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Making Russia forever great: imperialist component in the Kremlin's foreign policy

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Ostap Kushnir

Making Russia forever great: imperialist component in the Kremlin's foreign policy*

Abstract: The article outlines the geopolitical rationale behind contemporary Russian expansionism, as well as presents the asymmetric and "hybrid" mechanisms utilized by the Kremlin to solidify its authority in the post-communist space. To do this, the article refers to the findings of American, British, Polish and Ukrainian intellectuals on the nature of the Russian political identity. The four commonly used theoretical frameworks explaining contemporary Russian expansionism are described and critically assessed (imperial, diversionary, divergent identities and "angry guy"). Apart from this, the Russian and foreign political philosophic thought of the XIX-XXI centuries is referred to. The latter was done to trace the evolution of the Russian Byzantium-type governing tradition and national identity. The article puts forward the hypothesis that Russian expansionism, alongside the Russian sentiment towards an imperialist worldview, are tested by historical patterns of national policy-making which bring the state to its civilizational glory. In this light, it will be futile to expect that Russia can fully democratize, build a Western type of a nation-state and start conducting open policies.

Keywords: Russian foreign policy, Russian political identity, Russian neo-imperialism, Russian expansionism

Introduction

When speaking of the recent conflicts in the post-communist space, one can not overlook Russian involvement behind virtually every one of them: Nagorno-Karabakh, Tajikistan, Transnistria, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Adjara (unsuccessful), South Kyrgyzstan, Crimea and Donbas. Depending on the situation, Russian armed forces are portrayed as arriving as peacemakers or peacekeepers while the Kremlin often

* Selected ideas and arguments from this article were first presented at *American Political Science Association (APSA) Annual Meeting and Exhibition 2016* (1-4 September 2016, Philadelphia, US), *International Symposium Three Revolutions – War, Revolution and Their Consequences* (16-17 March 2018, College of Europe, Warsaw, Poland), as well as in the author's book *Ukraine and Russian Neo-Imperialism: the Divergent Break*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018.

denies it is one of the sides in the conflict.¹ Considering the power, authority, and geopolitical gravity of Russia, it is no surprise that the state takes decisive actions in its neighbourhood. However, some of these measures look like parts of a farsighted expansionist strategy, not the precise surgical strikes aimed at a prompt pacification and securing long-term peace between all sides.

This article puts forward the hypothesis that the rationale behind Russia's aggressive actions in its neighbourhood resides in its goal of achieving certain geostrategic objectives which are largely predefined by the state's imperial traditions, memories, and fears that the Kremlin may irretrievably lose control over lands which were once Russian. This especially applies to the currently sovereign entities of Central and Eastern Europe.

As the methodology is concerned, it will reside in combining classical and critical geopolitics. The first – state-centred Hobbesian geopolitics – will allow for the explanation of the nature of Russian expansionism in light of it seeking *Lebensraum*. In its turn, critical geopolitics will allow for the unveiling of the mechanisms which the Kremlin utilizes to achieve its objectives in the post-Cold War international arena. The paradox here is that the Kremlin pursues state interests through a utilization of mechanisms which emerged in democratic societies to limit the state's power (i.e. empowerment of the individuals and non-state actors).

The article consists of three major thematic blocks. The first block touches upon the nature of Russian imperialism and expansionism, as well as its perception by the Russian and Western academia (British, US, Polish and Ukrainian scholars). The second block outlines tools and strategies which the Kremlin utilises to achieve its desired foreign policy objectives in the neighbourhood. In this respect, special attention is paid to the Russia-initiated asymmetric operations and "hybrid" wars. The third block assesses the complexity of contemporary factors and drivers which nurture the assertive Russian foreign policy.

1 O. Kushnir, 'Ukrainian Policies in the Black Sea Littoral: History, Current Trends, and Perspectives', *The Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2017, p. 169; idem, *Ukraine and Russian Neo-Imperialism...*, p. 2.

1. Expansionism as Russian *modus operandi*

It was at the beginning of the XX century that Russian philosophers for the first time clearly presented and justified the ideas of Russian exceptionalism, expansionism, and – even – messianism. One may refer here to Vladimir Soloviev (1853-1900) who advocated the idea of a Russian-led global empire built on the principles of religious Christian universalism; or to Nikolai Fedorov (1828-1903) who emphasized the Russian “duty” before humankind to unify the world through Orthodoxy and autocracy; or to Nikolai Berdiaev (1874-1948) with his unveiling the historical and spiritual evolution of Russian Orthodoxy and political culture. The latter claimed that religion and authoritarianism were two cornerstones of the Muscovite state, which later nurtured the Russian imperialistic idea, and finally provided the impetus to Soviet expansionism and Russian messianism.²

Over time, little has changed in Russian political philosophy. For instance, after the collapse of the USSR Aleksandr Dugin continued to perceive Russian expansionism – especially in its Eurasian dimension – as something natural and inescapable. He contributed to the idea of Russia as the Third Rome; from Dugin’s perspective, Russia finds itself in an eternal struggle with the global maritime Carthage, which is the US. One of the battlefields between these two transcendent powers is its neighbourhood. Dugin argues that Russia has no other way to exist except for being victorious and constantly growing Empire: “The whole history of Russia is the history of the construction of the Empire. Russia either becomes the Empire or disappears”.³ Moreover, Russia as the entity combining the true Orthodox faith with true political leadership should unite and lead other nations against the Carthage. By doing so, it will prevent the doomsday and the coming of the Antichrist.⁴

Similarly as Dugin, Nataliia Narochnitskaia also stresses the importance of religion in understanding the Russian state and its histor-

2 J. Østbø, *The New Third Rome. Readings of a Russian Nationalist Myth*, Dissertation for the degree philosophiae doctor (PhD) at the University of Bergen, 2011, pp. 67-75.

3 Ibid., p. 134; A. Резчиков [A. Rezchikov], ‘Имперский марш прошел по Москве’ [Imperial march took place in Moscow], *Взгляд* [View], 8 April 2007, <http://www.vz.ru/politics/2007/4/8/76422.html> [2018-08-07].

4 Østbø, op. cit., p. 143.

ic mission. She constructs her narration on the dichotomy between Orthodox Russia and the Anglo-Saxon West, treating the latter as God-alienated and heretic. According to Narochnitskaia, the history of humankind is a by-product of interactions between different religious groups. Thus, it is impossible to interpret history by removing the spiritual element, as the West does it. Moreover, total secularization makes the West unavoidably hostile towards Russia, which remains morally superior due to its strong religious identity. As Jardar Østbø summarizes Narochnitskaia's major ideas: "The Russian state's expansion was for the most part in self-defence and can be justified by international law ... [i.e. the Western view on Russia Western view on Russia] is stereotypical and essentially false, partly because important research on Russia is not objective. It is rooted in heretical and inhuman thought and misunderstandings and is closely related to geopolitics, i.e. to the desire to conquer and annihilate Russia"⁵

Apart from Soloviev, Fedorov, Berdiaev, Narochnitskaia and Dugin, one may find a considerable number of other Russian philosophers and geopoliticians who – under various justifications – support the state's expansion. For instance, Alexandr Block (1852-1909), Iurii Kliuchnikov (1886-1938), Nikolai Trubetzkoy (1890-1938), Ivan Ilyin (1883-1954), Evgeny A. Korovin (1892-1964), Egor Kholmogorov, and others. Albeit their views may have been grounded on ambiguous deductions, one should not underestimate their influence on Russian foreign and domestic policies, as well as on the formation of Russia's identity.

Vadim Tsymburskii (1957-2009) can be defined as the most consistent anti-imperialist. He argued that Russia's post-Cold War borders were finally adequate and there existed no need to project power onto new territories. Moreover, he condemned expansionism claiming that it brings more negative than positive effects, especially if Russia expands into Europe. Russia, according to Tsymburskii, is a civilizational island and should always keep its distance from the outer world. But this kind of isolationist geopolitical philosophy was rather an exception than a rule.⁶

5 Ibid., p. 169.

6 Ibid., pp. 97-98; В. Цымбурский [V. Tsymburskii], *Остров Россия. Геополитические и хронополитические работы 1993-2006* [Island Russia. Geopolitical and khronopolitical works 1993-2006], Москва [Moscow]: ROSSPEN, 2007, pp. 7-11.

Addressing the Western philosophic and geopolitical views on the nature of the Russian state, one may hardly discover anything related to messianism, exceptionalism, or a “duty” before humankind. It is the opposite; Russia’s aggressive foreign policy is defined by many as an existential threat.

If one were to speak in particular of Polish geopoliticians at the beginning of the XX century, one might observe that a majority of them were openly anti-Russian. For instance, Włodzimierz Wakar (1885-1933) perceived the Russian Empire and later the USSR as a major foe. That was clearly visible in Russian advancements and the seeking for *revanche* after World War I. Wakar supported the idea of Prometheanism which entailed the unification of Eastern European nations, the creation of the Intermarium block of states, and the successful resistance to any aggression from the East. His strategic solution resided in the partition of Russia and the emergence of independent nation-states.⁷

In his turn, Władysław Studnicki (1867-1953) also claimed that the major regional villain is Russia. During the XVIII and XIX centuries, Russia had started 38 wars which lasted summarily 128 years. This allowed Russia to expand and achieve its major geopolitical objectives. Thus, the Eastern European states – in particular, Poland – would acquire security only after the demolition of Russia. The conflict between Russia and the rest (or Russia and the West), according to Studnicki, was timeless and natural.⁸

Adolf Bocheński (1909-1944) considered Russia to be an artificial state full of disgust and moral decay. Expansionism was not the salvation of humankind, but the enslavement of nonconformists. Hundreds of nations were experiencing constant repressions coming from central authorities in Moscow. In a word, the processes taking place in Russia and the USSR were described as barbarian, unhealthy and harmful.⁹

Apart from Wakar, Studnicki, and Bocheński, similar views on Russia were shared by other Polish geopoliticians, statesmen and philosophers, among whom one should name Ignacy Matuszewski (1891-1946),

7 P. Eberhardt, *Twórcy polskiej geopolityki* [The Fathers of Polish geopolitics], Kraków: Arcana, 2006, p. 86.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 111, 106.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 138.

Włodzimierz Bączkowski (1905-2000), Juliusz Mieroszewski (1906-1976) and others.

British historian Arnold Toynbee (1889-1975) defined Russia as the permanent Byzantium-type state, regardless of the time epoch and political regime ruling over it. Russian leaders, the same as Byzantium Emperors, were considering their decisions and judgments always correct and indisputable. This encouraged them to rule over the state with totalitarian confidence; state institutions were also appropriately adjusted. Bearing this in mind, Toynbee makes no distinction between tsarist Russia and the communist Soviet Union: “In this Byzantine totalitarian state, the church may be Christian or Marxian so long as it submits to being the secular government’s tool ... Under the Hammer and Sickle, as under the Cross, Russia is still ‘Holy Russia’, and Moscow is still ‘The Third Rome’”.¹⁰

The nature of the Byzantium state, as described by Toynbee, makes Russia permanently hostile towards the West. These two powers are civilizationally incompatible. Moreover, Toynbee describes the self-identification of Muscovites – the title nation in Russia – as chosen by God to protect the true faith after the fall of Constantinople and, eventually, to build a world empire around that true faith.¹¹ Here one may make numerous allusions to Russian philosophers and geopoliticians presenting Russia as the Third Rome. The difference between Toynbee and them, though, resides in the fact that the first neither sees Russian expansion as *a priori* constructive, nor “legitimizes” it from the perspective of serving the global good.

Ukrainian geopolitician Yuriy Lypa (1900-1944), when living in Warsaw, stressed the military aspect of the state’s expansionism: “War and only war was the idol of imperial rule. War could be easily started because the majority of the population supported it eagerly: peasants were waging heavy wars with the administration on their lands, that they were reluctant, or even looked with hope to gain new territories”.¹²

10 A. Toynbee, *Civilization on Trial*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1948, p. 164.

11 Østbø, op. cit., p. 78.

12 Ю. Липа [Yu. Lypa], *Призначення України* [Destination of Ukraine], Київ [Kyiv]: Фондація ім. Ольжича [Olzhych Foundation], 1997, p. 25; O. Kushnir, ‘Interwar Views on Managing Eastern European Space: Exploring Lypa’s Conceptualisation of the Black Sea Union’, *The Central European Journal of International and Security Studies*, vol. 7, no. 4, 2013, p. 128.

Lypa emphasized that Russia had always been absorbed with wars, either internal or external. This was possible because ordinary Russians perceive wars and armed conflicts as something natural; moreover, some of the dwellers even saw a chance to improve their personal well-being through conquering and looting new lands.

Finally, the US ambassador to the USSR, George F. Kennan (1904-2005) stated the following of the Soviet Communists: "From the Russian-Asiatic world out of which they had emerged they carried with them a scepticism to the possibilities of permanent and peaceful co-existence of rival forces. Easily persuaded of their doctrinaire 'rightness', they insisted on the submission or destruction of all competing power".¹³ As one may see, Kennan reiterates the idea of Russians perceiving themselves as the "true doers" under the strong unchallenged leadership, which often entailed the destruction of external competitive forces.

Bearing all of the above mentioned in mind, the rivalry between "Orthodox" Russia and the "Carthaginian" West should never come as a surprise; it cyclically reappears in history. Hiski Haukkala stresses that even if Russia tries, the principles of western governance and democratic identity cannot be incorporated genuinely into the state's policies.¹⁴ Instead, Russian centuries old traditional expansionism seems to constitute a much more efficient and rational *modus operandi*. One may find the latest proof in the post-Cold War experience. Deliberate attempts under President Boris Yeltsin to preserve and enhance Russian geopolitical importance through democratic mechanisms were faulty.¹⁵ Therefore, President Vladimir Putin's return to expansionist outward-looking policies was predictable; it is the return to Byzan-

13 G. Kennan, 'The Sources of Soviet Conduct', in: G. O. Tuathail and S. Dalby, P. Routledge (eds), *The Geopolitics Reader*, London: Routledge, 1998, p. 61.

14 H. Haukkala, 'From Cooperative to Contested Europe? The Conflict in Ukraine as a Culmination of a Long-Term Crisis in EU-Russia Relations', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2015, p. 31.

15 I. Torbakov, 'Vladimir Putin's Imperial Anxieties', *Eurasianet.org*, 9 February 2016, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/77256> [2018-07-03]; В. Горбулин и А. Литвиненко [V. Horbulin and A. Litvinenko], 'Большой сосед определился. Что Украине делать дальше?' [The big neighbour has made up his mind. What Ukraine should do next?], *Зеркало Недели* [Mirror of the week], 18 September 2009, http://gazeta.zn.ua/POLITICS/bolshoy_sosed_opredelilsya_chno_ukraine_delat_dalshe.html [2015-10-25]; J. Hughes and G. Sasse, 'Power Ideas and Conflict: Ideology, Linkage and Leverage in Crimea and Chechnya', *East European Politics*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2016, pp. 316, 319.

tium roots which successfully nourished the Tsardom of Muscovy, Russian Empire and the USSR.

2. Features of Russian expansionist *modus operandi*

It will be a grave mistake to claim that Russia seeks to expand by any means possible. On the contrary, Russia expands because it acquires the proper opportunity. This opportunity, though, may emerge either as a consequence of favourable circumstances or as a result of the Kremlin's purposeful activities.

In 1946 Kennan wrote that Soviet foreign policy was cautious, flexible, and deceptive. It was like a fluid stream which moved wherever it acquired space. Citing Kennan's Long Telegram: "Soviet power ... is neither schematic nor adventuristic. It does not work by fixed plans. It does not take unnecessary risks. Impervious to the logic of reason, and it is highly sensitive to the logic of force. For this reason, it can easily withdraw – and usually does when strong resistance is encountered at any point"¹⁶

One may find an appropriate illustration for the Soviet's absence of fixed plans in its occupation of the Baltics. According to the Russian historian Elena Zubkova (2008), at the end of the 1930s, one of Joseph Stalin's strategic objectives resided in establishing full control over Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. However, there was no clear strategy, as evidenced by the archives, how to accomplish this. All Stalin's decisions and actions were made *ad hoc* and targeted the weakest sides of an opponent. This approach proved to be efficient.¹⁷

On the contrary, Stalin's highly improvisational intervention into Finland – the 1939-1940 Winter War – was a fiasco. Regardless of acquiring new lands and moving the border further to the west from Leningrad, the major objective – emergence of the Soviet-controlled Finnish socialist state – was not met. Moreover, the casualties faced by the Red Army were disastrous: 126,000 soldiers dead or missing, 188,000 soldiers severely injured, almost 2,300 tanks and armoured

¹⁶ Kennan, op. cit., p. 62.

¹⁷ Е. Зубкова [E. Zubkova], *Сталинский проект для Прибалтики* [Stalin's project for Baltic states], Open lecture, 2008, <http://polit.ru/article/2009/01/13/pribalt/> [2016-06-28].

vehicles destroyed.¹⁸ Since then the Kremlin did not undertake a firm attempt to establish control over its north-western neighbour. However, it will be wrong to conclude that the Kremlin abandoned its Finnish ambitions for good.

As Russia's benefit from favourable circumstances is concerned, one may refer to the inclusion of the islands Sakhalin and Amur into the Russian Empire. At the beginning of the XIX century, these territories remained underpopulated and poorly explored with neither Russia nor China claiming authority over them. Therefore, it was simply an issue of setting a settlement in the Amur estuary to mark the whole region as Russian. This was done in 1850 and in 1853 Tsar Nikolay I confirmed the inclusion of the island of Sakhalin and Amur into the empire by stating: "Once the Russian flag is raised over it, let it never be lowered!"¹⁹ Exhausted by the Opium war, China agreed to recognize Russian expansion through signing the Treaty of Aigun (1858) and the Convention of Peking (1860).

As the Russian creation of opportunities is concerned, in his 1946 Long Telegram, Kennan also outlined the principles of Soviet expansion apparent in the Baltic and Finnish cases.²⁰ He stressed that the Kremlin usually achieved key objectives through exerting its influence on (i) political parties in other states which openly or secretly support communism and – in their unity – form some kind of the concealed Comintern; (ii) social leaders and opinion makers who are loudly promoting particular political ideas and solutions, usually revolutionary; (iii) a wide variety of national associations and organizations (labor unions, youth movements, and others); (iv) international organizations which could interfere with the domestic policies of other states; (v) Russian Orthodox church; (vi) Pan-Slav movements and

18 Russian Life, 'The Forgotten Winter War', *Russian Life*, vol. 57, no. 6, 2014, p. 26; R. M. Citino, 'White death', *World War II*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2014, p. 50.

19 O. Kushnir, 'Russian Geopolitical Interest in the Black Sea Region: The Case of Crimea', *Athenaeum. Polish Political Studies*, vol. 56, 2017, p. 125; В. Гелаев [V. Gelaev], 'Где раз поднят русский флаг, там он спускаться не должен' [Where Russian flag was raised once, it should never be lowered], *gazeta.ru* [gazeta.ru], 14 August 2015, https://www.gazeta.ru/science/2015/08/13_a_7686922.shtml [2018-08-18].

20 G. Kennan, 'Long Telegram (from 1946)', *Wilson Center*, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116178> [2018-08-03].

other related movements; (vii) national governments who are ready to align their states to Soviet objectives.

The Soviet Union strove to create a multi-dimensional network of agents and proxies in target states. If one removes the communist component, similar *modus operandi* can be observed in contemporary Russian foreign policies (especially as the post-communist space is concerned). One of the best examples here is the conspiracy behind the annexation of Crimea, as it was unveiled by Taras Kuzio, Lada L. Roslycki, Joanna Szostek, Michał Wawrzonek and other researchers.²¹ Another example is the Georgian war of 2008 with Russia using its proxies in South Ossetia to eradicate the already explosive situation, engage Georgia into armed conflict and then arrive as the peacemaker recognizing South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states.²² Timothy Thomas, in his turn, points out that the Kremlin has also created a powerful network in the EU. In particular, he prescribes to this network Former Premier Silvio Berlusconi of Italy, Jean-Marie Le Pen, leader of France's far-right National Front, former German Chancellors Gerhard Schröder and Helmut Schmidt, and many CEO's of German industrial giants. Thomas defines them as Russian proxies – or at least sympathizers – in Europe who speak in one voice with the Kremlin on many issues.²³ It is, though, very unlikely that Russia will start conducting assertive expansion into Western Europe soon.

It will be logical to conclude that Kennan in the 1950s outlined the principles of Soviet policies which has provided the backbone to contemporary Russian asymmetric or – according to some – “hybrid”

- 21 For more details see T. Kuzio, 'Russian Subversion in the Crimea', *Commentary to German Marshall Fund of the United States*, 3 November 2006, <http://www.gmfus.org/commentary/russian-subversion-crimea> [2018-08-01]; L. L. Roslycky, 'Russia's Smart Power in Crimea: Sowing the Seeds of Trust', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2011, pp. 301-307; J. Szostek, 'Russia and the News Media in Ukraine: A Case of "Soft Power"?', *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2014, p. 466; M. Wawrzonek, 'Ukraine in the Grey Zone: Between "Russkiy Mir" and Europe', *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*, vol. 28, no. 4, 2014, pp. 760-766.
- 22 For more details see R. Sakwa, 'Conspiracy Narratives as a Mode of Engagement in International Politics: The Case of the 2008 Russo-Georgian War', *Russian Review*, vol. 71, no. 4, 2012, pp. 591-592; Y. Sarikaya, 'Georgian Foreign Policy after the August 2008 War', *Journal of Black Sea Studies*, vol. 8, no. 31, 2011, p. 4; T. Sinkkonen, 'A Security Dilemma on the Boundary Line: an EU Perspective to Georgian-Russian Confrontation after the 2008 War', *Journal of Southeast European & Black Sea Studies*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2011, pp. 272-274.
- 23 T. Thomas, 'Russia's Military Strategy and Ukraine: Indirect, Asymmetric – and Putin-Led', *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, vol. 28, 2015, pp. 449-450.

offensive operations. Thomas argues that the first type of operations “feature a combination of forms and methods of using forces and means that depend on an adversary’s unequal combat potential”.²⁴ This includes the strategic planning of every step with significant emphasis made on acquiring the informational and intellectual superiority before any action is taken. In a word, the victory on a conventional battlefield is not the key objective anymore; the certain defeat of an adversary is not necessarily achieved through armed struggle as the informational environment, social architecture, and international community also becomes a battlefield.²⁵ Sakwa adds to this point that the conspiracy narratives – searching for the hidden enemy in the black-and-white world – also plays one of the key roles in justifying the state’s actions.²⁶

According to Volodymyr Horbulin, contemporary Russia is not conducting asymmetric operations, but waging “hybrid” wars against the target states. He defines the “hybrid” war as a “fuzzy” military conflict envisaging the implementation of non-military means which originally have no direct relation to classical military confrontation. This includes the complex and flexible nature of adversaries, utilization of conventional and irregular means of warfare, wide-scale media propaganda, cyber-attacks and others.²⁷ Some Western experts add to this point that the ultimate Russian goal resides in ensuring that the strong authoritarian leaders’ rule over key states or territories with their powers grounded in organized crime, GONGO’s and secret services. All of these authoritarian leaders are accountable – directly or indirectly – to the Kremlin.²⁸

24 Ibid., p. 454.

25 A. Visvizi, ‘Soft risks and threats to safety and security in the region: an overall assessment’, in: A. Visvizi and T. Stępniewski (eds), *Poland, the Czech Republic and NATO in Fragile Security Context*, IESW Reports, December 2016, pp. 42-43.

26 Sakwa, op. cit., pp. 583-588.

27 В. Горбулін [V. Horbulin], “Гібридна війна” як ключовий інструмент російської геостратегії реваншу [“Hybrid war” as key instrument in Russian revanche geostrategy], *Дзеркало Тижня* [Mirror of the week], 23 January 2015, http://gazeta.dt.ua/internal/gibridna-viy-na-yak-klyucho-viy-instrument-rosiyskoyi-geostrategiyi-revanshu_.html [2018-08-06].

28 B. P. Jackson, ‘The “soft war” for Europe’s East’, *Policy Review*, June-July 2006, <http://www.hoover.org/research/soft-war-europes-east> [2018-08-06]; V. Socor, ‘Advancing Euro-Atlantic Security and Democracy in the Black Sea Region’, *Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee*, 2005, <http://www.jamestown.org/fileadmin/EDM/Resources/SocorCongTestimony030805.pdf> [2018-06-08].

In turn, Russian military strategists avoid the term “hybrid” war while addressing conflicts in their neighbourhood; instead, they refer to such terms as asymmetric, non-linear, or indirect operations.²⁹ For instance, it was Russian Chief of General Staff Valeriy Gerasimov who advocated the importance of “non-linear” warfare as a complement to the military might of the modern state.³⁰ In his article “The Value of Science in Foresight,” Gerasimov emphasized the following: “The role of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness.”³¹ He underlined that in the contemporary world non-military operations should occur at a rate of 4:1 over military operations. Gerasimov also raised the importance of conducting surgical intelligence operations and nurturing social dissatisfaction within the target state to undermine the authority of local governments in order to create a vacuum of power. Non-military means, especially manipulations with information, are employed to weaken the adversary’s military potential and disorient the indigenous population. Finally, “the open use of forces – often under the guise of peacekeeping and crisis regulation – is resorted to only at a particular stage, primarily for the achievement of the final success in a conflict.”³²

The non-linear military strategy presented by the Russian Chief of General Staff became known as the Gerasimov’s Doctrine. It also has clear references to the 86, 88, 89, and 20 provisions of the latest Military Doctrine 2010 which – amongst others – stresses the Russian obligation to protect its citizens abroad.³³ Being multi-dimensional, ruthless, planned in advance and – at the same time – highly adjustable, this is the strategy Russia evidently implies in order to exert its influence over target states. In particular, over the post-Soviet and post-communist states.

29 Thomas, op. cit., p. 455; V. B. Andrianov and V. V. Loyko, ‘Employment of the Russian Armed Forces in Critical Situations in Peacetime’, *Military Thought*, vol. 1, no. 24, 2015, p. 148.

30 M. Galeotti, ‘The “Gerasimov Doctrine” and Russian Non-Linear War’, *Moscow’s Shadows*, 6 July 2014, <https://inmoscowsshadows.wordpress.com/2014/07/06/the-gerasimov-doctrine-and-russian-non-linear-war/> [2018-07-28].

31 В. Герасимов [V. Gerasimov], ‘Ценность науки в предвидении’ [The value of science in foresight], *Военно-Промышленный Курьер* [Military and industrial courier], 26 February 2013, <http://vpk-news.ru/articles/14632> [2018-08-03]; Thomas, op. cit., p. 455.

32 Galeotti, op. cit.

33 Kushnir, ‘Russian Geopolitical...’, p. 118.

3. Reasons behind Russian neo-imperialist expansion

On the example of the annexation of Crimea, Andrei Tsygankov defines four of the most common explanations behind Russian today's assertive foreign policy.³⁴

The first – imperial – explanation portrays Russian actions as a straightforward inspiration to restore the Kremlin's rule over former Soviet lands. Experiencing the revival of a nationalistic narration in the times of Putin, Russia expands wherever it acquires the opportunity and faces minimal resistance. Tsygankov claims that a significant number of Western researchers still “continue to interpret Russia as a traditionalist and expansionist power waiting to expand into former Soviet lands”.³⁵ For instance, here one may name Horbulin who invented the term “revanche geostrategy” to explain Russian-led “hybrid” wars.³⁶

The second explanation – diversionary – presents Russia's aggressive external actions as the Kremlin's attempts to consolidate domestic power and secure internal stability. In this light, Russia's annexation of Crimea and its subsequent engagement into the East Ukrainian conflict was nothing else, but a lure to distract the attention of its citizens from political protests and economic troubles. One of the supporters of a diversionary explanation is Igor Torbakov.³⁷

The third explanation – divergent identities – presents Russian engagement into Ukrainian affairs as a retaliation to the anterior Western civilizational assault. Tsygankov states that the Ukrainian revolution of 2014 – or the EuroMaidan – came as a shock to Russian decision-makers.³⁸ The latter simply could not accept Ukraine's conscious alienation from the Russian “civilizational space”; they tended to perceive the EuroMaidan as a successful West-orchestrated operation.³⁹ Thus, the Crimean annexation and later events were nothing, but an over-

34 *Idem, Ukraine and Russian Neo-Imperialism...*, pp. 89-92.

35 A. Tsygankov, 'Vladimir Putin's Last Stand: the Sources of Russia's Ukraine Policy', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 31, no. 4, 2015, p. 294.

36 Горбулін, *op. cit.*

37 I. Torbakov, 'What Does Russia Want?', *DGAPanalyse*, vol. 1, 2011, p. 1, <https://dgap.org/de/article/getFullPDF/17753> [2018-07-03].

38 Tsygankov, *op. cit.*, p. 296.

39 J. Darczewska, *The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare: The Crimean Operation, A Case Study*, Warszawa: Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich im. Marka Karpia [Centre for Eastern Studies], no. 42, May 2014, p. 15.

reaction of the “East Slavic Orthodox Civilization” on the existential threat to its Byzantine nature. This explanation is supported, for instance, by Michał Wawrzonek.⁴⁰

The fourth explanation – the so-called “angry guy” – portrays recent Russian policies regarding Ukraine as Putin’s personal fury and outrage after the failure of his plans. Putin repeatedly stressed that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the XX century; naturally, the President of Russia was willing to restore the global status which his state once enjoyed, as well as to overcome the West’s mistreatment of Russia.⁴¹ The EuroMaidan was a noticeable strike in Putin’s ambitions what made him act out emotionally.⁴² Thomas, while not exactly interpreting Putin’s decisions as emotional, portrays contemporary Russian actions in its neighbourhood as clearly “Putin-led”. According to Thomas, there would neither be a Crimean annexation, nor other instabilities in the post-Soviet space without Putin’s direct input.⁴³

None of these reasons, though, reflect the position of Tsygankov on contemporary Russian policies in its neighbourhood. He interprets these policies as a rational response by the Kremlin to the West’s growing ignorance of Russian values and national interests: “In acting toward Ukraine, Russia has been guided by its understanding of national interests and values, as well as the degree of their recognition by Western powers. The absence of such recognition has contributed to confrontation and violence in Ukraine”.⁴⁴ Thus, aggression regarding Ukraine is defensive behaviour by Russia in a deteriorating international environment caused by the unilateral and multifarious Western expansion into Eastern Europe. Moreover, in Putin’s view, it is also an issue of prestige to withstand the cultural, historical and geopolitical ties with Ukraine from a Western assault even if such defence breaches Ukraine’s sovereignty. The question of defending Russian-speaking minorities from the far-right offenders in the post-revolutionary Ukraine

40 Wawrzonek, op. cit., p. 760.

41 В. Путин [V. Putin], ‘Послание Президента Российской Федерации от 25.04.2005 г.’ [Address of the President of the Russian Federation from 24.04.2005], *President of Russia official web-page*, <http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/36354> [2016-08-12].

42 Tsygankov, op. cit., p. 297.

43 Thomas, op. cit., p. 447.

44 Tsygankov, op. cit., p. 298.

is also on top of Putin's agenda. The major weak point with such a position, though, resides in Tsygankov's sporadic perception of Ukraine as the subject, not the object of international relations.

Summarizing the above enlisted explanations and developing the Tsygankov's perception – which is relevant in its core – the Russian today's expansionist behaviour is nothing else, but the attempts to ensure geopolitical “justice” as Russia unilaterally sees it. The post-Cold War history has revealed that contemporary Western liberal and democratic values found proper ground in the post-communist space. The painful and uneven, but gradual and conscious process of transition started in Ukraine and other states in the 1990s. Thus, it is incorrect to claim that the West conducted a *multum* of special operations, “intervened” and “enforced” democracy among millions of people living in the newly-emerged states. The people decided to switch to democracy by themselves, what this meant is that the Byzantium-type Russian model of governance lost out to its Western alternative. Russia – which has always favoured imperial thinking – could not accept this easily. Moreover, the accelerating transition in the post-communist space looked for many in the Kremlin as a reiteration of the biggest catastrophe of the XX century. Thus, losing the competition, but not wanting to lose, Russia started to “forcefully export” its model of governance through “hybrid” wars and asymmetric operations. This was the best way to deal with Western-“tempted” states before they become irreversibly westernized. Apart from this, numerous local conflicts were – and remain – a message to all post-communist states that their security and prosperity depend on the extent of their coherency to Russia.

In brief, regaining geopolitical influence and securing civilization-al homogeneity – lost after the collapse of the USSR – are unilaterally treated by the Kremlin as a “right” and a “just” affair. Through conducting an expansionist foreign policy, Russia strengthens its national integrity; its leaders satisfy their personal ambitions, a wide range of Russian interests on different levels are met, and – finally – Russian Byzantium-type policies are re-confirmed as functional in the contemporary world. From this perspective, the political preferences and national interests of people living in Ukraine and other post-Soviet states are of minor importance. This is a typical neo-imperialist approach to the foreign policy-making. The West,

therefore, should review its understanding of Russia as a player in international affairs.

Conclusions

After the collapse of the USSR, Russia attempted to implement democratic values, transparent governance, and the free market. However, these attempts were devastating and nearly caused the partition of the state.⁴⁵ It is no surprise, though, that the late 1990's political and economic crisis evoked the restoration of the authoritarian rule which overlapped in time with Putin's coming to power. This restoration embraced the adoption of a refreshed Soviet national anthem, the proclamation of a neo-imperial course solidified by energy exports, semi-isolationism and spy hysteria of 2005-2007, occasional confrontation with the US, the proclamation of the post-Soviet region as a zone of Russian privileged interests, rehabilitation of Stalinist policies, and other issues.

Contemporary Russia behaves as a neo-imperial expansionist power in Central and Eastern Europe due to a mixture of reasons. Primarily, it is "feeling uncomfortable" with a growing Western presence in what is considered to be the Russian zone of privileged interests or, according to Narochnitskaia, the Russian fiefdom.⁴⁶ Secondly, it is "feeling threatened" due to the lack of efficiency of its Byzantium type political tradition and the successful democratic transitions of post-communist states. Thirdly, it is "feeling offended" in the same way as it felt after the collapse of the USSR when the West launched active cooperation with post-communist states; some of these states joined the EU. Which is later on considered by the Kremlin as a geopolitical defeat: the Cold War "balance of powers" was undermined. Fourthly, current Russian leaders have accumulated enough resources to "feel" themselves "confident" in pursuing expansionist policies regardless of Western condemnation. They are also securing their domestic political gravity through achieving successes on the international arena.

45 Горбулин и Литвиненко, *op. cit.*

46 Н. Нарочницкая [N. Narochnitskaia], *Россия и Русские в Мировой Истории* [Russia and Russians in the world history], Москва [Moscow]: Международные отношения [Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia], 2003, p. 128.

To summarize, contemporary Russian expansionism is fuelled by attempts to restore historical, cultural, and geopolitical justice as the imperialist-thinking Kremlin perceives it.

This said, no neighbouring state is safe in the Russian game of thrones. Dugin points out a range of battlefields where the Third Rome (Russia) will fight the global Carthage (the Western World and – in particular – the US). These battlefields are Belarus, Eastern Ukraine, Moldova, Mongolia, parts of China (Siankiang, Tibet, and Manchuria), large areas of Central Asia, the Caucasus, Finland, and some northern parts of Norway and Sweden.⁴⁷

Russian aggression towards its neighbours – especially the post-communist Central and Eastern European states – is not solely triggered by their democratic aspirations, but by Russian strategic objectives and interests. Regardless of the neighbours' political preferences, Russia will aim to establish efficient supervision over them, either through conquest (Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine) or negotiating unions (Belarus). Edvard Lucas states here that Russia is building a “soft empire” on the post-communist space solidified by secret services, corruption, financial inflows, economic ties and propaganda. This empire should be more robust and more dangerous than the USSR; this empire may include more states than the USSR did.⁴⁸

In a word, the expansionist and imperialist policy-making is a workable Russian *modus operandi*, tested by history, which brought the state (empire?) to its civilizational glory. Therefore, it would be unwise for the Kremlin to disregard this *modus* today.

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47 Østbø, op. cit., p. 134.

48 Е. Лукас [E. Lucas], 'Цінності дорого коштують' [Values are expensive], *Zbruc*, 6 July 2015, <http://zbruc.eu/node/38601> [2018-07-29].

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