Russian Colonialism and Imperial Ambitions: Case Studies of Donbas, Abkhazia, and Chechnya

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Abstract

This paper investigates contemporary forms of Russian colonialism as manifested in three distinct regions: Ukraine's Donbas, Georgia's Abkhazia, and Russia's Chechnya. Through a comparative case study approach, the analysis applies the concepts of internal colonization and selected elements of settler colonialism, drawing on postcolonial theory to explore practices such as identity erasure, militarization, and legal assimilation. The study argues that Russian imperial strategies have not disappeared but adapted into dynamic tools of governance—combining symbolic integration, coercive loyalty, and discursive control. By situating these developments within both Soviet legacies and post-Soviet transformations, the paper contributes to a growing body of literature that reconsiders Russia's imperial role in the 21st century.

Introduction

Russian policies toward post-Soviet regions such as Donbas, Abkhazia, and Chechnya evoke critical discussions regarding colonial legacies and contemporary imperial ambitions. These territories exemplify the complex interplay between internal and settler colonialism, reflecting Russia's historical continuity and its current geopolitical strategies. Analyzing these regions through the lens of internal and settler colonialism clarifies the mechanisms Russia employs to maintain regional dominance and national cohesion—particularly through cultural assimilation, demographic manipulation, and economic control. Russia's contemporary approach can be characterized as power politics masked by legal and humanitarian rhetoric[1]. For instance, the assertion of cultural unity with Ukrainians has been used to justify military intervention and cultural erasure, aligning with settler colonial tactics aimed at eliminating indigenous identities and integrating regions into a broader Russian-centric narrative[2]. In parallel, the concept of "internal colonization," rooted in the imperial and Soviet past, reemerges in practices such as militarization, forced assimilation, and the marginalization of non-Russian national identities[3]. These tendencies are particularly visible in Chechnya, where repression and imposed loyalty exemplify violent internal colonial governance, and in Abkhazia, where Russian "peacekeeping" missions established long-term political and military influence, reshaping the region's identity and affiliations[4]. The research question guiding this analysis is: What aspects of internal and settler colonialism characterize Russia's post-Soviet dominance in Donbas, Abkhazia, and Chechnya? This inquiry seeks to uncover how identity erasure, demographic engineering, and securitized governance function as tools of control. Through the lens of postcolonial theory, the study interrogates how Russia legitimizes its domination under the guise of protection and historical continuity—especially by invoking shared culture, security concerns, or "common origins," as seen in Putin's 2021

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[1] Johannes Socher, *Russia and the Right to Self-Determination in the Post-Soviet Space* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 112–115.

[2] Botakoz Kassymbekova, "Imperiale Unschuld als Identität und Methode: Opferkult und Kolonialismus der Russländischen Föderation," *Totalitarismus und Demokratie* 21, no. 1 (2024): 37–55.Deutscher Bundestag

[3] Maxim Khomyakov, "Russia: Colonial, Anticolonial, Postcolonial Empire?" *Social Science Information* 59, no. 2 (2020): 225–263. https://doi.org/10.1177/0539018420929804.

[4] Julie A. George, *The Politics of Ethnic Separatism in Russia and Georgia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 198–212.

essay on Ukraine[5].

This topic is particularly significant given ongoing conflicts in Eastern Europe and the intensifying confrontation between Russia and Western institutions. Understanding how colonial frameworks inform Russia's contemporary behavior helps explain why conflicts in these regions persist and how imperial strategies are adapted rather than abandoned. The case of Donbas demonstrates how internal colonialism intersects with extractive economic policies and ideological indoctrination through education and media, while Abkhazia highlights settler strategies including passportization, infrastructure control, and demographic shifts[6]. Meanwhile, Chechnya reflects the coercive dimensions of internal colonialism, where loyalty is secured not only through military dominance but also via symbolic submission to Moscow's authority[7].

This research contributes to the broader academic conversation by extending postcolonial theory into the post-Soviet context, a field where such frameworks remain underutilized. It also provides practical insight into how colonial dynamics shape the politics of identity, sovereignty, and governance in contested territories. By foregrounding the continuity between Russia's imperial past and its current territorial practices, the study aims to inform both scholarly debates and international policy responses to post-Soviet instability.

Soviet Understandings of Different Cultural Groups

Understanding Soviet colonialism necessitates a realization that their colonialism is structurally different from older forms of colonialism. Older forms of colonialism can be generalized into three groups: settler colonialism, exploitative colonialism, and dynastic colonialism.[8] Settler colonialism involves settlements from a larger country onto "unoccupied" lands – that is, unoccupied by other colonizing powers, as these do not

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[5] Vladimir Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," President of Russia Official Website, July 12, 2021, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181.

[6] Thomas Ambrosio and William A. Lange, "The Architecture of Annexation? Russia's Bilateral Agreements with South Ossetia and Abkhazia," *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 5 (2016): 673–693.

[7] John Russell, *Chechnya—Russia's 'War on Terror'* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 48–73.

[8] Borrowing descriptions from this source, I develop definitions of "dynastic" and "exploitative" colonialism. Horvath, Ronald J. "A Definition of Colonialism." *Current Anthropology* 13, no. 1 (1972): 45–57. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2741072.

recognize indigenous ownership as an uncrossable barrier to their expansion. This kind of colonizing strategy can further differentiate depending on their relationships with natives, where they either subjugate and integrate the natives into their societies (such as the Spaniards in California) or conduct forceful repulsion, such as with the British colonies in North America. Exploitative colonialism does not focus on long-term settlements in other lands. Instead, they seek to extract as much as possible with as few inputs as possible to maximize the benefit the mother country gains. This flourished under the Mercantilist economic model, where the wealthiest state should maximize exports from the mother country and resources to the mother country through colonies. The Dutch East India Company under the Netherlands is the most prominent example of this model, and even gold and silver extraction from South America could be best explained through this system. The final example is dynastic colonialism, where empires would conquer neighboring peoples, assimilate them to a dominant culture, expand trade, and pillage for loot. This example best explains pre-modern empires, such as the Roman Empire, Muslim empires (Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates), and the Hellenistic Empire. These do not create an exhaustive list of colonial styles, and tailored versions for specific examples can be better.

The USSR experienced structural differences with its colonial ambitions and created a different style and strategy of colonialism. First, shared borders with their colonies brought an intersectional approach toward each culture. This would allow the Russians to apply the same understanding towards different peoples, to simplify and organize the colonization process. This approach did not arise from nowhere. Communism's goal would be a stateless society, but there was much discourse on how to get there. Stalin's perspective was that a dictatorship of the proletariat, created by a Socialist state, would strengthen people until the need for a state disappeared.[9] When the USSR formed in 1922, Stalin stated that this would "serve as another decisive step along the way toward the unification of the toilers of the entire world in a single World Socialist Soviet Republic."[10] A focus on unification through shared plights allowed a broad application of colonialism into lands separated by culture and values, for the language of Lenin's slogan "Workers of the world and oppressed peoples,

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[9]Geroid Tanquary Robinson, "Stalin's Vision of Utopia: The Future Communist Society," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 99, no. 1 (1955): 13.

[10] Robinson, 13

unite" simply focuses on the shared material statuses of people. This enables the Soviets to prescribe a different bourgeois enemy per Soviet republic and justify their behavior.

Since colonialism almost always involves negotiation with a different cultural group and different ethnicity, we must understand the Soviet, and then Russian, understanding of different cultures. Internal Soviet passports had a designation of национальность, or natsional'nost' in the closest transliteration into English.[11] This would indicate the ethnic minority of the individual living in the USSR. Soviet ethnographers viewed ethnicity as "the production of self-reproducing collectives based on self-identification and a distant culture as well as on its role as a major determinant of social action."[12] Social action does not seem intuitive when understanding ethnicity, as your background does not necessitate some action of the person, yet any social action stemming from a cultural minority may require ethnicity as a prerequisite, making it a useful quality to keep in mind. This definition is much more concerned with action and effect of ethnicity rather than the quality of being of the ethnicity itself. Other scholars may never consider action as a part of ethnicity. Soviet ethnographers also saw assimilation as the "inclusion of small groups (or of separate individuals) of one people in the body of another – usually a larger or more developed community."[13] This definition makes sense in the way Western thinkers know of assimilation, and later we see how these understandings mesh well with Soviet approaches to cultural minorities.

Soviet history involved a quashing, and then reckoning, with cultural minorities within the USSR. The early Soviet model of centralization created a wary effect towards cultural minorities. Under Stalin, state-building and unifying the people required a central nationalization, which meant that any deviation for self-determination by peoples not wanting to take part in unification required suppression. Stalin summarizes this idea into the motto "ethnic/nationalist in form, socialist in content", where the Stalin could let cultural minorities exist, however they had to act within a grander, Socialist structure, and not deviate.[14]

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[11] Barbara A. Anderson and Brian D. Silver, "Estimating Russification of Ethnic Identity Among Non-Russians in the USSR," *Demography* 20, no. 4 (1983): 464.

[12] Teodor Shanin, "Ethnicity in the Soviet Union: Analytical Perceptions and Political Strategies," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31, no. 3 (1989): 414.

[13] Anderson, 462

[14] University of Chicago Library, The Soviet Imaginary: Soviet Policy Toward the Nationalities in the 1920s–1930s, accessed April 8, 2025, https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/collex/exhibits/soviet-imaginary/socialism-nations/soviet-policy-nationalities-1920s-1930s/.

However, this amiable situation would not last. Right after WWII, Stalin would declare that Russians were the "leading people of the Soviet Union", solidifying a favoritism for the Russian ethnicity.[15]

Andropov would admit a need for a "well thought-out, scientifically substantiated policy concerning natsional'nost", starting a wave of Russian ethnologist research in the 1980s, until it was mothballed by Gorbachev due to economic crises taking precedent.[16]

Russian hostility to cultural groups, then, seems as likely as it is not, considering the history of the USSR. However, the large landmass and thus large amounts of cultural minorities meant consideration would create hassle for the Politburo, who elected to ignore the situation as much as possible. But this purposeful ignorance would lead to Russian xenophobia towards ethnic minorities, which will help explain the mentality behind Russian colonial effects later in this paper. The next paragraph will discuss Russian xenophobia, and afterwards we will discuss the types of Russian colonialism and the response by native peoples. Finally, we will discuss whether scholars should understand these actions within a post-Soviet framework or a post-colonial one.

Changing socioeconomic conditions in Russia after the collapse of the USSR exacerbated ill feelings that Russians held towards other minorities. After the Second Chechen War and the general decay of the Russian economy in the early 2000s, a survey of Russians found that 47% of people thought that national minorities had too much power in the country, and 49% thought that the power of Jews had to be limited in politics and business.[17] Worsening attitudes also increased towards Caucasus and Asiatic minorities after conflicts in the region in the late 1980s and early 1990s.[18] However, these feelings were never made into large-scale demonstrations or effects which took Russia by a storm. Some parties used these feelings for political gain – Rodina, for example, supported ultra-

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[15] Roger D. Markwick, "The Great Patriotic War in Soviet and Post-Soviet Collective Memory," in Dan Stone (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Postwar European History* (Oxford Academic, 18 Sept. 2012)

[16] Shanin, 421-422.

[17] Lev D. Gudkov, "Russian Nationalism and Xenophobia," in Philipp Casula and Jeronim Perovic (eds.), *Identities and Politics During the Putin Presidency : The Foundations of Russia's Stability* (Stuttgart, Germany: Ibidem Press, 2009), 177.

[18] Gudkov, 175

nationalist thought and gained 9% of the vote in the 2003 legislative elections.[19] Yet, these feelings can be used as fuel for one's political desires if a politician were diabolical enough. Putin's strategy harnessed this to introduce a new form of colonialism within the post-Soviet space.

Putin's Idea of Ukraine

Putin's article in 2021 "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" unearths latent distaste towards non-Russian peoples and their self-determination, and he harnesses that rhetorical language for power grabs. Initially, Putin disguises his contempt for Ukrainians by bargaining with their right to self determination:

"some part of a people in the process of its development, influenced by a number of reasons and historical circumstances, can become aware of itself as a separate nation at a certain moment. How should we treat that? There is only one answer: with respect! You want to establish a state of your own: you are welcome! But what are the terms?... the republics that were founders of the Union, having denounced the 1922 Union Treaty, must return to the boundaries they had had before joining the Soviet Union."[20]

Here, we see Putin introduce the possibility of peoples, grouped by a commonality, seeking their own borders after the collapse of the USSR. Although somewhat accepting of this, he introduces a caveat: that they go to their original borders, which is up to debate. Putin's lengthy reliance of historical narratives in this article does not promise any authentic negotiation in this matter. Indeed, the second invasion of Ukraine was not to diminish their borders to some smaller level, it was to take over the country entirely.

Putin confirms his animosity towards other cultural groups later in his speech. Putin contrasts today's Ukraine with an imaginary one which fits his vision. He states how today's Ukraine forces Russian speakers to give up their heritage, cementing a foundation for justifiable action against the region. His comparison is drastic, as shown below:

"It would not be an exaggeration to say that the path of forced assimilation, the

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[19] Robert Horvath and Charlotte Lever, "The Second Coming of Rodina: The Role of a Nonparliamentary Party in Putin's Managed Nationalism," *Nationalities Papers* (2024): 3.

[20] Vladimir Putin, "Article by Vladimir Putin "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," *President of Russia*, July 12, 2021, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181.

formation of an ethnically pure Ukrainian state, aggressive towards Russia, is comparable in its consequences to the use of weapons of mass destruction against us."

Indeed, it goes without saying that this is factually not true. The Verkhovna Rada, Ukraine's parliament, did pass a law in 2019 to help ensure "the development of the Ukrainian language to strengthen national identity" and "the use of the Ukrainian language as the State language".[21] However, this does not affect private communication or use of other languages in religious settings, and Russian can continue to be used over radio, television, and other institutions such as healthcare and law enforcement.[22] Some Ukrainian schools did remove Russian as a mandatory language to learn, but supplementary classes still offered it as a language of study.[23] The idea that forced assimilation occurred is highly dubious, and using nuclear weapon imagery to equate the fictional repression only helps substantiate Putin's plans to use assimilation himself. He belittles the idea of an independent Ukraine by using historical narratives:

"I am confident that true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia. Our spiritual, human and civilizational ties formed for centuries and have their origins in the same sources, they have been hardened by common trials, achievements and victories."

This final passage disconnects the argument for independence. How can Ukrainians have an independent identity if their heritage is inextricably linked with Russians? Thus, what is Ukrainian is Russian. Yet, the reverse is not explicitly noted here, as if Russians hold the dominant culture and Ukrainians are, at best, a subsect, not worthy of their own calling.

Post-Soviet or Post-Colonial?

Russia's actions in neighboring regions introduce the opportunity to understand

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[21] European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission). *Opinion on the Law on Supporting the Functioning of the Ukrainian Language as the State Language*. CDL-REF(2019)036. Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2019, 4. https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-REF(2019)036-e.

[22] "DISINFO: Russian language is entirely forbidden in Ukraine," *EUvsDisInfo*, August 7, 2019, https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/russian-language-is-entirely-forbidden-in-ukraine/.

[23] "Ukrainian schools begin to drop off Russian language as discipline," *TASS*, October 17, 2017, https://tass.com/society/971214.

these actions through modern theoretical frameworks. One such framework is postcolonialism, a recent field of study to critique societies after their colonial eras. Modern postcolonial thinkers offer frameworks for understanding societies still touched by colonial predecessors. Generally, post-colonialism is a methodology to deal with the nature of cultural identity, gender, race, social class, ethnicity, and nationality in postcolonial studies. We will use this definition to mainly understand cultural identity (a very important part of Putin's rhetoric) and nationality (discerning between the Russian and minority in question). Our case studies of Russian colonialism and imperialism can be held within this realm of postcolonialism and even provide a framework for how to combat against such intangible damages.

Due to the infancy of postcolonial thought, many thinkers offer different, and sometimes conflicting, ways of thinking of postcolonialism. Ato Quayson, professor of English at Stanford university, understands postcolonialism as a way to reckon with both previous and current effects of colonialism, and specifically highlight the "struggle against colonialism and its after effects."[24] Here we can view Russia's intrusion and imperialistic actions in places such as South Ossetia, the Donbas region in Ukraine, and Chechnya[25] all within this guideline – as actions taken during the USSR and afterwards. Marko Pavlyshyn, a professor of Ukrainian studies in Australia, does not see the colonial impacts in purely negative light. He sees it as an integral part of the experience which can be used to form an independent self-consciousness.[26] Thus, if we prefer Marko's viewpoint over Ato's, we may understand the effects of Russian imperialism as helping build an independent Ukraine, whereas Ato's framework may lead us to view it as hurtful and not helpful. Lastly, we have other authors who provide commentary to help us understand parts of colonialism, such as culture. One such academic is Homi K. Bahba, a professor of English at Harvard, who understands the culture of a people as both stemming from inflection points in history, which enter into a common feeling of cultural canon, but also that a people must be understood as

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[24] Analyses of Quayson's ideas is found in Chernetsky's work. Vitaly Chernetsky, "Postcolonialism, Russia, and Ukraine," *Ulbandus Review* 7 (2003): 42.

[25] While inside the sovereign territory of the Russian Federation, the attempts to limit identity for the Chechen people cannot be overlooked.

[26] Chernetsky, 41.

gradually changing through processes which build upon themselves.[27] This understanding of culture can help us find pinpointed events of history that helped contribute to Ukrainian culture, but also how Russia's intrusion in the Donbas either fortified, or weakened, this culture. A clear conclusion may not materialize, as this framework leaves much for deliberation, but the reader can at least understand more the nuances and complex effects of modern Russian imperialism.

Postcolonialism, then, can help us categorize Russian effects. However, not all thinkers believe that this new, and predominantly Western, school of thought, can elucidate Russian cause and effects. Some thinkers believe that the unique circumstances of post-Soviet states due to their previous independence, then joining, and eventually splitting away of, cannot ever be adequately compared with post-colonial states around the world. The level of closeness of states such as Georgia and Ukraine to Russia cannot be understated, and by saying that their inner and inter dynamics is comparable to those of states hundreds to thousands of miles away from the colonizing country is a generalization at best. For example, Taras Kuzio, a professor of political science at Mohylianka in Ukraine, sees the colonial relationships between France and their colonies, England and their colonies, and Russia and Soviet states as structurally different relations.[28] England and France had nationalist nation-states before their existence as overseas empires, whereas Russia lacked this relationship. Thus England and France had this prior identity to hold onto in postcolonial times, whereas the USSR was an existence based on conjoined republics, not Russians and their Russian empire.[29] Although the postcolonial frameworks can still help organize different effects Russia has on the native culture, races, and nationalities, the presumptions by noted contributors to the genre may harm deeper understandings of these post-Soviet aspects against Russian interference. Even the battles fought against the Russian power were different from revolutions against European powers. Algeria, India, Vietnam, and Indonesia all had much more violent uprisings for their independence compared to post-Soviet states, as

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[27] Homi K. Bhabha, "DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation," in *Nation and Narration* eds. Homi K. Bhabha (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), 297.

[28] Taras Kuzio, "History, Memory, and Nation Building in the Post-Soviet Colonial Space," *Nationalities Papers* 30, no. 2 (2002): 242.

[29] Laetitia Spetschinsky and Irina V. Bolgova, "Post-Soviet or Post-Colonial? The Relations between Russia and Georgia after 1991," *European Review of International Studies* 1, no. 3 (2014): 120.

those battles were mainly led by nationalistic leaders against the central administration, crumbling quickly, rather than an empire fighting for relevance. Thus, post-Soviet thinkers may place more importance on individual actors crafting the relationships between Russia and their countries or regions, or on actions which stem from great power politics.

These similarities and differences provide a complicated set of tools to use while understanding Russian imperialism and colonialism. However, there is no one correct lens, and by incorporating all viewpoints, postcolonial and post-Soviet. Later in this paper, case studies from regions actively undergoing Russian imperialism can point towards whether the effects and goals of Russian objectives caters towards a postcolonial effect of native individuals' understanding of self, or whether this is wholly non-applicable due to larger scope, state concerns in question.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative case study design to examine how Russia's contemporary policies in Donbas, Abkhazia, and Chechnya reflect evolving forms of internal colonization, as well as partial adaptations of settler colonial logic. These cases are explored not as direct analogues to classical overseas colonies but as territories where Russia exercises coercive control through militarization, demographic manipulation, and cultural assimilation—each in region-specific forms.

We define internal colonialism, drawing on Alexander Etkind's concept of internal colonization, as a domestic imperial strategy that restructures peripheral regions through cultural dominance, political co-optation, and economic dependence.[30]This form of colonization does not rely on geographic distance but rather on asymmetries of power and identity within a formally unified state.

The framework of settler colonialism is applied here in a limited and contextualized sense. While traditionally associated with land seizure and permanent settler populations, we use the term to describe structural practices that seek to erase or override existing political and cultural orders, particularly in Donbas. These include passportization, the replacement of institutional frameworks, and symbolic integration into the Russian polity. However, we do

[30] Alexander Etkind, Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).

not claim that Chechnya or Abkhazia were subject to full-scale settler colonialism in the classical sense. In Abkhazia, Russia acts more as a patron state, exerting influence through legal and economic integration. In Chechnya, mechanisms of control align more closely with internal colonialism, characterized by militarized repression and elite-led authoritarian governance. We acknowledge the critique that settler colonialism's core elements—territorial replacement and mass resettlement—are not consistently present across all three cases.[31]

This dual framework allows us to explore how Russia legitimizes territorial domination while formally denying colonial intent. The cases reflect different applications of this logic:

- Donbas exemplifies a hybrid model of settler and internal colonial practices, with legal absorption, ideological indoctrination, and demographic engineering;

- Abkhazia shows how dependency and exceptional legal status function as tools of informal annexation;

- Chechnya reveals a model of internal colonization rooted in repression, symbolic subjugation, and authoritarian kinship between center and periphery.

These cases were selected based on shared characteristics: direct or indirect Russian intervention, institutional subordination, and identity reconstruction. While other regions like South Ossetia exhibit similar patterns, the selected cases provide variation in colonial logics and integration intensity.

The research draws on multiple sources to triangulate findings:

- Primary legal and policy texts from Russian authorities and regional administrations;

- Peer-reviewed literature, including foundational contributions from Etkind and Bhabha, as well as the critical work of Madina Tlostanova on Soviet and post-Soviet

[31] Adrian Brisku and Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, "Russia's Place in the World and the Problem of Postcoloniality," *Europe-Asia Studies* 72, no. 6 (2020): 965–970.

coloniality;[32]

- Human rights reports, investigative journalism, and NGO data, particularly where field access is limited or restricted.

Our analysis operationalizes four key dimensions of colonial governance:

- Identity erasure: language policy, educational reform, symbolic domination, and state propaganda;

- Militarization: paramilitary indoctrination, youth programs, and securitization of civil life;

- Demographic and legal engineering: passportization, controlled displacement or return, and restructuring of citizenship regimes;

- Economic dependence: infrastructure capture, selective subsidies, elite patronage, and informal economies.

We also remain attentive to the legacies of Soviet governance, recognizing that the USSR, despite formal claims of equality and affirmative action, established a vertical system of control over ethnic peripheries.[33] Our approach does not ignore early Soviet nativization or educational access but argues that imperial logics persisted beneath this façade, especially in the post-Stalin period and post-Soviet adaptations.

Methodological challenges include the lack of field access, difficulties in verifying accounts from occupied or conflict-affected regions, and ideological biases in available materials. These are mitigated through careful source cross-validation and a critical interpretive lens.

By integrating internal and postcolonial frameworks, this study contributes to an expanded understanding of Russian domination as a dynamic imperial formation—combining older practices of suppression with modern instruments of legal, discursive, and institutional

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[32] Madina Tlostanova, Postsocialist Eurasia as a Site of Colonial Difference: A Decolonial Critique (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021); Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994).

[33] Terry Martin, The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

control.[34]

Case Study: Russia's Internal and Settler Colonialism in Donbas (Post-2014)

The case of Donbas provides a compelling example of how Russia's colonial strategies have evolved since 2014. While the region was not incorporated into Russia formally, it has been subject to intense political, cultural, and institutional integration under Russian patronage. The occupation has produced hybrid governance structures, combining local proxies with centralized control from Moscow, while deploying discursive, legal, and material tools of domination.

The 2014 invasion and the subsequent emergence of the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics marked a dramatic escalation of Russian influence. Although not formally annexed like Crimea, the territories have experienced processes that reflect both internal and settler colonial logics: imposition of Russian legal codes, replacement of Ukrainian institutions, Russification of education and media, economic dependency, and deep penetration of Russian security services.[35]

A key aspect of Russia's strategy in Donbas is the use of propaganda and symbolic narratives to promote the Russkiy Mir ("Russian World") ideology. Rather than attempting to erase or forcibly change identities, Russia reconstructs a political and historical myth of "shared civilizational space," portraying Donbas not as occupied but as historically and culturally Russian.[36]This narrative is disseminated through education, cultural production, and state-sponsored media to justify intervention and foster long-term loyalty.[37]

The region has also seen demographic interventions that resemble settler colonial patterns, albeit in a localized and strategic form. While there is no formal settler program, there is documented evidence of population movement into the occupied territories, including

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[34] Botakoz Kassymbekova, "Imperial Innocence: Postcoloniality and Russian Historical Memory," *Ab Imperio* 1 (2022): 79–105.

[35] Alexander Etkind, Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).

[36] Marlene Laruelle, Russian World: Russia's Soft Power and Geopolitical Imagination (Washington, DC: Center on Global Interests, 2015).

[37] Botakoz Kassymbekova, "Imperial Innocence: Postcoloniality and Russian Historical Memory," *Ab Imperio* 1 (2022): 79–105.

administrators, police, military personnel, and affiliated civilians from Russia.[38] These relocations reinforce institutional dependence and reshape local authority structures.

Institutionally, Russian legal, educational, and bureaucratic systems have been transplanted into Donbas. Ukrainian curricula were replaced by Russian-approved content; Russian ruble became the main currency; local courts began operating under Russian law.[39]Elections and referenda conducted under occupation are designed not to reflect local agency but to simulate legitimacy within a colonial framework.[40]

Economically, Donbas is integrated into a resource-extractive, peripheral economy dominated by Moscow-linked elites and Russian subsidies. Strategic industries were dismantled, assets transferred to proxy-controlled authorities or Russian companies, and economic self-sufficiency was replaced with dependence.[41]

Finally, militarization has reshaped public life. Youth are subject to paramilitary training, patriotic education programs, and ideological indoctrination. Schools promote narratives of anti-Ukrainian hostility and glorify Soviet and Russian military heritage, embedding colonial loyalty in a new generation.[42]

In sum, the post-2014 transformation of Donbas cannot be understood merely as a security or geopolitical crisis. It constitutes a multi-level process of colonial restructuring. Russia's hybrid approach blends internal colonization—marked by coercive loyalty and systemic control—with settler-like strategies of territorial absorption and symbolic replacement. Rather than erasing identity directly, Russia embeds itself within existing cultural frames, reinterprets them through the lens of Russkiy Mir, and creates a dependent space where sovereignty is redefined by imperial logic.

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[38] Human Rights Center ZMINA, Deportation of Ukrainian Citizens from the Territory of Active Military Hostilities to the Russian Federation (January 2023), https://zmina.ua/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/01/deportation_eng.pdf

[39] Andrei Gerusimov et al., The Postcolonial Turn in Russian History (Slavica Publishers, 2014).

[40] Julie A. George, The Politics of Ethnic Separatism in Russia and Georgia (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

[41] Andrew Wilson, *Ukraine Crisis: What It Means for the West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

[42] Halya Coynash, "Russian Militarization of Children in Occupied Donbas," *Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group*, July 2021.

Case Study: Russian Patronage and Informal Domination in Abkhazia (Post-2008)

The case of Abkhazia demonstrates how Russia's post-Soviet imperial ambitions can be enacted without formal annexation. Since the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, Russia has tightened its control over Abkhazia through legal alignment, economic integration, demographic management, and institutional diffusion—all under the guise of bilateral partnership and protection.

Abkhazia formally retains its "independence," but Russian-issued passports, Russian ruble circulation, and adoption of Russian curricula, media, and administrative systems have functionally subordinated its institutions to Moscow's direction.[43] This form of informal domination enables Russia to maintain significant influence while avoiding overt integration.[44]

The post-2008 period has also seen efforts to reshape the ethnic and political character of the region. Although large-scale demographic replacement has not occurred, Russia has supported the return of ethnic Russians and reinforced Abkhazia's dependence through elite co-optation, the promotion of Russian-aligned political parties, and control of border and customs regimes.[45] While the Abkhaz ethnic majority has remained statistically dominant, this strategy has contributed to the erosion of independent governance capacity.

In parallel, Abkhazia's economy has been restructured around Russian subsidies and access to the Russian market. Strategic sectors such as tourism, real estate, and energy have been partially absorbed by Russian firms or regulated under bilateral agreements.[46]This delegated economic integration reflects Moscow's broader logic of imperial consolidation across post-Soviet peripheries—without necessitating full political absorption.

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[43] Julie A. George, The Politics of Ethnic Separatism in Russia and Georgia (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

[44] Gerard Toal and John O'Loughlin, "Inside South Ossetia: A Survey of Attitudes in a De Facto State," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 29, no. 1 (2013): 1–29.

[45] Rachel Clogg, "The Politics of Identity in Post-Soviet Abkhazia: Managing Diversity and Defining the Nation," *Nationalities Papers* 32, no. 2 (2004): 277–301.

[46] Bert Gerrits and M. Bader, "Russian Patronage in the Post-Soviet Space: Linkage and Leverage," in *Post-Soviet Affairs* 32, no. 5 (2016): 424–447.

Moreover, Abkhazia's status as a de facto state has made it a laboratory for Russia's influence operations, including information control, "passportization" as a tool of leverage, and selective military presence. Peacekeeping troops serve to cement Russian dominance while forestalling conflict resolution or Western involvement.[47]

In sum, Abkhazia reveals an imperial modality based not on settlement or full annexation, but on patronage, dependency, and political absorption. Rather than exercising formal colonial power, Russia achieves control through symbolic sovereignty, strategic economic ties, and institutional mimicry. This model preserves the appearance of autonomy while anchoring Abkhazia within Russia's geopolitical orbit.

Case Study: Russia's Colonial Governance in Chechnya (Post-2000)

Chechnya represents one of the most illustrative examples of Russia's post-Soviet internal domination. After two devastating wars, Moscow implemented a hybrid model of rule that combines authoritarian centralism with the symbolic delegation of power to a loyal local elite. Rather than enforcing direct settler control, Russia constructed a system of governance based on performance of loyalty, selective autonomy, and coercive stability.

The Russian Empire's legacy in the North Caucasus established a long-standing framework for asymmetrical control over Chechnya. In the post-Soviet period, this structure was reinforced through both military subjugation and political co-optation. Contemporary rule in Chechnya has been described as a form of "decentralized despotism," where formal sovereignty is maintained but key dimensions of power—security, economy, and ideology—are tightly regulated by Moscow.[48]

Under Ramzan Kadyrov's leadership, Chechnya's local government performs displays of loyalty to Putin while suppressing dissent, LGBTQ+ rights, independent Islam, and opposition voices.[49] The regime employs state-funded "patriotic Islam," militarized youth education, and security apparatuses not only to maintain control, but to embed imperial

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[47] Kolstø, Pål. "Peacebuilding and Patron–Client Relationships in Abkhazia." *Security Dialogue* 40, no. 6 (2009): 621–641.

[48] Mahmood Mamdani, Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism (Princeton University Press, 1996).

[49] Julie Wilhelmsen, "Russia and the Chechen Wars 1994–2009: A Case for Chechenization?" *Journal of Strategic Studies* 33, no. 2 (2010): 217–242.

ideology into the region's cultural and religious infrastructure.[50]

This is not a simple case of cultural suppression, but rather one of instrumentalization of culture for imperial goals. Islamic identity has not been erased; instead, it has been selectively reshaped to serve the goals of authoritarian stability. Kadyrov's regime promotes a version of Islam that aligns with Kremlin narratives, while marginalizing alternative religious expressions and civil society actors.[51]

Julie Wilhelmsen describes the Chechen leadership's loyalty dynamic as "colonial kinship," in which personalized rule substitutes for institutional governance, and identity becomes a tool of state performance.[52]This aligns with broader patterns of imperial governance through loyalist elites, rather than through direct assimilation or demographic engineering.

Economically, Chechnya receives substantial subsidies from Moscow, which are tied to regime loyalty and political stability. State-led reconstruction in Grozny serves both symbolic and strategic purposes, masking repression with the aesthetics of development. [53]Yet beyond the capital, unemployment, poverty, and exclusion from political life remain widespread, especially for critics of the regime.

In sum, the case of Chechnya illustrates a distinct form of internal domination. Russia's strategy does not rely on settler presence or formal annexation, but on elite co-optation, ideological control, and vertical dependence. The result is a region that maintains surface autonomy while functioning as a loyal outpost of imperial authority.

Comparative Analysis of Russian Internal and Settler Colonialism in Donbas, Abkhazia, and Chechnya

The post-Soviet geopolitical landscape reveals persistent patterns of colonial

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[50] Sarah Kendzior, "When the Soviet Past Becomes the Russian Future," in *The New Republic*, March 2013.

[51] Botakoz Kassymbekova, "Imperial Innocence: Postcoloniality and Russian Historical Memory," *Ab Imperio* 1 (2022): 79–105.

[52] Julie Wilhelmsen, "Chechnya: Between Resistance and Submission," *Europe-Asia Studies* 64, no. 9 (2012): 1657–1685.

[53] Jean-François Ratelle, "From Pragmatism to Imperial Politics: The Structural Transformation of the Chechen Conflict," *Caucasus Survey* 2, no. 1–2 (2014): 25–46.

domination, particularly in contested regions such as Donbas, Abkhazia, and Chechnya. This comparative analysis applies postcolonial theory—especially the frameworks of internal and settler colonialism—to examine how Russian control is sustained through cultural imposition, militarization, demographic engineering, and governance by proxy.

The concept of internal colonization, articulated most prominently by Alexander Etkind, helps explain how Russia exerts coercive power over its peripheries without formally designating them as colonies. Etkind highlights how Russian imperial logic has historically operated through symbolic and epistemic dominance, reconfiguring local identities and establishing vertical loyalty structures within the empire's boundaries.[54]

In Donbas, Russia's post-2014 intervention demonstrates features of both internal and settler colonial strategies. As Botakoz Kassymbekova notes, the Kremlin invokes a myth of shared civilizational space—the Russkiy Mir—to justify domination while disavowing colonial intent.[55] The narrative of cultural unity legitimizes military presence and administrative absorption, reframing the erasure of Ukrainian sovereignty as cultural restoration. While not a classic case of settler colonialism, some elements—such as the integration of Russian legal and educational systems, population resettlement of affiliated personnel, and symbolic replacement—reflect settler logics adapted to local conditions.[56]

Abkhazia illustrates another dimension of hybrid colonial governance. Although formal annexation did not occur, Russia's policies of passportization, infrastructural absorption, and economic patronage have created deep dependency. Selective demographic interventions—particularly the facilitated return of some ethnic Russians and displacement of internally exiled Georgians—align with settler-colonial tactics aimed at altering the balance of loyalty and diluting indigenous political agency.[57] Yet, as Alexander Morrison emphasizes, Russian settler colonialism differs significantly from its Western counterparts: it lacks mass land seizures or ideologies of racial supremacy, and often operates through elite replacement

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[54] Etkind, Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience

[55] Kassymbekova, "Imperial Innocence," *Ab Imperio*

[56] ZMINA, "Deportation of Ukrainian Citizens," 2023

[57] Hewitt, "Demographic Manipulation in the Caucasus"

and legal integration rather than physical displacement.[58]

Chechnya, by contrast, exemplifies the extreme forms of internal colonization. Following two devastating wars, Moscow consolidated power through coercive peace: installing a loyalist regime under Ramzan Kadyrov, sponsoring state-controlled religion, and embedding Chechnya into Russia's vertical structures of governance. Julie Wilhelmsen and Jean-François Ratelle describe this as a colonial mode of control masked by performative autonomy—where loyalty is rewarded and dissent brutally repressed.[59] Chechnya's integration did not entail settler practices, but rather the suppression and rearticulation of identity within a controlled ideological framework.

Across all three cases, Russia deploys a dual strategy: it manufactures instability, then positions itself as a stabilizing force. As Brusylovska and Maistrenko observe, this creates asymmetric dependency and erodes the legitimacy of self-governance.[60] Socher further illustrates how Russia selectively invokes the principle of self-determination—granting it to allied regions like Abkhazia while denying it to others like Chechnya or Ukraine's eastern territories—to serve its imperial ambitions.[61]

In conclusion, while the dynamics vary across cases, the Russian approach combines elements of internal and settler colonialism in historically contingent and ideologically flexible ways. Rather than conforming neatly to Western models, Russian colonial strategies operate through symbolic absorption, elite co-optation, legal and epistemic integration, and coercive pacification—producing a hybrid empire built on the rhetoric of unity, protection, and historical restoration.

Conclusion

This study has shown that Russia's strategies in Donbas, Abkhazia, and Chechnya reflect a hybrid model of internal and settler colonialism that departs from classical Western

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[58] Morrison, "Russian Settler Colonialism," in Routledge Handbook of the History of Settler Colonialism, 2016

[59] Wilhelmsen, "Chechnya: Between Resistance and Submission"; Ratelle, "From Pragmatism to Imperial Politics"

[60] Brusylovska and Maistrenko, Russia's Foreign Policy Towards Unrecognized States

[61] Socher, Russia and the Right to Self-Determination in the Post-Soviet Space

paradigms but retains structurally imperial logics. Rather than a relic of the past, Russian colonialism continues to evolve—blending symbolic absorption, coercive governance, demographic intervention, and epistemic control to consolidate dominance in the post-Soviet space.

Alexander Etkind's concept of internal colonization remains essential for understanding how Russia governs not only foreign peripheries but also subjugated populations within its own borders. In Chechnya, this manifests through vertical authoritarianism, loyalty-based rule, and the suppression of dissent under the guise of local autonomy. Such governance operates through cultural imposition and militarized discipline, echoing colonial dynamics of epistemic and political containment.

In Donbas and Abkhazia, selective elements of settler colonialism are evident—but not in the classical sense of mass land seizures or racial apartheid. As Alexander Morrison emphasizes, Russian settler colonialism must be understood in its distinct form: not as wholesale demographic replacement, but as legal, administrative, and symbolic integration accompanied by elite substitution and loyalty engineering. This explains Russia's emphasis on passportization, resettlement of officials and affiliated populations, and the imposition of Russian education, law, and currency in occupied territories.

Botakoz Kassymbekova's notion of "imperial innocence" further illuminates the ideological dimension of this system. Russia reframes its presence as civilizational guardianship, invoking shared history and cultural unity to justify interventions that undermine local sovereignty. This dual narrative—protector and occupier—enables Russia to mask colonial violence as humanitarianism.

Sarah Hunt's distinction between settler colonialism and classical empire underscores that Russia's model operates not only through resource extraction but also through structural identity displacement. In this light, the cultural and demographic transformations in Donbas and Abkhazia—though limited in scale—reflect the settler logic of elimination, whereby indigenous agency is neutralized and rewritten within an imperial framework.

Finally, recalling Andrei Golubev's insight on early Soviet historians, it is worth

noting that Russian expansion was once openly described as settler colonial. The subsequent erasure of this framing from official narratives only highlights the need to reclaim these analytical tools. Postcolonial theory, if applied critically and contextually, offers a powerful framework for unpacking the ideologies, mechanisms, and historical continuities that shape Russia's neo-imperial ambitions.

In sum, Russia's contemporary domination in the post-Soviet space cannot be understood through geopolitical language alone. It is a project of ideological, demographic, and epistemic engineering—one that fuses internal colonization with adaptive forms of settler practice. Recognizing these patterns is essential for developing decolonial responses and defending the principles of justice and self-determination in the region.