



Imperialism and nationalism

The nature of Russian aggression in Ukraine

Paweł Rojek¹ 

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Abstract

Is Russia a neoimperial or postimperial state? In this paper, I compare two interpretations proposed by political commentators Marcel Van Herpen and Dmitri Trenin. Van Herpen holds that the Russian empire is literally being rebuilt, whereas Trenin believes that Russia is just ceasing to be an empire. I argue that, contrary to popular belief, the current war against Ukraine cannot be interpreted as an attempt to restore the Russian empire. This is because being an empire requires a universalistic ideology that can be accepted by other nations. Meanwhile, the ideological foundation of the current war is an obviously nationalistic conception of the “Russian world.” Polish historians Andrzej Nowak and Włodzimierz Marciniak brilliantly argued that it was Russian nationalism that had previously led to the collapse of both Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union. Under this interpretation the current war in Ukraine can be seen not as the rebirth but rather as the dramatic end of Russian imperialism.

Keywords Russian politics · War in Ukraine · Russian ideologies · Nationalism · Imperialism · Postimperialism · Neoimperialism · Pan-Slavism

Russia is undoubtedly a former empire. The most important question today is whether it remains a postimperial or is becoming a neoimperial. Postimperial states, such as Turkey, France, or Great Britain, gradually give up their imperial aspirations, although they retain the memory of their past for a long time and occasionally turn to old rhetoric. Neoimperial states, on the other hand, return to imperial ideology and renew their imperial power structures, threatening not only their former territories but also further neighbors. The process of imperial decay can be very long and painful. Turkey committed the Armenian genocide in a postimperial spasm, France had a terrorist organization defending its imperial status, and Britain was still waging war in the 1980s to defend the remnants of its overseas possessions. All of these countries

✉ P. Rojek
pawel.rojek@uj.edu.pl

¹ Institute of Philosophy, Jagiellonian University, Grodzka 52, 33-332 Kraków, Poland

ultimately gave up their imperial legacy, although they still play a significant role in world politics. Former empires can also return to their previous form after a period of weakness and disintegration. The best example of this is Imperial Russia, which reemerged as a Soviet Union after several years of decline. However, what is happening to contemporary Russia? Are we witnessing its transition to a postimperial phase, or perhaps the beginning of another dangerous imperial rebirth?

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 seems to finally resolve this question. Russia has attacked a neighboring country for no specific reason, triggering a war of unprecedented scale, with terrible civilian casualties and apparently numerous war crimes. The war is accompanied by the strengthening of authoritarianism in Russia, massive propaganda, and the isolation of society from the free media. So far, control over Russian society seems to be successful. The war still enjoys the support of the majority of Russians and the few anti-war protests were brutally suppressed. Bloody military aggression, cynical lies of propaganda, and the helplessness of the opposition are reminiscent of the worst days of the Soviet Union. No surprise then that it is widely believed that Putin is trying to rebuild a lost empire.

However, something seems to be missing in this obvious analogy. The former Soviet Union was a supranational empire based on a universalist ideology. The contemporary Russian Federation, while still uniting many nations, increasingly appeals to a particularist Russian nationalism. The officially declared goal of the “special military operation” in Ukraine is to protect ethnic Russians from alleged Ukrainian Nazis. It primarily concerns the Russian population living in Ukraine, but indirectly also the inhabitants of Russia. While it is clear that the idea of the defense of Russians was just a pretext for war, I think it should be taken seriously. This is because such an official ideology creates a conceptual framework that limits the possible actions of power. Every previous form of Russian imperialism appealed to some supranational ideas, such as Orthodoxy, Enlightenment, or Communism. Contemporary Russia, for the first time in its history, has begun a major war against another country officially appealing not to universalistic ideas, but to Russian nationalism. However, the point is that nationalism is fundamentally antithetical to imperialism. It is impossible to build a stable multinational empire on the bare domination of a single nation. The domination must be mediated by universalistic ideologies justifying the cooperation of conquered nations with the empire. Such ideologies could be based for instance on religion, a civilizational mission, or a philosophical vision. As it seems, there is no such universalistic ideology behind the current Russian aggression. So perhaps, ironically, the war in Ukraine is evidence of the final end of Russian imperialism and the beginning of a new national Russia. Unfortunately, the face of this new Russia appears to be no less repulsive than that of the former empire.

The question of the postimperial or neoimperial character of contemporary Russia has been the focus of an important debate between two prominent specialists in Russian affairs associated with important pro-Atlantic and pro-European think tanks, Dmitri Trenin and Marcel Van Herpen. I think this discussion can be very helpful in understanding what is happening in Russia today.

In 2011, Trenin, director of the Moscow branch of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, widely recognized as one of the most pro-Western Russian commentators, published a book with the telling title *Post-Imperium*. He wrote emphatically:

The Russian empire is over, never to return. The enterprise that had lasted for hundreds of years simply lost the drive. The élan is gone. In the two decades since the collapse, imperial restoration was never considered seriously by the leaders, nor demanded by the wider public. Rather, Russia has gone in reverse—expansion has yielded to introspection [...]. This is a Russia the world has not known before the start of the twenty-first century. (Trenin 2011, p. 231)

It should be noted that Trenin wrote these words several years after a clear shift in Russian policy toward strengthening its international position, after Putin's infamous claim that the collapse of the Soviet Union was "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century" in 2005, after Putin's harsh speech against the United States in Munich in 2007, and after the Russian intervention in Georgia in 2008. Despite all this, Trenin argued that, contrary to the fears of many Western experts and the hopes of some Russian ideologists, none of these events actually reflected a revival of Russian imperialism. According to him, Russia simply wanted to remain one of the major players in the international game, a great power with a privileged zone of influence, but this had nothing to do with building a universalist empire as in the Tsarist or Soviet times.

In 2014, just before the annexation of Crimea, the Dutch commentator Marcel H. Van Herpen, director of the Cicero Foundation in Maastricht, published a book with the no less telling title *Putin's Wars: The Rise of Russia's New Imperialism*. As he wrote,

The thesis of this book is that—unlike in Western Europe, where the process of decolonization was definitive—the same is not necessarily true for Russia. For the Russian state colonizing neighboring territories and subduing neighboring peoples has been a continuous process. It is, one could almost say, part of Russia's genetic makeup. (Van Herpen 2014, p. 2)

Van Herpen analyzed in detail the tendencies of Russian internal and external policy. He noted the rise of authoritarian trends on the one hand and the growth of imperialist tendencies on the other. For him, Russian despotism is the most important cause of Russian expansion. This is so because imperialist aggression helps to neutralize social tensions produced by authoritarianism. Van Herpen severely criticized Trenin's interpretation. He insisted that "the problem with Trenin's analysis is not only that it is too simple, but also that it contradicts the facts" (Van Herpen 2014, p. 3). *Putin's Wars* are in fact a polemic against *Post-Imperium*.

Trenin is reassuring us: Putin's Russia has no plans to reconquer its lost empire. Russia is a post-empire and intends to remain so. The thesis of this book [namely, Van Herpen's one] is that the Russian Federation is both a postimperial state and a pre-imperial state. (Van Herpen 2014, p. 5)

Van Herpen sees the time of Putin's rule as a period of transition from postimperialism to neoimperialism. After a short time of crisis, we are witnessing the rebirth of the Russian empire. This dynamic, according to Van Herpen, is evidenced by the fact that just after the publication of Trenin's book in December 2011, Moscow launched the Eurasian Union project, which he considered the final effort to restore the lost empire. Recent events in Russia seem to strongly support his thesis. Shortly after

Van Herpen's book was published, we witnessed the annexation of Crimea, followed by Russian intervention in Donbas and Luhansk, and finally the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

In this paper, I would like to present the main arguments in the debate between neoimperial and postimperial interpretations of contemporary Russian politics. As it turns out, Marcel Van Herpen was right in his prediction of increasingly aggressive Russian internal and external politics. However, it seems to me that, contrary to him, the official justification for current Russian aggression in fact rules out the possibility of the realization of any imperial project in a strict sense. It is widely agreed that nationalism, chauvinism, and xenophobia have become increasingly influential in Russia in recent years. Moreover, the current aggression in Ukraine is being carried out in the name of defending the "Russian world" (*russkii mir*), that is, the community of Russians living in Russia and neighboring countries. It is not clear whether this supposed community is based on ethnic Russians, Russian-speakers, or people identifying with Russian culture broadly. Nevertheless, it seems that no true empire can be built on such foundations. This is because the idea of the Russian world has a distinctively nationalistic character. After all, it was the rise of nationalism, and not just that of the subjected nations, but above all of the Russians themselves, that led to the collapse of the USSR. Furthermore, it seems that current Russian nationalistic rhetoric also threatens the integrity of the Russian Federation itself, which is after all a multinational and multiethnic state. Thus, it appears that Russia has fallen into a trap of nationalism that not only prevents the restoration of the former empire but also threatens the very integrity of what remains of it.

Three forms of Russian empire

Russia has always been an imperial country. I would like to briefly look at the history of the formation of the Russian empire. Roughly, there are three main phases of this process, differing not only in territorial extent, but also in the dominant imperial ideology. I will call them the Traditional Empire, the Classical Empire, and the Soviet Empire. The history of these three imperial forms provides the context for a discussion of the current stage of Russian history.

At the beginning, the Grand Duchy of Moscow was an ethnically homogeneous Ruthenian state, perhaps the only foreign element being the descendants of the Varangians who ruled it. However, shortly after Grand Duke Ivan the Terrible assumed the title of Tsar in 1547, a process of rapid expansion began. The country became a true empire, incorporating predominantly Muslim lands formerly belonging to the Golden Horde. In 1552 the Kazan Khanate was incorporated, in 1556 the Astrakhan Khanate, then, in 1598, the Siberian Khanate. Russia began the colonization of Siberia. In 1649, the Russians reached the coast of the Bering Sea. Then, in the middle of the seventeenth century, eastern Ukraine was incorporated, and the Cossacks conquered lands up to the Caucasus. The Traditional Russian Empire was thus established, forming the core of any subsequent imperial creation.

Next, the conquests of Peter the Great, who assumed the title of emperor in 1721, led to a new formation that could be called the Classical Russian Empire. The victo-

rious war with Sweden opened access to the Baltic. Then, during the reign of Catherine II, Lithuania, the rest of Ukraine, and a great part of Poland were conquered. Afterward, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Russia captured Finland. In the south, Crimea, the Black Sea coast, and Bessarabia were annexed; in the east, Central Asia, and the Far East. For a long time, there were fights over the North Caucasus. Russian colonists took over Alaska and even reached California, where they established the settlement of Fort Ross in 1812, slightly north of present-day San Francisco. Whereas the Traditional Russian Empire was built through colonization rather than conquest, the new lands forming the Classical Empire in most cases belonged to states that actively opposed Russian expansion. For the most part, the new territories broke away from Russia at the first opportunity, in 1917, some forever, others only for the period of the civil war.

The third form of Russian empire was the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Revolutionary Russia, having withdrawn briefly to its seventeenth-century borders, began a new expansion, annexing the Baltic states, parts of Poland, Bessarabia, Karelia, Tuva, and after World War II, parts of East Prussia, southern Sakhalin, and the Kuriles. The Soviet Empire created a powerful domain of influence that covered almost the entire world. Soviet troops were stationed in East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Mongolia. Yugoslavia and Albania also belonged for some time to this strict zone of influence. Looser Soviet influence included North Korea, Vietnam, Cuba, Nicaragua, Laos, Egypt, Syria, South Yemen, Ghana, Mali, Congo, Ethiopia, and Angola. It is worth recalling that the flag of Mozambique still features a Kalashnikov gun.

Being an empire, however, is not merely about having vast and diverse territories, but also, and perhaps most importantly, about establishing the ideas that justify such power. For no empire is based solely on force; each presents some legitimizing formula, which, at least officially, provides the justification for rule over it. The role of imperial ideas should not be underestimated; for whether or not they are sincerely accepted by the rulers and the ruled, they form an official worldview that defines the framework of their possible operations (Rojek 2009). During the 500 years of the Russian empire, there have been several different ways of its legitimization.

The Traditional Russian Empire was explicitly religious in nature. The mission of the Tsar was to protect and spread Orthodoxy. Such a mission resulted especially from the adoption of the idea of Moscow as the Third Rome, which implied that the Russian state was the heir of ancient Rome and Constantinople and the only defender of true Christianity in the world (Rojek 2014, pp. 35–54). Religious legitimacy was also present later. It was the religious mission that drove Russian leaders to fight for the territories inhabited by Orthodox Christians and sometimes led to dramatic choices. A conflict with the Ottoman Empire and France over Russia's role as protector of Orthodox believers in the Balkans and the holy sites in Jerusalem led to the Crimean War in 1853, which ended with a stunning Russian defeat and an earthquake in internal politics.

The Classical Russian Empire under Peter and Catherine initially changed its emphasis from a religious mission to a civilizing one. Russia's new rulers officially proclaimed that their rule brought peace, culture, and enlightenment to their various peoples. Russian imperial rhetoric of this type was close to the concept of the "white

man's burden" later developed in the West (Thompson 2000). The conquests were presented as a beneficial emancipatory action of the peoples who could thus enjoy the achievements of European civilization. However, for a long time, the civilizing mission was combined with a religious one. For instance, the partitions of Poland were carried out in the name of protecting the rights of religious minorities, Orthodox and Protestants, allegedly threatened by intolerant Polish Catholicism.

Subsequently, the universal civilizing mission was slowly replaced by a more particular nationalistic idea. As early as 1833, Count Sergei Uvarov formulated the famous triple principle of Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality, which constituted the ideological basis of the empire. Such a formula obviously excluded non-Orthodox and non-Russian inhabitants. The pan-Slavic concept of the unity of the Slavic peoples, which justified Russian claims to rule in Poland and the Balkans, was somewhat broader. An elaborate theory substantiating the Slavic alliance was put forward by Nikolai Danilevsky, who many years before Feliks Koneczny and Samuel Huntington wrote about the "plurality of civilizations." Russia was to be the political organization of the "Slavic cultural type." Ultimately, however, Alexander III, after his father's assassination in 1881, adopted a decidedly more nationalist course supported by his minister Nikolai Pobedonoscev, which resulted in massive Russification and Jewish pogroms. Nevertheless, pan-Slavic ideas were still alive, and Russian support for the Slavs in the Balkans finally led to the outbreak of World War I.

The third form of the Russian empire, the Soviet Union, was based on admirably universal communist ideology. The USSR was founded not on the national, but rather class basis. It was to be the "homeland of the proletariat" and since the proletariat is everywhere, it was supposed to ultimately encompass the whole world. The first anthem of the Soviet Union announced quite literally that "with the International, the human race will rise." Such a legitimizing formula had for a long time ensured the great successes of the empire, even after the new wartime anthem of the USSR referred to the "Great Russia" that had united the "free republics." The conquered peoples always had an alibi for their situation, since they were not formally subject to the authority of a single nation, but to that of a state realizing the interests of the world proletariat.

Russian history might be seen as a great laboratory of imperialism. Most importantly, we can investigate in this case the fundamental role of ideologies, not only in the rise of empires but also in their fall. First, it seems that the general shift from universal civilizational principles to a particularistic national formula eventually led to the collapse of the Russian Classical Empire. This process has been admirably described by a prominent contemporary Polish historian, Andrzej Nowak (2014). The initial inclusive civilizational formula naturally privileged the most culturally developed peoples of the empire. As it happened, these were predominantly Poles. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, more subjects of Alexander I read Polish than Russian. The Polish nobility made up more than half of the entire nobility of the Russian empire. This provoked opposition from the Russian elite, who called for the empire to be based on a more national basis that would privilege their position. That was the main underlying idea of the famous "Opinion of a Russian Citizen," sent by Nikolai Karamzin to Tsar Alexander I. However, the adoption of the national formula blocked the elites from the peripheries. They were not able to realize their aspirations

in the new system, which pushed them to undermine it. National repressions thus led not only to the intended Russification, but also to the unintentional radicalization of oppressed minorities. Revolutionary activity was treated as the next, perhaps more effective, stage of the struggle for national liberation. This explains the phenomenon of thousands of Russified Poles engaged in revolutionary movements in Russia. As a result, the Russian Empire was overthrown by the Russian-speaking Pole Felix Dzerzhinsky, the Jew Lev Bronstein, and the Georgian Yosif Dzhugashvili. This case clearly shows that it is impossible to build a lasting empire on a too narrow national base. The Classical Russian Empire collapsed because it became too nationalistic.

Secondly, the universalist communist ideology, although for a long time legitimized Soviet domination over enormous ethnically diverse territories, prompted Russian patriots to dismantle the system from within. This process, in turn, has been brilliantly described by Polish political scientist and historian, former ambassador to Moscow, Włodzimierz Marciniak (2004). As he argued, it was the national awakening of the Russians, who were the only nation in the USSR without their own Communist Party, that eventually led to the collapse of the Soviet Empire. In this way, Russian nationalism crushed Soviet imperialism. Russia was one of the first republics to detach itself from the USSR. Thus, a mechanism similar to that which led to the collapse of the Classical Empire worked here. Again, the national principle undermined the imperial one. However, the Soviet Empire fell not because it was too national, but because it was not national enough.

The neoimperial view

The Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. The Russian Federation, although a quarter smaller than the former USSR, is still the largest country in the world. Present Russia, as many commentators note, with either satisfaction or concern, is surprisingly similar to the first Traditional Russian Empire, before the incorporation of Ukraine in the mid-seventeenth century. Apparently, the peoples of this imperial core have bonded strongly over 500 years of shared history. The new Russian state is clearly more national in character, although it is still a mixture of many national and ethnic groups. At the end of the Soviet Union, roughly half of its citizens described themselves as ethnic Russians (*russkie*); today they form about 75% of the Russian Federation's population. The process of the collapse of the Soviet Empire was remarkably peaceful. Massive decolonization led to only a few local border conflicts, some of which have not been resolved to this day. Compared to other collapsing empires, which left a state of war of all against all, the Soviet Union disintegrated in a very decent way and certainly better than the French, British, or Portuguese empires.

Commentators agree that the early 1990s was a turning point in which the continuity of Russian imperial history was called into question. "The Russian Federation," Trenin says, "having emerged from an empire, had a good chance to build a nation-state" (Trenin 2011, p. 60) "In retrospect," Van Herpen says, "1991 offered the first real chance in modern Russian history to break the infernal cycle of imperialist expansion and colonial subjugation of neighboring peoples" (Van Herpen 2014, p. 47). The Russians rejected the restraining curse of empire and the ideology

that legitimized it. This process was accompanied by a profound shift in attitudes toward pragmatism and individualism. Russians became tired of maintaining costly colonial possessions and generally lost interest in common goals, focusing instead on their individual lives. In addition, the violent economic crisis made it urgent to find a way to survive. Then, the path to spectacular individual success opened up for some people. Russia therefore faced a unique historical opportunity to transform its own consciousness and redefine the nature of its state. The difference between Trenin and Van Herpen was that, in the former's view, Russia has generally seized its opportunity, while in the latter's view it has not. "Unfortunately," Van Herpen urged, "in the Russian situation, after a short period of shock, the loss of empire did not result in a gradual acceptance, but in a swelling tidal wave of chauvinism and nationalism" (Van Herpen 2014, p. 50).

The foundation of Van Herpen's reasoning is the belief that despotism is the source of imperialism. Brief democratization in the new Russia led to temporary decolonization, but shortly thereafter a process of restoration of strong central power began, resulting in a new cycle of imperialization. The underlying mechanism is that undemocratic governments generate citizen discontent that can be neutralized by the government's use of neoimperialistic rhetoric and occasionally aggressive activity in the international sphere. Citizens thus give up their political freedom in exchange for national pride. The expansion legitimizes government and unites the nation around common causes. Unfortunately, the government, in order to maintain support, must permanently mobilize citizens and engage in aggressive external politics.

Russian imperial reconquest obviously needs a new state ideology. This ideology, according to Van Herpen, is increasingly nationalistic, or even "ultranationalistic." As he indicated, this could be seen not only in the program of the governing party but also in the slogans of the opposition and in the demands of extremist groups that enjoy the silent support of the government. Van Herpen carefully analyzed Vladimir Putin's famous speech, "Russia at the Turn of the Millennium," delivered on December 29, 1999, just before he became president (Putin 1999). For him, this was "one of the most elaborated pieces of the Putin ideology" (Van Herpen 2014, p. 110). Putin begins with the somewhat surprising assertion in this context that he has no intention of proposing a new state ideology:

I think the term "state ideology" advocated by some politicians, publicists, and scholars is not quite appropriate. It creates certain associations with our recent past. [...] I am against the restoration of an official state ideology in Russia in any form. (Putin 1999)

At the same time, however, as Van Herpen notes, Putin clearly suggests such an ideology in his speech. It was based on four principles: patriotism (*patriotizm*), great power (*derzhavnost'*), statism (*gosudarstvennichestvo*), and social solidarity (*sotsial'naiia solidarnost'*). Putin defined the principle of great power as follows:

Russia was and will remain a great power (*velikoi stranoi*). It is preconditioned by the inseparable characteristics of its geopolitical, economic, and cultural existence. They determined the mentality of Russians and the policy of the government throughout the history of Russia, and they cannot but do so at present. (Putin 1999)

Van Herpen finds in Putin's speech a typically Russian apotheosis of a strong state, ultranationalism, and a virtual negation of the principles of democracy and the free market, which acquire a worrisome local, Russian, rather than universal, sense. In his view, Putin's ideology, which proclaims the need for national rebirth, is close to Italian fascism. The analogy between Putinism and fascism has been extensively developed by Van Herpen in his previous book (Van Herpen 2013).

The internal politics of the government and the rise of nationalist attitudes of the people were followed by concrete statements and actions of Russia in the international sphere. In 2005 Putin called the collapse of the USSR "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century," and in 2007 in Munich, he threatened a new Cold War. Next, in 2008 Medvedev included into the principles of Russian foreign policy "protecting the lives and dignity of Russian citizens wherever they live," and a law passed in 2009 allowed the use of Russian troops abroad for this purpose. That same year, 2009, Russia conducted huge military maneuvers in which a tactical nuclear attack on Poland was exercised. Finally, Russia initiated various integration projects apparently aimed at rebuilding an empire in the former Soviet space. Already in 1996, the Union of Belarus and Russia was initiated, in 2002 the Collective Security Treaty Organization was created, and in 2011 the Eurasian Union was launched, which according to Van Harpen was "the ultimate integration effort, crowning and superseding all earlier integration efforts," and the "pet project of Vladimir Putin" (Van Herpen 2014, pp. 82, 83). To sum up, "under the guise of the Eurasian Customs Union, Eurasian Economic Union, and—most recently—Eurasian Union, new efforts of empire-building have begun" (Van Herpen 2014, p. 3). Subsequent well-known events seem to fit this pattern perfectly. In 2014, Putin annexed Crimea and created a crisis in eastern Ukraine, and in 2022 he carried out an open attack on Ukraine.

The postimperial view

Dmitri Trenin offered a completely different diagnosis of contemporary Russia. In his opinion, it is a postimperial country, not a neoimperial one. This means that "the country is no longer an empire and it is not going to be one again. However, the many features that were established in the imperial period are still felt to this day" (Trenin 2011, pp. 13–14). However, these features, which may continue for decades to come, should not obscure a fundamental, substantive change in the very nature of the Russian state.

The most important feature of the imperial legacy in modern Russia is its internal political system. In its general description, Trenin would probably agree with Van Herpen to a great extent. Russia is an authoritarian country, although it is a rather soft, moderate and not, in fact, very repressive authoritarianism. Democratic mechanisms function merely superficially, political parties do not truly represent the population, the courts do not preserve proper neutrality, the media is not independent, and there are no sufficient guarantees of individual freedoms. For Trenin, authoritarianism, however, contrary to Van Herpen's suggestion, is not the same as imperialism. On the one hand, a state can be nondemocratic and show no expansionist tendencies, while on the other hand, there can be democratic states that adopt imperialist policies.

The second feature of the imperial legacy is the expansionist rhetoric frequently used by various Russian ideologists, historians, publicists, and sometimes politicians. Trenin, however, insisted that we should not attach undue importance to words. They are irritated but, in fact, ineffective expressions of the postimperial syndrome. “Words substituted for action. [. . .] Troubled souls could vent their feelings and relieve themselves, but—apart from a few ruffled feathers—everything remained in place” (Trenin 2011, p. 208). This is particularly evident in the comments of the late Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, who in reality discredited, rather than promoted, imperial ideas. Moreover, in Trenin’s view, the widespread nostalgia for the Soviet Union observed by sociologists among Russians is not due at all to its imperial character, but rather to the social security it provided. The Russians, according to Trenin, yearn for the lost stability, equality, protective government, and ultimately their youth spent in the Land of Soviets rather than its status as a global empire.

Trenin argued that Russia has fundamentally changed its priorities in international politics. It has renounced imperialism but still wants to maintain its status as a great world power. Putin directly wrote about this in the article quoted and linked above. Trenin explains this shift in the following way: “While no longer a pretender to world hegemony and staying within its new, shrunken borders, Russia has been trying hard to establish itself in the top league of the world’s major players and as the dominant power in its neighborhood” (Trenin 2011, p. 13). The transformation of an empire into a great power may seem like a nuance, but it is of great importance. Great powers realize their own interests, not imperial missions. The problem is that they can adopt aggressive politics that, to outside observers, may not differ from the former imperial politics.

What does it mean that Russia wants to be a great power? Trenin pointed to three components of the Russian idea of great power. First, Russia wants to be internally sovereign, secondly, it wants to be externally sovereign, and thirdly, it wants to maintain its own zone of influence.

Internal sovereignty means that no country should influence Russia’s internal affairs. This idea was developed in the doctrine of sovereign democracy, elaborated primarily by Vladislav Surkov (Surkov 2007a, 2007b; Rojek 2014, pp. 77–101). The doctrine was clearly intended to protect Russia from another “color revolution” supported by Western powers, but it also stemmed from a deep belief in the uniqueness of Russian culture, incommensurable with Western experience and categories. The pursuit of political, economic, and cultural autarky, however, is not characteristic of an empire. From an empire, we would expect bold expansion rather than desperate defense.

External sovereignty means independence in foreign-policy decisions. Russia has finally given up its previous attempts at integration with the West. To recall, in the 1990s it seriously discussed joining NATO and the newly formed European Union. Then, in the first years of the twentieth century, Russia hoped to integrate not as a part of the West but rather with the West. Putin, after the September 11 attacks, proposed a strategic partnership with the United States. According to Trenin, however, the West could not find a formula that would satisfy Russia, and Russia ultimately decided to go its own way. Most importantly, however, the concept of external sovereignty has a negative character. “The basic meaning of great power in Russian minds, then, was

its own independence, rather than others' dependence on it" (Trenin 2011, p. 208). Again, this is not a mark of empire.

Certainly, the most controversial element of the idea of great power is the concept of a sphere of privileged influences, which has been quite often voiced by representatives of the Russian government. Trenin sees it as a clear relic of imperial thinking. "As an international actor, Russia is at a point where it recognizes all former borderland republics as *separate countries*, even if it does not yet see all of them as *foreign states*" (Trenin 2011, p. 14). The post-Soviet states, however, are not all treated in the same way. The Baltic countries, for instance, seen as completely foreign, are one thing, whereas Belarus or Kazakhstan, still treated as close neighbors, are another. For Trenin, the idea of the influence sphere initially had a defensive nature. It was evidenced, for instance, by the long stagnation in the process of Russia's integration with Belarus. Undoubtedly, however, the idea of a sphere of influence, which presupposes the Russian expectation of at least neutrality, leads to unavoidable conflicts. Georgia's and Ukraine's attempts to leave the sphere of neutrality by integrating with the EU and NATO gave Russia reasons to go to war.

Trenin insisted that even famously aggressive statements by Russian leaders should be interpreted in the light of the idea of great power rather than empire. For example, Putin's notorious speech at the Munich conference was, according to Trenin, in fact, a legitimate defense of Russia's rights to retain its own status. "Accept us as we are; treat us as equals; and let's do business where our interests meet" (Trenin 2011, p. 27). Trenin also recalled that Putin's worrying statements about the collapse of the Soviet Union were actually quotations from Ukrainian politicians. Allegedly, it was Oleksandr Moroz, a Speaker of Rada, who first said that "one who does not regret the passing of the Soviet Union has no heart; one who wants to bring it back has no brains."

The shift from the idea of empire to the idea of great power was grounded in a fundamental and permanent change in the dominant system of values. Russians have become less committed to grand collective projects and more focused on personal concerns. They also became much less willing to share their wealth, while the possession of an empire requires sacrifices.

Empires, for all the coercion they necessarily entail, do produce some public goods, in the name of a special mission. Great powers can be at least equally brutish and oppressive, but they are essentially selfish creatures. (Trenin 2011, p. 212)

It is the natural selfishness, both at the level of individuals and the country as a whole, that is the deepest reason for the resignation from imperial ambitions. Indeed, the possession of colonies was extremely expensive, and people remember this very well. In 1991, the seven Soviet republics received large subsidies from the union budget; in the case of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, the subsidy from the center was almost the same as their own budgets. Today, simply no one would be willing to make such sacrifices.

There is no ideology, no clear set of values, but a very strong sense of pragmatism. The motto is simple: to survive, and to succeed, using whatever means

available. This pragmatism allows no room for empire-building. Russian leaders have agreed among themselves: no more expensive ideological nonsense; no more material self-sacrifice; and no more subsidies for others. (Trenin 2011, p. 234)

For Russia's ruling elite is painfully selfish. They are not hot idealists, but cold pragmatists. One can expect from them a firm defense of the interests of great power, but not the realization of demanding imperialistic ideals.

This diagnosis generally agrees with the famous theory of the System of the Russian Federation formulated by Gleb Pavlovsky. This former Kremlin close advisor, a major figure in the presidential campaigns, suggested that Russia is in the hands of a relatively small group of people, led by the Team (*komanda*), as he calls it, whose sole concern is to maintain their control over the circulation of Russian resources. Russia, in his view, is therefore not a state in the usual sense of the word. Political institutions are merely facades, and politics is dominated by informal personal relationships. Putin's maintenance of personal power despite its formal takeover by Medvedev in 2008–2012 was clear evidence of this. Pavlovsky claims that the power in Russia is held first by Putin's Team, which consists of several dozen people, and second by the Bonus Class (*premiál'nyi klass*), which is about a thousand, which profit from control of key sectors in Russia's economy.

These people are getting rich by being monopolists in the field of resource extraction and building gas pipelines. Under Putin's supervision, they operate the global financial network of the Russian Federation. [...] There is a protected class of people who govern the conversion of resources into power. This class has grown from Moscow to the whole country and includes more than a thousand people. Together with Putin, they constitute an unelected elite circle of the Russian Federation, similar to the establishment of the European Union. Real decisions are made at a level that is beyond the reach of voters. [...] This model has been working for decades and will continue to work. (Pavlovskii 2014, pp. 46–47)

The purpose of the System of the Russian Federation is not, as in the case of other countries, to ensure the common good of its citizens, but rather to enable the elite to make profits by controlling the exploitation of resources. Also, obviously, the purpose of the System is not to realize any civilizational or imperial projects. It is only about money and power for a small group of people.

It seems, therefore, that the modern Russian state is a perfect realization of the principles of austere political realism. It is guided by hard economic interests, brutally defends them, and looks with contempt and incredulity at Western countries that sometimes still refer to values. All this, of course, perhaps shows Russia in a bad light, but at the same time, it proves that it does not seek to build an empire at all. For empire is based not so much on force as on ideas. Russia is therefore not an ordinary country, but its uniqueness lies not in the fact that it is a neoimperial state, but in the fact that it is a predatory state. Russia is not, in other words, an ideocracy, but rather a kleptocracy.

Nationalism and imperialism

A crucial point in the debate between the postimperial and neoimperial interpretations of contemporary Russia is the question of Russian nationalism. As I pointed out, following Polish historians Andrzej Nowak and Włodzimierz Marciniak, it was exactly the problem of nationalism that led to the collapse of the two previous forms of the Russian empire. The Tsarist empire became too national, whereas the Soviet one was not national enough. As a result, the former was broken up by revolting minorities, whereas the latter was dismantled by a dissatisfied majority. Russian nationalism was thus paradoxically a main antiimperial force throughout history.

It seems to be the same today. Russian nationalism, even if it takes extremely aggressive forms, actually undermines Russian imperialism, which has been far more dangerous at times. This is so because nationalism limits the possible scope of the supposed empire. This was clearly recognized by Trenin, who wrote:

What the rise in xenophobia, the upsurge of chauvinism, and the spread of anti-foreign violence also tell is that there is no appetite whatsoever for a new edition of the empire, only residual nostalgia for the old days. (Trenin 2011, p. 62)

The radicalization of nationalism in Russia thus indicates a reduction in imperial sentiments. Paradoxically, the more nationalism, the less imperialism. Therefore, the recent rise of Russian nationalism gives at least hope for the final decline of the Russian empire. While we may be endangered by aggressive Russian chauvinists, we will not be threatened by the far more ambitious Russian imperialists.

Obviously, this is a controversial interpretation. For many commentators, Russian chauvinism, xenophobia, and nationalism rather indicate the rise, not the fall, of Russian imperialism. That was Van Herpen's view.

Trenin's argument that the widespread xenophobia in Russia will prevent Russia from becoming imperialist is [...] not valid. In fact, the contrary is true: ultranationalism and imperial chauvinism are often most developed in xenophobic and racist countries. (Van Herpen 2014, p. 3)

Van Herpen was right in his insistence that Russia escalates aggression. Trenin obviously turned out to be too optimistic. However, it seems to me that ultimately Trenin is right in his analysis of the relationship between nationalism and imperialism. No empire can be founded on a too narrow national basis. The Russian empire always had to include many different nations, religions, and cultures, so the current rise of Russian ethnic nationalism virtually excludes any wider imperial aspirations. Even the present-day Russian state is officially based on the idea of a political sense of Russian nationality (*rossiiskii*), rather than a cultural or ethnic one (*russkii*). Paradoxically, therefore, the more Putin's regime becomes nationalistic, the less imperialistic it must be. Alas, this does not mean that it becomes less aggressive.

Now, what is the nature of the current Russian war against Ukraine? It seems that it is a nationalist reaction rather than an imperialist expansion. This is evidenced by the ideological justifications of the war in Ukraine shown in the statements of Russian politicians. The defense of ethnic Russians beyond the borders has long been

among Russia's foreign policy priorities. A convenient instrument of this policy was the "passportization" of Russians living outside the Russian Federation, providing a formal pretext for their defense. The foundation of Russia's current claim to domination in the post-Soviet area is the doctrine of the Russian world (*russkii mir*). It follows from the statements of Putin and his officials that the Russian world is supposed to be a specific cultural community of people who speak Russian, somehow identify with Orthodoxy, and refer to some common values (Menkiszak 2014). The center of the Russian world is, of course, Russia, but it also comprises Belarus, at least the eastern part of Ukraine, and perhaps other territories bordering Russia, but definitely not the whole post-Soviet space, not to mention the rest of the world. Russia merely presents itself as a defender of the rights of the Russian-speaking population in its neighboring countries. Van Herpen aptly calls this concept an "annexationist Pan-Russianism" (Van Herpen 2014, p. 56). However, there is no doubt that such an idea has a strong nationalist, not imperialist, sense. This is so even if Russian nationalists sometimes speak about the reintegration of the former Soviet Empire. If they attempt to do this on the grounds of national ideas, they could not succeed. The logic of empire building, which needs a more universalistic principle, is inexorable.

What's more, it seems that playing the nationalist card not only prevents the building of an empire but also threatens the disintegration of the Russian state itself. The concept of *russkii mir* is potentially dangerous for the Russian Federation. In the short run, it may serve as a basis for local expansion, but in the long run, it may lead to an irreversible destabilization of the Russian state itself. This is because the Russian Federation is still not a regular nation-state, but a semi-imperial remnant of a multi-ethnic and multicultural empire. Hence, if it became a one-nation country, it would inevitably trigger separatist tendencies. As Trenin notes:

There is a sense that an ethnic Russian nation might spell the end of the present Russian state. Even though more than 50 percent of Russian residents find the slogan "Russia for the Russians" attractive, an ethnic Russian nation in a country with so many ethnic homelands organized as republics with their constitutions, national languages, and aspirations is a sure way to a new disaster. (Trenin 2011, p. 62)

It is worth recalling that, for instance, Dagestan, one of the eighty-five subjects of the Russian (*Rossiiskaia*) Federation, is inhabited by about thirty different nationalities that can by no means be considered as parts of the ethnic Russian (*russkii*) world. The government's insistence on a national premise may thus open an ethnic Pandora's Box. If the Russian authority today stands up for the rights of ethnic Russians abroad, then Russian residents of other nationalities become second-class citizens. It is only a matter of time before this thought will appear in the minds of the Chechens, Ingush, Buryats, or Yakuts fighting in Ukraine. The Russians may thus unwittingly hang themselves with the rope they wanted to impose around the necks of their neighbors. Instead of moving beyond the current borders of Tsar Alexei I Mikhailovich, they may return to the borders of Grand Prince of Moscow, Ivan III.

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