

August 2023

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Recommended Citation

Akchurina, Victoria and Dolidze, Anna (2023) "The Impact of Sanctions against Russia on Central Eurasia: A New Great Game through a Feminist Lens," *Journal of International Women's Studies*: Vol. 25: Iss. 6, Article 5.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol25/iss6/5>

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The Impact of Sanctions against Russia on Central Eurasia: A New Great Game through a Feminist Lens

By Viktoria Akchurina¹ and Anna Dolidze²

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to better understand a hard-core security issue through a feminist lens or to grasp a new “Great Game”³ emerging in central Eurasia by using a feminist understanding of power. The war in Ukraine is considered pivotal to the direction of world history, global order, and the very architecture of the international system. While NATO and Western powers are reluctant to go into a direct military confrontation with Russia over Ukraine, sanctions on Russia have repercussions that extend way beyond Russian borders. Specifically, the former Soviet republics of Central Asia and South Caucasus—which have continued to be almost an integrated part of the extended Russian economy—are experiencing a stronger impact of sanctions than initially planned by the international community. This paper aims to address the unintended consequences of sanctions against Russia on the extended Eurasian space. It claims that sanctions against Russia represent both a trap and an opportunity for the so-called small states in Central Asia and South Caucasus, subjecting them to the patterns of the world hierarchies on one hand and providing the space for maneuver, on the other. A question in focus here is what conditions the so-called small Eurasian actors may need to overcome to remove themselves from Russian dependency. This article relies on the ontology of feminist security studies by focusing on the marginal actors of the Great Game, discovering that resilience is another form of soft power in today’s international relations.

Keywords: Great Game, Sanctions against Russia, Central Asia, South Caucasus, Feminist security studies, Feminist ontology, Soft power, Geopolitics

Introduction

Reportedly, sanctions against Russia, which followed its invasion of Ukraine, have led to alternative global supply chains and the “shadow shipping and financing infrastructure” to be created, making the “global energy system more dispersed, divided, and dangerous” (The Economist, 2023). Regions such as Central Asia and South Caucasus may become pivotal in either maintaining or challenging this near-absolute Russian influence in the post-Soviet space, and most importantly, they may lead today’s international relations scholars to reconsider notions of power and power dynamics. In other words, these smaller international actors, which

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³ The “Great Game” was a term used to describe the rivalry between the 19th-century British and Russian Empires over influence in Central Asia. In the 1990s, the expression “The New Great Game” was coined by journalists to describe a renewed geopolitical interest in Central Asia.

used to be seen as marginal to Eurocentric international relations, may now influence the dynamics of power more than ever. Will they help turn Russia into a “shadow” or “informal” hegemon or will they make sure that sanctions actually work and that the international community maintains its long-fought for liberal international order?

While the apex of the Russian elite seemed to be well-prepared for the sanctions prior to the invasion, the more vulnerable states, societies, and economies, which—due to the historical legacy and connections with Russia’s economy—have been bearing consequences just as much as vulnerable parts of Russia’s economy. The small states within the so-called “Russian sphere of influence” have been demonstrating an unprecedented degree of resilience and diplomatic maneuvering between the rock and the hard place, that is the Western sanctions against Russia on one hand and their near absolute dependency on Russia’s economy on the other.

To better understand the power dynamics emerging from these places of marginality and their potential impact on the Great Game, this article focuses on two regions, Central Asia and South Caucasus comparatively, in order to better understand how the smaller states (which in many ways are even weaker than Ukraine in terms of resources), handle the collateral damage of the sanctions against Russia.

When the Western powers imposed sanctions on Russia for its invasion of Ukraine, the epistemic communities across the former Soviet space were concerned with indirect repercussions of the sanctions upon Central Asia and South Caucasus, as those have been economies most interconnected and dependent on the Russian economy. While Russia has always positioned itself as a savior of these so-called small states, both in economic and security terms, our research has shown that it can actually be seen as an impediment to economic development and democratization in the region.

By employing feminist ontology, we have focused on the power dynamics between the great powers and the marginal actors in the central Eurasian region, and have reversed the causality from the top-down (great powers down upon the small ones) to that of the bottom-up (from the small states to the great powers). While our initial hypothesis was that we would see the worsening of economic, security, and social situations in Central Asia and South Caucasus, we have discovered an unexpected finding of economic growth and connectivity, processes of decolonization, and rising global awareness of the marginal. These findings suggest two main conceptual and empirical implications. First, contrary to conventional logic, Russia has been an impediment to development rather than an enabler in Central Asia and South Caucasus. Secondly, these examples of resilience invites new research avenues in conceptualization of power in international relations, especially when it comes to better understanding of the peripheral and marginal (even colonial) subjects of international relations.

In other words, this paper employs feminist ontology in international relations, yet, not with the focus on “women” or “gender” as such, but with the focus on the “marginal” in the relationship between the dominant (patriarchal) and dominated (the “feminine”). Yet our argument goes beyond the mainstream agenda of the Women, Peace, and Security agenda as our approach defies the femininity–masculinity binary and works from the proposition that patriarchal modes of thinking, acting, and being are gender-free. Hence, marginality can be both a feature of the seemingly powerful as it can become a power of the seemingly vulnerable actors of international relations.

We unfold this argument in three steps. At first, we provide an overview of repercussions of sanctions against Russia as extended to the economies most interconnected with Russia’s. Then we comparatively determine patterns found in both regions of Central Asia and South Caucasus. Finally, we conclude with an invitation to re-conceptualize power in international relations and suggest questions for further research on the change of global order from bottom-up or from the marginal to the status quo powers.

Section one of the article outlines the methodology that this article employs to study the impact of Russia-oriented sanctions on the peripheral actors. It lays out the concepts that the article draws upon to engage with the analysis of the spill-over effects of the sanctions. Section two puts forth the case studies in focus and highlights the resilience of the marginal actors in relation to the crisis. The final section summarizes our findings.

Is There a Feminist Theory of Sanctions? Towards a Framework of Analysis

Amidst the dozens of ongoing wars today, Ukraine has been most widely discussed due to its potential to change the direction of history (Harrari, 2022). Ukraine is the threshold where Europe's post-sovereign and borderless world clashes with Russia's near-medievalist attachment to territories and borders (Akchurina & Della Sala, 2018). The clash of foreign policy mindsets cannot be understood without a better understanding of a new phenomenality of power in international relations, which needs to be relational and dynamic.

The concept of soft power has been the closest step towards something called "feminization" of international relations. Indeed, prior to the Russia-Ukraine War, the attempts of feminist security studies have been directed to non-material understanding of power in international relations, towards the search of "feminine" features in the patriarchal architecture of the global order (Tickner, 2001).

We offer a hybrid framework of analysis to better understand the indirect impact of sanctions against Russia against the "marginal objects" of international relations, which are the former "colonial subjects" (Bayart, 2007) within the so-called "Russian sphere of influence," specifically Central Asia and South Caucasus. Borrowing the focus on the marginal from feminist and critical security studies, we suggest that resilience and improvisation, with which Central Asia and South Caucasus have been facing the unintended consequences of sanctions on Russia, demonstrates that a new kind of power has been emerging in the international system. This may challenge the usual Great Game in a feminine way while creating significant change in the global order in the long run.

While most feminist scholars discuss sanctions as a coercive tool with a negative impact on women's economic, political, and social rights, a feminist approach suggests that war and economic sanctions can also lead to a higher degree of independence (Tickner 2001, p. 50). For instance, the increase in economic independence and the bargaining power of the marginal states could also give us an insight into the patterns of domination in international relations. A feminist perspective, however, suggests focusing on the impact of sanctions on women. For instance, it suggests that women have been largely overlooked in the debate about the impact of sanctions, due to the prevalent state-centrism of the International Relations discipline (Buck et al., 1998, p. 73). However, in their study on the sanctions against Iraq in 1990, Buck et al. (1998) also focus on the chains of vulnerability, such as food availability, unemployment, and the collapse of personal wealth on both men and women in Iraq. While the gendered perspective sheds some light on the perspective of justice during the war period, it is limited to understanding social change, as societies and states still fall into the same global power dynamics when fighting is concluded, with no political impact whatsoever (Drury & Peksen, 2014; Buck et al., 1998).

While the literature on sanctions and feminism has mainly focused on the gender aspect of inequality and on the individual level of analysis, we suggest bringing this agenda further to the analysis of power of the marginal states and their capacity to change the world order. The marginality here is a mere metaphorical tool, to highlight the dependency in which these states have found themselves historically, in this case the dependency on Russia.

We define "marginality" as a perceived inability to influence the course of global affairs and global order. While the causes of the marginality are out of the scope of this article, most of these small states have undergone a colonial or semi-colonial history or have been what

Jean-Francois Bayart (2007) terms “global subjects.” We find this concept to be a good tool to highlight the perceived vulnerability of the states that have been for a long time considered “no one’s land” (Safranchuk, 2018) or the *tabula rasa* society in the Great Game.

In other words, we borrow from the very ontology of feminist security studies, which suggests that social relations in International Relations (IR) are constructed by initially unequal political, economic, and social structures. However, the focus on the great power politics prevents IR from understanding the behavior of the small states and the hierarchies that they have to face in the presumably anarchic international system (Tickner & True, 2018). Hence, thinking from the local to the global, a feminist approach contributes to understanding the indirect impact of sanctions and their unintended empowerment of the seemingly marginal actors of international relations. Within the Great Game, the big powers may be gradually subjected to the “local rules” (Cooley, 2012). In other words, the question of whether sanctions against Russia further weaken or paradoxically empower the marginal international actors is the focus of the following sections. Furthermore, can we say that the collateral damage done by the sanctions against Russia could lead to the emergence of a new type of soft power in international relations?

Impact of Sanctions on Marginal Actors: Resilience as an Emerging Type of Soft Power?

This section highlights how the Central Asian and South Caucasus states have been impacted by the sanctions imposed on Russia. These countries were expected to suffer due to the sanctions; however, all of the countries have exhibited a peculiar degree of resilience and have navigated the sanctions, avoiding severe costs both from the European and Russian sides. To paraphrase the Kazakh President’s statement, they have not violated the sanctions while still working with Russia. The anticipated cascading effects of sanctions against Russia on Central Asian economies have not yet materialized (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2022). On the contrary, the economies of the Central Asian region performed unexpectedly strongly in 2022 (International Monetary Fund (IMF), 2022). All Central Asian countries, except Turkmenistan, saw an upward revision of growth number projections for 2022 and 2023 (OECD, 2022; European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), 2022). In January through October, Kyrgyzstan’s economy expanded by 7.0%, Uzbekistan’s by 5.8 %, Tajikistan’s by 7.8 %, and Kazakhstan’s only by 2.8 % (ADB, 2022). This growth of economies in the region was a result of high remittance flow such as a large influx of Russian citizens and public sector wage hikes along with an essential increase in “shadow” trade with Russia (EBRD, 2022, p. 3; ADB, 2022, p. 11). The data of the National Statistical Committees of various Central Asian countries confirm an increase in trade turnover between Russia and Central Asia in 2022 compared to the previous year (National Statistical Committee of Kyrgyz Republic, 2023; Bureau for National Statistics of Kazakhstan (BNSK), 2023; State Committee for Statistics of Uzbekistan (SCSU), 2023). Russia remains the largest trading partner of Tajikistan and Kazakhstan, and the second largest, preceded by China, of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Increase in mutual trade between Russia and Central Asia is mainly seen as trade diversion as a result of replacement of the West with Central Asia (Hedlund, 2023; Eremenko & Smith, 2022).

While none of the Central Asian countries supported Russia’s war, none joined the sanctions against Russia because Russia is still the main strategic partner of the region. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan abstained from the UN vote to censure Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, while Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan did not vote at all. Tajikistan and Turkmenistan have not publicly or officially commented on Russia’s war in Ukraine, thus keeping their position neutral.

Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokaev stated in an interview that while Kazakhstan continues to work with Russia, the country will not violate international sanctions against Russia:

We cannot violate them, especially because we receive warnings about possible so-called secondary sanctions against our economy from the West if we did violate the sanctions...But I stress, we continue working with the Russian government, I would say in an intensified manner and reach necessary agreements, while not violating the sanctions. (RFE/RL, 2022)

As the oil and gas prices have sharply increased in the light of the war in Ukraine, Kazakhstan increased its export volumes to the EU, China, and South Korea, and recorded high gas and oil revenues (EBRD, 2022, p. 18). Moreover, in 2023, Kazakhstan plans to transport 1.5 million tons of oil via the new Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline, bypassing Russia. On the 22nd of November 2022, during the briefing of the KazMunayGas (KMG) national company, a KMG representative stated that KMG and SOCAR, the national Azerbaijani oil company, signed an agreement:

We are holding negotiations because the KMG and Azerbaijani SOCAR signed an agreement for five years on transporting 1.5 million tons of oil through the Baku (Azerbaijan)–Tbilisi (Georgia)–Ceyhan (Turkey) Pipeline. It remains to determine which Kazakh oil companies will transport this volume starting next year. We expect volumes to increase in the future because Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan are interested in this. (*Astana Times*, 2022)

According to the report of the 2023 National Statistical Committee of Kyrgyz Republic, trade turnover between Kyrgyzstan and Russia increased from \$2.03 billion in 2021 to \$2.98 billion in January–November 2022. While the export of goods from Kyrgyzstan to Russia increased from \$258 million to \$917 million, the imports from Russia to Kyrgyzstan increased from \$1.67 billion to \$2,06 billion in 2021–2022. High increase of export can reflect patterns of so-called shadow trade:

In Kyrgyzstan indeed, increased bilateral trade with Russia coincides with falling exports to the rest of the world. Exports to Russia have mainly consisted of industrial goods and production inputs, while the value of imports of interim goods, mainly from China, increased by 65% between the first and the second quarter of 2022, and by 69%. (OECD, 2022)

Moreover, in the period of January through November 2022, inflow of remittances was \$220.8 million more than in the previous year (Kudryavtseva, 2023). According to the 2023 Bureau for National Statistics of Kazakhstan, trade turnover with Russia also increased in 2022. While the export from Kazakhstan to Russia grew from \$6.3 billion to 7.8 billion, the import of goods from Russia to Kazakhstan saw an insignificant increase from \$15.77 billion to \$15.80 billion (BNSK, 2023).

According to the 2023 data of the State Committee for Statistics of Uzbekistan, exports from Uzbekistan to Russia grew from \$1.4 billion in 2021 to \$2.1 billion in 2022, and the import increased from \$3.6 to \$4.3 billion. One company in Uzbekistan, Promcomplektlogistic, was sanctioned by the U.S. for shipping goods to a sanctioned Russian electronics maker (Eremenko & Smith, 2022).

Unlike other mentioned states, Tajikistan's and Turkmenistan's agencies do not provide figures on the trade turnover for the years under study. However, the Minister of Economic Development of the Russian Federation, Maksim Reshetnikov, stated that mutual trade between Russia and Tajikistan in 2022 increased by 20% and broke the record over the past two decades (Ministry of Economic Development, 2023). As for Turkmenistan, in January through March of 2022, Russian exports increased by 49.3% (up to \$124 million), and imports from Turkmenistan increased by 35% (up to \$47.1 million) (Turkmenportal, 2022).

The three countries of the South Caucasus, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan have also approached the issue of sanctions on Russia with similar maneuverability and resilience. Although individual steps differ among the countries, all three countries have abstained from radical actions and strong alliances with NATO member countries or Russia, navigating the confrontation between the Great Powers with soft power instruments, including humanitarian diplomacy and trade.

When the first package of sanctions against Russia came into effect in February 2022 (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, 2022), the Prime Minister of Georgia, Irakli Gharibashvili, said that Georgia does not agree with the sanctions: "I want to state clearly and unequivocally that Georgia, taking into account our national interests and the interests of our people, is not going to participate in financial and economic sanctions, since this will only damage our country and our population much more" (Narimanishvili, 2022; JAMnews, 2022a). Underlining the country's vulnerability, he also added to the arguments that the country is economically very dependent on Russia. Gharibashvili said that in the last seven to eight years, \$12 billion was transferred from Russia to Georgia and "he will not lower this income of the population" (Narimanishvili, 2022; JAMnews, 2022a). On the 28th of February, 2022, the Georgian authorities refused to allow the Ukrainian side to operate a chartered flight that was supposed to take volunteers from Georgia and the humanitarian cargo collected by the Georgian citizens to Ukraine (JAMnews 2022b; Kokaya, 2022). As a result, on March 1st of 2022, President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy announced that Ukraine recalled its ambassador to Georgia over the "immoral position" of the Georgian authorities (JAMnews, 2022b; Civil Georgia, 2022a).

In the banking sector in Georgia, the sanctions applied to the branch of the Russian VTB Bank, the transfers of which were restricted (Narimanishvili, 2022; VTB, 2022; Interpressnews, 2022). However, in the meantime, according to the data of the National Bank of Georgia, in April 2022 five times more sums were transferred from Russia to Georgia compared to the previous month. In March 2022, \$27 million was transferred from Russia to Georgia, and in April 2022, \$133 million was transferred, which is 300% more than in April of the previous year (National Bank of Georgia, 2023).

In March 2022, the Russian Agricultural Authority (Rosselkhoznadzor) proposed to allow the supply of dairy products from 15 Georgian enterprises. The Russian agency TASS published on March 5th of 2022 that the decision was the result of the negotiations between the head of Rosselkhoznadzor, the head of the National Food Agency of the Ministry of Agriculture of Georgia Zurab Chekurashvili, and the chairman of the Food Security Agency of the Republic of Azerbaijan Goshgar Tahmazli. The National Food Agency of Georgia confirmed that the negotiations with the Russian side regarding the agreement did in fact take place. They noted, however, that Georgia had been working with Russia on the matter since 2020 (TASS 2022a; Ekho Kavkaza Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (EK RFE/RL), 2022; Radio Liberty, RFE/RL, 2022).

Transparency International Georgia released a report in February 2022 stating that Georgia's economic dependence on Russia increased in 2022 compared to previous years, mainly due to rising remittances (Transparency International Georgia, 2023). The report highlights that Georgia's growing economic reliance on Russia poses a threat as Russia has a

history of using economic relations for political leverage in independent countries. Georgia's exports to Russia increased by 6.8% in 2022, totalling \$652 million, while imports from Russia rose by 79% to \$1.8 billion, according to the report. The share of exports to Russia in Georgia's total exports decreased by 2.7% to 11.7% in 2022, while the share of imports from Russia increased to 13.6%, which is "the highest in the last 17 years" (Transparency International Georgia, 2023; Civil Georgia, 2023). The value of trade between Georgia and Russia in 2022 exceeded \$2.4 billion, a 52% increase from 2021. Russia is now Georgia's second-largest trading partner with a 13.1% share in Georgia's foreign trade (Azernews, 2023).

On 21 September, Russia's President Vladimir Putin signed a decree on partial mobilization, after which the second influx of Russians into Armenia as well as Georgia began (Sargsyan, 2022; Gavin, 2022). Compared to them, Azerbaijan appeared to have far fewer new arrivals as its land borders have stayed closed since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (Gavin, 2022; JAMnews & Baku, 2022). Due to the influx, there has been significant inflation in the real estate market in both Georgia and Armenia (Avetisyan, 2022).

According to Georgian Economy Minister Levan Davitashvili, between 20,000 and 25,000 Russians entered Georgia in the first week after the start of the war against Ukraine, and more than 100,000 remained in the country (Pertaia, 2022). Georgia is often a transit country for many Russian migrants (Business Media Georgia, 2022). In Armenia, the number of arrivals from Russia is similarly high, with about 50,000 Russians arriving in the country between February and April 2022 alone. According to Minister of the Economy Vahan Kerobyan, this represents a significant proportion of Armenia's population of about 3 million (Schmies, 2022; News Armenia, 2022).

Armenia recorded a significant rise of almost 50% in its trade with Russia, causing concerns about Armenia's role in supplying Russia with the foreign goods its economy requires (Mejlumyan, 2022). During the first half of 2022, the bilateral trade between Russian and Armenia saw a 42% increase to touch \$1.6 billion (Mejlumyan, 2022; State Committee of the Republic of Armenia (SCRA), 2022; TASS, 2022b). Armenia is one of the few countries where some banks are still processing Russian Mir payments (Harutyunyan, 2022; Dovich, 2022).

Amidst the E.U. and U.S. ban on the flights from Russia, the Russian leadership hinted at the possibility of resuming direct flights with Georgia. This statement was welcomed by the Georgian leadership, "Our position is simple: [the flight ban] was a sanction imposed on Georgia by Russia at the time, in 2019, which, of course, aggravated the situation of our citizens" (Kucera, 2023). Georgian Dream Chairman Irakli Kobakhidze stated later that "[i]f unilateral sanctions are lifted by the Russian Federation, it will be welcome for us in the interests of our fellow citizens and countrymen" (Kucera, 2023). The Mayor of Tbilisi, Kakha Kaladze, views the restoration of direct flights with Russia as a potential positive development for the country and sees no issue with it (Tskifurishvili, 2023a; Tskifurishvili, 2023b).

The trade turnover between Azerbaijan and Russia in the first three quarters of 2022 reportedly increased by 23.6% compared to 2021, amounting to \$2.54 billion (TASS, 2022c). During the 11th Russian-Azerbaijani Interregional Forum, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin announced that the trade turnover between Russia and Azerbaijan had reached \$3 billion in the first ten months of 2022, showing a 20% increase compared to 2021 (TASS, 2022d).

As for Azerbaijan, its position in relation to the European energy market has significantly strengthened after the imposition of sanctions on Russia. On November 18th of 2022, Russia's state-owned gas company Gazprom announced the start of gas supplies to Azerbaijan's state gas company SOCAR. Gazprom stated that it would provide up to a billion cubic meters of gas to SOCAR through March 2023 (O'Byrne 2022; Interfax, 2022; Abay, 2022). SOCAR stated to Azerbaijani Press Agency (APA) that it has had a long-standing

partnership with Gazprom and that both companies are working to optimize their infrastructure through the mutual exchange of gas flows (APA, 2022).

President Ilham Aliyev stated that Azerbaijan's gas exports to Europe were expected to increase to "at least" 11.6 billion cubic meters (bcm) in the next year, up from an estimated 11.3 bcm this year (Reuters, 2022). Furthermore, the shortage of energy in Europe resulting from the sanctions on Russian energy opened a window for a potential new geostrategic project for the South Caucasus. Azerbaijani President Aliyev, Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili of Georgia, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, and Romanian Prime Minister Nicolae Ciucă signed an agreement on December 17th of 2022 to develop a strategic submarine electricity cable to transport energy from Azerbaijan to the European Union via Georgia (Euronews, 2022; Civil Georgia, 2022b; RFE/RL's Romanian Service, 2022). The 1,100-kilometer cable is expected to become a new energy source for the European Union, which aims to reduce its reliance on Russian energy (O'Byrne, 2022). Azerbaijani President Aliyev stated that the project is "a step towards creating a corridor for green energy," and Azerbaijan aims to increase its wind and solar power capacity by 4 gigawatts by 2027 (RFE/RL's Romanian Service, 2022). The maneuvers of these marginal actors did not go unnoticed in the West. Both Georgia and Armenia have been reported among the countries that serve as transit routes for sanctioned goods to reach Russia and Belarus (JAMnews, 2022c). Despite the lack of concrete evidence indicating that Armenian firms are participating in parallel exports or re-exports, the raw trade figures have caught the attention of Western diplomats in Yerevan (Mejlumyan, 2022; SCRA, 2022). Furthermore, Krisjanis Karins, Prime Minister of Latvia, made a claim that traders are using Armenia, Turkey, and Kazakhstan to "dodge" the EU sanctions on Russia. He highlighted an increase in European trade with these countries, which he deemed to be "disproportionate to where it has been in the past" (Sytas, 2023).

Georgia's President Salome Zurbishvili was prompted to clearly state in an interview with CNN that Georgia participates in all financial sanctions and resolutions to support Ukraine:

We are participating in all kinds of international financial sanctions and that's quite something for the Georgian financial sector. At the same time, we are participating in all the international resolutions that have been taken to support Ukraine. We share [with Ukraine] a common two-century history of Russian aggression and we know what that means. (Amanpour, 2022)

The president attempted to clarify to host Christian Amanpour that the notion that Georgia is not participating in the sanctions is "exaggerated" and that the issue might lie in the vocabulary the Georgian government used (Agenda.ge, 2022; Amanpour, 2022; Kunchulia, 2022). Similarly, in an interview with European Commission President Ursula von Leyen, Christiane Amanpour alleged that Georgia is deviating from the sanctions regime (Amanpour, 2023). The US State Department expressed concern over the potential resumption of flights between Russia and Georgia (Kucera, 2023). The *Financial Times* has recently reported that the EU is probing whether the Russian neighboring countries are helping Russia avoid the effects of sanctions (Financial Times, 2023). However, so far these critical remarks have remained mild and diplomatic, and have stayed in the ambit of diplomatic statements, possibly due to the fact that the trade between Russia and its neighboring actors concerns goods not directly subject to the sanctions.

Conclusion

The overview of the conflicting data on the unintended consequences of the Western sanctions against Russia on the extended Russian sphere of influence suggests the following findings.

Firstly, the expected spill-over of economic distress caused by sanctions upon the vulnerable societies has not really taken the expected shape, but rather offered opportunities for unexpected economic growth.

Secondly, the Central Asia and South Caucasus, while seemingly different regions, have both exhibited unprecedented resilience to not only maneuver among the big global players, but also to influence the direction of global economic and financial processes, by using their cross-roads positionality. They have avoided getting caught between Scylla and Charybdis, i.e., identification with the sanctions on one side or Russia on the other, as such a position would make their situation even more vulnerable from both geopolitical and economic perspectives.

Finally, the resilience that the two regions have demonstrated can contribute to further conceptualization of the soft power in International Relations. In other words, the analysis of data shows that the “no one’s lands” or the *tabula rasa* is never as faceless and powerless as perceived by the conventional International Relations lens. Rather, amidst the grandest Great Game, there will always emerge what Alex Cooley (2012) called the “local rules” and these are the rules of resilience, subtlety, and near-informality.

While definitely under-institutionalized and not necessarily part of the key international architecture of power, the processes and relationships which emanate from these areas may become pivotal for how the world will look like when the war in Ukraine is over. Perhaps, the West, which used to see Central Asia and the South Caucasus as a mere extension of Russia, will now turn their eyes to the small actors on equal terms and allow them to enter global affairs without a gatekeeper, but using their own political agency.

From the feminist perspective, this article has highlighted the exercise of soft power by the so-called weaker and marginal actors in Eurasia. As we have seen, the leaders of these countries clearly understand their own vulnerability in the face of the great power confrontation. They have displayed agency through a variety of soft power mechanisms, making their actions pertinent to the feminist focus on power in International Relations.

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