the desire for hegemony by one major power; with Russia singled out for its will to dominate the international system. Second, that the pursuit of this hegemony comes at a cost to the sovereign independence and territorial integrity of what Obama referred to as a 'client state'; not only Ukraine but also Georgia, Syria and any other country, for that matter, that might fall into Russia's orbit.

The terms of this narrative are so pervasive, so dominant in the Western geopolitical imagination that it is difficult to do research on spheres of influence that dares to see things differently. None of the contributors to this volume wish to take sides in a Cold War-style struggle. Yet we also

recognise that to take a deeper look at spheres of influence, we need to begin with the focus of the present discourse. In other words, we also need to focus on Russia. We do this not because we wish to lock-in the association between Russia and this concept. But in order to challenge the Western narrative of 'return' which we believe over-simplifies spheres of influence as a concept and practice of geopolitics, and depicts Russia as a wicked and monstrous other.

In this issue, we question how this narrative reshapes our memories and reforms our morals, particularly when it comes to passing judgement on Russia's foreign policy. We invite new reflections on how boundaries are drawn around spheres of influence, in time and in space; how other concepts and ideas feed into geopolitical thinking on this topic; how spheres of influence take shape in media and popular culture; how and why this concept is so embedded into geopolitical readings of the post-Soviet space; and, most importantly of all, how spheres of influence can be understood as a concept that ought to be contested and – given how weighed down it is with negative imagery – perhaps even abandoned as a tool of geopolitical analysis.

Our intention is not to arrive at a general theory or complete account of what spheres of influence are. As we see it, the biggest problem with the prevailing narrative on spheres of influence is that it is framed by appeals to absolutes and fixed certainties that are moralising and irrefutable. This has tended to close-off a discussion of spheres of influence to any real debate. We want to change that.

We feel that academic researchers have not done enough in this respect. There is precious little scholarship on spheres of influence. Moreover, most of it comes from the Cold War era and supports the dark claims of the dominant Western narrative (Hast 2014, 1–9). To provoke fresh thinking, questioning and inquiry into spheres of influence, this issue tries in various ways to broaden the scope of the discussion. We look further back and further forward than the middle of the twentieth century. And we theorise and reflect on a variety of postulates and contexts that render spheres of influence both a meaningful and a problematic concept of geopolitics.

The issue opens with a challenge to the reading of 'spheres of influence' as suddenly re-appearing after Russia's intervention in Ukraine. We question not only this narrative of 'return', but the image of spheres of influence it falls back on. Spheres of influence are not some timeless geopolitical form or clever strategy for mastering territory. Their story is one of continuities and disruptions. They transform political power and are transformative of power in unexpected ways.

In the first contribution to this issue, **Iain Ferguson** presents a new narrative about the struggle for spheres of influence that has destabilised Ukraine. This is not about the 'return' of a past tendency, but a recent development caused by the attempt to escape geopolitics in a region between

the EU and Russia. This attempt has backfired in revealing ways. The case of Ukraine's instability represents a sharp break from the statist form of spheres of influence of the nineteenth century. A more complex kind of geopolitics has emerged between the EU and Russia to challenge Ukraine's sovereignty and that of other in-between countries. Ferguson describes and explains this with reference to the political theory of neo-medievalism. Out of a neo-medieval attempt to create an indivisible security order between the EU and Russia's international borders, a new form of spheres of influence has emerged, resulting in overlapping authority, and eventually, instability and violence instead of security in Ukraine.

Aside from its dubious assumptions about cycles of history, the prevailing narrative of spheres of influence is also fixated on the role of the most powerful states. Smaller states are seen as little more than pawns in the great powers' geostrategic games. As a corrective to this view, this issue recognises that every political actor involved in a project of spheres of influence has their own agency, their own agenda, their own choices to make.

Interested in how local actors and elites respond to Russia's moves to impose its influence, **Joanna Szostek** looks into the role of mass media in Belarus and Ukraine. Instead of investigating how the Moscow-based media organisations are used as soft-power tools in maintaining regional dominance, she explores the interests of local news providers in exporting content from Russia to Belarus and Ukraine. Szostek refers to neo-Gramscian regional hegemony in which actors in the 'periphery' sustain the norms of 'the centre'. She argues that the Russian leadership has not developed a coherent strategy for utilising mass media to establish a sphere of influence, and the media content aimed at Russian domestic audiences, and then distributed in Belarus and Ukraine, is often not well-received by the audiences of the 'periphery' to the detriment of Russia's interests.

Enriching the discussion on Russian conceptions of influence, and their development, **Mikhail Suslov** writes about how spheres of influence are embedded in the concept of 'Russian world', a concept which is now becoming an all-embracing ideology. Like other authors in this issue, Suslov does not take concepts and their histories for granted. He argues that the 'Russian world' has not always been a mere synonym for Russia's neo-imperialist pursuits in the post-Soviet arena. Suslov identifies the discontinuities from the 1990s until 2010s. He charts a move between the geopolitical extremes of a de-territorialized and de-centred imagery of the 'Russian archipelago' and a re-territorialized, irredentist and isolationist project. At the midpoint, the idea of 'sovereign democracy' emerges and brings to the 'Russian world' a spheres of influence agenda that is defined more by what it is against than that it is for. This is spheres of influence as the product of a Russian conservative critique of US-led globalization and regime change.

Natalia Morozova continues the exploration into the Russian discourse on spheres of influence, focussing on the uses of the concept of 'humanitarian cooperation' in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Morozova uncovers three different meanings attached to 'humanitarian cooperation' deployed by Russia: literal, associative and symbolic. The discourse on humanitarian cooperation was readjusted after 2014 in order to de-problematize Russia's incorporation of Crimea. Utilising Laclau and Mouffe's theory of antagonism and hegemony, she argues that Russia's influence in the CIS space is less penetrating than most readings of the concept of spheres of influence suggest. She predicts that the states in this post-Soviet region will continue to drift away from Russia's reach.

Filippo Costa Buranelli's focus is on Central Asia, and explicitly the historicity and possible 'return' of spheres of influence to a region that was once integral to the Tsarist and Soviet empires. Costa Buranelli argues that spheres of influence can be understood as social structures which are constantly changing through a negotiated hegemony. He analyses contemporary Russia's influence in Central Asia from three angles: Russia as a security guarantor in the region, Russia's capacity to influence regional norms and rules of conduct, and the cultural affinity between Russia and the former Soviet republics. Yet the influence is by no means static, and Central Asian states, while accommodating much of Russia's influence, are also diversifying their foreign policies and developing their own national practices independent of Russia.

Spheres of influence is not an isolated concept, but belongs to a world of ideas that has defined the international system since its birth. The last two articles in this special issue tackle the limitations of the concept that issue from its close association with great power politics. In the post-Cold War era, the relevance of the concept can be questioned as part of a broader critique of long-held views about the logic of power. From a crude *realpolitik* perspective, states are 'power containers' that struggle to acquire more power from each other. Criticism of this view has reshaped the discipline of International Relations over the last 30 years, just as it has the study of geopolitics. This critique has been coupled with a desire to broaden the research agenda in world politics to include identities, emotions, images, gender, globalisation, all manner of social movements and non-state actors. Seeing the world through this wider lens, does spheres of influence offer the same kind of explanatory appeal as it once did? It persists in political parlance, but should it?

Stephanie Ortmann asks if spheres of influence can still be considered a useful a concept for understanding the geopolitics of the post-Soviet space. She argues that the concept essentialises the state and relies on a one-dimensional account of how power operates in political space. This concept needs to be replaced, or at least augmented, with tools that are better suited

to analysing multiple and varied political spatialities. To that end, Ortmann develops an analytical framework that combines a theory of ‘seductive power’, which operates through political relationships, with Timothy Mitchell’s analysis of ‘state effect’. Through a discussion of Russia’s pursuit of influence in Kyrgyzstan, she shows how political space and power in Russian and Kyrgyz myths are produced relationally in ways that are far less unifying and stable than the logic of spheres of influence suggests.

In the final contribution to this issue, **Susanna Hast**, the author of *Sphere of Influence: History, Theory and Politics* (2014), turns the critical lens on her earlier work. She abandons the geopolitical literatures she used to rely on when discussing spheres of influence in favour of a feminist reading which takes gendering as the basis of understanding power. This change of perspective and literature allows her to develop insights on what masculinity and femininity have to do with the power of the state, the powerful state, the manly state. She uses the Netflix series *House of Cards* as her empirical case in order to add another crucial element to the reading: the bodily state, a visualisation of the state in human corporeality. The result is a critical view of spheres of influence as reaffirming a gendered construction of public political life, in which violence can thrive.

Each contribution to this volume presents a new angle of vision on spheres of influence. While they are diverse, these articles do have elements in common. All of them take perspectives that come from outside the West (since they are based on research on Russian, Eastern European or Central Asian politics) or, and sometimes also, offer a critique of the biased and simplistic views on spheres of influence in the prevailing Western discourse.

This critique is timely because of how the concept of spheres of influence has been abused in politics to heighten the tensions between the West and Russia. It is being used in a narrative that dramatises a crisis and divides the world along the fault lines of a new Cold War. If there is, as Merkel, Obama and others have suggested, an anachronism to spheres of influence in the twenty-first century then it may be found in this narrative’s stark and familiar dichotomy of good versus evil.

In this special issue, we can only begin to challenge this geopolitical imaginary. Considering our limited scope, we hope that other scholars will take this discussion to other geographical and geopolitical contexts, reveal more angles of vision on this topic and push the debate on spheres of influence wide open.

Note

1. The Group of Seven (G7) is an informal bloc of the world’s richest countries, all industrialized democracies – Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United

Kingdom and the United States. It meets annually to discuss issues such as global economic governance, international security, and energy policy. Russia belonged to this forum from 1998 through 2014 – then the Group of Eight (G8) – but as already noted, it was suspended after its annexation of Crimea in March of that year. Technically, Russia is still a member of the G8. Even though it has not attended any meetings of this organisation since 2014, and has announced its decision to permanently walk away from the G8 group.

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