

Chapter 4: Russia's Foreign Policy Determinants: Expansionist Policy and "Imperialism" since 1991

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Abstract

Russian expansionism and imperialism are not new phenomena. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian rulers in the Kremlin have been flirting with the idea of rebuilding the lost empire and revising the world order. This chapter reviews the main determinants of Russian foreign policy since the 1990s, identifies the basic ideas behind Russia's imperialist policies, and analyzes Moscow's main set of tools for its expansionist activities. The repeated presence of certain ideologies, narratives, and methods in various campaigns, whether conventional or hybrid, confirm the existence of a pattern in Russian foreign policy since the 1990s on which Russian expansionism is based. While this has not infrequently been overlooked in the Western world, some scholars have warned of it for many years. Among them was our colleague and renowned Russia expert *Dr. Hannes Adomeit (1942–2022)*, who saw right through the ideologies and goals of the Russian political elite and fully predicted Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. This chapter is dedicated to Dr. Hannes Adomeit and is based on his central theses.

Keywords

velikaya derzhava, Pravoslavie, Pobeda, the Great Patriotic War, revanchism, Transnistria, Chechen wars, war in Georgia, "frozen conflicts", Donbas crisis, Primakov doctrine

1 Introduction

*It can be said that we (Russia)
are an exception
among nations. We [...] exist only to
teach the world a great lesson.*

Pyotr Chaadayev, “Философские письма”¹, 1836

After the brutal Russian attack on Ukraine in February 2022, one could observe a sudden appearance of long-forgotten quotes by Pyotr Chaadayev in Russian-speaking social media. One of the harshest critics of the Russian Empire in the country’s philosophical movement of the 19th century, Chaadayev was labeled “insane” by the emperor Nicholas I, and his texts were immediately banned. Suddenly, when the war crimes of the Russian army in Bucha, Irpin, and Izyum were revealed in March-April 2022, intellectuals resorted to his scandalous texts about Russia’s alienation from the “universal cultivation of the human race”² to find an explanation for these tragic events. The world was chilled to the bone by the development of Vladimir Putin’s “special military operation”, at the same time finding itself at the entry gate of epochal changes in security policy.

Though for many Western experts on Russia or those familiar with the Kremlin’s image of the “Russian world” (with the Baltic states, Eastern and Central Europe), Putin’s expansionist course in 2022 is hardly an unexpected novelty. Imperialist policies, expansionism in the immediate neighborhood, and the use of similar methods of warfare (disinformation campaigns, deportations, “re-education”, attacks on civilians, etc.) are a long-standing habit of Moscow that, as we see today in the example of Ukraine, have been overlooked in the West either because of a systematic misreading of Russia, a misunderstanding of the Kremlin’s signals, or a deliberate policy of “closed eyes”. Only a rational view of Russia and an early assessment of its foreign policy actions can be a guarantee that neither the overestimation nor the underestimation of the Russian goals and capabilities will be repeated again – a mistake of strategic blindness that turned into a catastrophe for millions.

1 Chaadayev, Pyotr: *Философские письма* [Philosophical Letters], 1836.

2 Ibid.

2 The Old “New” Russia: The Ideological Implications of Modern Russian Imperialism

Legally, the modern Russian Federation is a “legitimate successor” to the Soviet Union (USSR).³ According to Putin, this is “self-evident”, which is why an amendment to this validity was included in the Constitution of the Russian Federation in 2020 on his initiative.⁴ In fact, the UN General Assembly Resolution 55/153 “Nationality of natural persons in relation to the succession of States”, according to which all fourteen other Soviet republics are equal successors of the former state, was ignored. On practice, this Russian continuity⁵ is presented economically (Russia paid a larger part of the Soviet foreign debt),⁶ diplomatically (e.g. Russia taking over USSR’s seat in the UN Security Council) and, above all, ideologically.

Since 1991, the Russian ideological space began to develop, adopting selective features not only from the Soviet Union but also from Tsarist Russia. If not economically, then ideologically, almost every Russian citizen found his or her place in the new Russia in the 1990s. Among numerous other features, the complicated “ideological cocktail” of contemporary Russia consists of the following four, occasionally contradictory, “ingredients”. It is important to note that they all can be recognized as fundamental aspects of “Putin’s imperialism”.

2.1 “*Velikaya Derzhava*”: Great(er) Russia

It is a re-emerging phenomenon in Russian history that was devised in Tsarist Russia in the second half of the 17th century, namely *Velikaya Rossiya* (a geographical construct that literally means “Great(er) Russia”).⁷ Used primarily as a domestically oriented policy of self-colonization, as in

3 UN General Assembly: Nationality of Natural Persons in relation to the Succession of States, Resolution 55/153, 12 December 2000.

4 TASS: “Путин предложил закрепить в Конституции правопреемство России в отношении СССР” [Putin proposed to enshrine Russia’s succession to the USSR in the Constitution], 2 March 2020.

5 For more on the phenomenon of Russian continuity, see Jakob Wöllenstein’s chapter “The Ukraine War as a Regional Confrontation” of this anthology.

6 Seager, Ashley: “Russia pays off its Soviet era debts to the west”, *The Guardian*, 22 August 2006.

7 Adomeit, Hannes: “Putin’s ‘Greater Russia’: misunderstanding or mission?” *Raam op Rusland*, 27 February 2018.

Alexander Etkind, the concept eventually transitioned to foreign policy⁸ – paralleling the establishment of Russia as an empire and, accordingly, as a great power. There are many similarities between the “*velikoderzhavnyi*” concept and *Realpolitik*, including the idea of undeniable natural right of the larger (stronger) state over the smaller (weaker) one. The paradox of this ideological aspect is the non-fulfillment of Russia’s “great power” claim, or as Anatoly Reshetnikov states, “Russia has often talked about being a great power and has always had problems being recognized as such.”⁹ Putin was vocal about experiencing the similar dilemma, adding to his public speeches faintly irritated comments about Russia’s “humiliating defeat” in the Cold War and the destruction of the Soviet Union by the “weak hand of Gorbachev”.¹⁰ In Putin’s view, Russia is being unjustly oppressed by the West/NATO, and he has no choice but to oppose this modern world order, in which *Velikaya Rossiya* is placed on a par with smaller sovereign states or is marginalized altogether.

Diplomacy is a good framework to illustrate Russia’s desire to be perceived as a great power. For example, Putin expressed this, among other things, by having all the world’s heads of government waiting for him in official meetings.¹¹ Russia also expected to be invited by the allies to join NATO and not to have to apply to join the alliance like the “smaller” countries.¹² Eventually, this “geopolitical insecurity” turned into the conviction that the Russian system was superior to the Western one, and thus the Kremlin believed in its “preeminence” – not without the encouragement of the anti-Western (mostly anti-American) regimes. Over the past decade, Moscow nurtured a plan to unite and lead a coalition of anti-Western actors

8 See Etkind, Alexander: *Internal Colonization: Russia’s Imperial Experience*. Polity Press: Cambridge 2011.

9 Reshetnikov, Anatoly: *Uses of Greatness in Russian International Politics: A Conceptual History of Velikaya Derzhava*, Department of International Relations, Central European University: Budapest, 2018, p. 4.

10 Пономарьова, Аля: “Последний генеральный секретарь” [The Last Secretary General], Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2 March 2016 .

11 According to Statista, the record was set during a meeting with former German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who had to wait 4 hours and 15 minutes for the Kremlin leader. Cf. McCarthy, Niall: *Putin Likes To Keep Other World Leaders Waiting*, Statista, 16 July 2018.

12 For more, see the chapter by Joris Van Bladel “The Ukraine War as a Result of Geopolitical Rivalry?” of this anthology.

– something that modern experts refer to as the development of the rivalry between “dictatorships *versus* democracies”.¹³

Regarding the competition between China and Russia for the leading role in the above unit, Hannes Adomeit emphasizes:

“Putin’s Russia has more of a problem providing positive proof that its system is superior to that of the West. Lavrov has argued that ‘a big debate is underway about which [system] is more effective. The coronavirus infection has taken the debate up a notch’. The question had arisen, therefore, ‘To what extent the Western democracies have shown themselves capable of opposing this absolute evil and to what extent countries with centralized, strong, and “authoritarian” government have been successful. History will be the judge.’ ... The more than preliminary verdict, however, is that China has been much more successful than Russia, both in terms of controlling the virus and in economic performance.”¹⁴

Bastian Giegerich and Maximilian Terhalle also confirm that at this stage of history Russia is not able to impose a new world order: “Russia suffers from a myriad of economic and political weaknesses and, unlike China, does not have the potential ability to shape a new world order, it is still strong enough to act as a ‘spoiler’ state within the existing order [...]”¹⁵ The current war in Ukraine is a good example of how Russia is not able to defend the title of superpower, yet still manages to poison the existing world order – not only conventionally in Ukraine, but also asymmetrically worldwide.

2.2 “*Pravoslavie*”: Russian Orthodoxy

The Orthodox Church occupies an important place in modern Russian ideology. *Pravoslavie* (from the rus. *Pravo* – “right”, i.e. a correct Christianity in contrast to the Roman Catholic branch) is one of the main mechanisms

13 See Szulecki, Kacper/Wig, Tore: The War In Ukraine Is All About Democracy Vs Dictatorship, CEU Democracy Institute, 9 April 2022.

14 Adomeit, Hannes: Russia’s Strategic Outlook and Policies: What Role for China? In: Kirchberger, Sarah/Sinjen, Svenja/Wörmer, Nils (Eds.): Russia-China Relations. Emerging Alliance or Eternal Rivals? Springer: Cham 2022, pp. 32–33.

15 Giegerich, Bastian/Terhalle, Maximilian: The Responsibility to Defend: Re-thinking Germany’s Strategic Culture. Routledge: London 2021, p. 98.

that constitute the Russian sense of exceptionalism in its foreign relations with the West since the Tsarist period. Originally, Kievan Rus' adopted Christianity from the Byzantine Empire. During the formation of the Muscovite state (15th century) and after the fall of Constantinople (1453), the name of "the capital of Orthodoxy" was unceremoniously endorsed by Moscow. Already in the 16th and 17th centuries a crucial political concept in the Kremlin was born: "Moscow is the third Rome [...]",¹⁶ which gave the growing empire a justification for its exceptional position in the region and a unique historical vocation. The Russian role as the successor to the Byzantine Orthodox Empire, though self-named, gave Moscow an ideological basis for uniting all Orthodox "brotherhood" nations into one *Pravoslavny Mir* (the Orthodox World). With its strictly hierarchical and controlling nature, the Church was supportive in justifying Moscow's absolute monarchy in the Tsarist epoch, and one may well note how nowadays Putin uses it in the same way both internally (by justifying his authoritarianism), and externally (by establishing "a natural claim" to neighboring Orthodox nations such as Ukraine and Belarus):

"[...] Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are the heirs of ancient Russia, which was the largest state in Europe. Slavic and other tribes in the vast space – from Ladoga, Novgorod, Pskov to Kiev and Chernigov – were united by one language [...]. And after the baptism of Russia – an Orthodox faith. The spiritual choice of St. Vladimir, who was both Prince of Novgorod and Grand Prince of Kiev, still largely determines our kinship."¹⁷

2.3 "Us" versus "the West"

On the path laid by the Orthodox Church, another feature of the Russian sense of exceptionalism in history and world politics emerged. The collective concept of "the West" became entrenched in the Russian vocabulary, among others, through the work of the chauvinist writer Fyodor Tyutchev

16 Klimenko, A. N.: Концепция "Москва – Третий Рим" в геополитической практике И.В. Сталина [The concept "Moscow – Third Rome" in geopolitical practice of I. V. Stalin]. In: Vestnik Moskovskogo gosudarstvennogo lingvистического университета, Vol. 24 (684), 2013, pp. 124–132.

17 Putin, Vladimir: Об историческом единстве русских и украинцев [On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians], Kremlin, 12 July 2021.

in the mid-19th century. In his treatise “Russia and the West”, the author outlines the absolute and insurmountable distinctions between Russia and the West (in this case, the European countries). According to his vindication, European countries are more materialistic and practical, while Russia is spiritual – it is chosen, guided, and protected by God. Tyutchev criticizes Catholicism, Protestantism, and revolutions; he states that there are “us” and “them”.¹⁸

This hypothesis was broadly preached and incorporated to the political thinking during the Soviet times, and, expectedly, it found a comfortable place in the mottled ideology of the new Russian Federation. In the early 2000s, the so-called “imperial romantics” gained popularity in Russia, according to whom the need to create a strong state and acquire territories is essential. Traditional values from Tsarist times such as autocracy, Orthodoxy, and the Slavic chauvinism were adopted by modern Russian ideology, not neglecting to establish a belief of fundamental distinction between “us” and “them”. The only difference is that Tyutchev’s definition of “the West” as an anti-European concept has been enhanced by an anti-American one.¹⁹

2.4 Post-Soviet Nostalgia

Putin is certainly not alone in his grief for the lost Soviet empire, but one of many more Russians who lost their economic stability and could not adapt to the rapidly changing market economy of the 1990s. For these people, it was logical to blame the West – the winner of the Cold War – since it was “the Western projects” (democracy and market economy) that replaced the socialist world. This sense of defeat was particularly bitter for the post-Soviet society, since it was precisely they who were the “nation of victors” of World War II (in Russia – the Great Patriotic War). Those who had liberated Europe from the Nazi regime now had to sit on the penalty bench of history. Today the Kremlin masterfully exploits this nostalgia and the sense of injustice in society, promising its people a historic revenge on the West. For thirty years, the narrative of the Great Patriotic

18 Tarasov, Boris: Россия и Запад в историософии Ф. И. Тютчева [Russia and The West in the Historiography of Fyodor Tyutchev]. In: *Literary Journal*, Vol. 19, 2005, pp. 41–53.

19 Letov, Oleg: Россия и Запад: проблемы русской идентичности [Russia and the West: the Problems of Russian Identity]. In: *Human Being: Image and Essence. Humanitarian Aspects*, Vol. 3–4, Issue 30–31, 2017, p. 67 ff.

War was heavily politicized, often leaving out “uncomfortable” episodes of military cooperation with the Hitler’s Germany, dramatic defeats in the Soviet-Finnish Winter War, or occupation of Baltic, Eastern and Central European states. *Pobeda* (victory), theatrically celebrated on May 9 parades, became a sacred (and solely Russian) achievement and an opportunity to demonstrate the country’s military might.

Hannes Adomeit aptly describes how in modern times the history of Russian expansion is presented in purely “heroic” and “glorious” terms:

“... there are dark sides, but in comparison with other states, especially the USA, they are of little significance. In its history Russia has always had ‘brilliant’ military victories over the invaders from the West [...]. The Great Patriotic (war, author’s note) [...] is a proof of patriotism and sacrifice of the population and the need to be always militarily equipped. [...] the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact is by no means to be devalued as morally reprehensible, but was objectively necessary – a historically justified act of reason of state. The horrors of the Soviet occupation of the Baltic States, Poland, and other territorial allocations from the Hitler-Stalin Pact in the period from September 1939 to June 1941 are ignored. The establishment of Soviet rule in these territories after 1944 is presented as liberation.”²⁰

The new Russia has never really left behind the core ideas of old Russia (be it Soviet or Tsarist) but has gradually introduced them as determining factors for its modern domestic and foreign policy. All attempts to bring about a completely new rapprochement with the West failed, long before NATO “threatened” Russia’s national security with its eastward expansion. According to Adomeit, this happened as early as 1993, when *derzhavniki*²¹ dismantled the new transatlantic approach of then-Foreign Minister Andrey Kozyrev by accusing him of making Russia a “lackey” of the United States.²² The *derzhavniki* were able to unite under their ideological umbrella Russian nationalists, chauvinists, “Eurasianists”, “neo-Slavophiles”, and

20 Adomeit, Hannes: Innenpolitische Determinanten der Putinschen Außenpolitik. In: *Sirius – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen*, Vol. 1, Issue 1, February 2017, p. 49.

21 Could also be met in the literature as *gosudarstvenniki*: representatives of state power; those in politics who advocate a powerful state that can maintain order. For more on this, see Sergunin, Alexander: *Explaining Russian Foreign Policy Behavior: Theory and Practice*. Ibidem Press: Stuttgart 2016.

22 Adomeit, *Russia’s Strategic Outlook and Policies*, 2022, p. 18.

even communists.²³ The merger of the latter meant defeat for Gennady Zyuganov, the leader of the Communist Party, in the 1996 presidential elections. To the new imperialists, the Kremlin very soon proposed a (diplomatic) project to rebuild the lost empire – with the help of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS, founded in 1991) and eventually the Eurasian Economic Union (2015). As such, Russia offered the platforms for cooperation to the former Soviet republics, which were presented as alternatives to the European Union (EU). This could be seen as one of the Kremlin's *soft power* instruments on the path to rebuilding the lost empire. However, Russian *hard power* instruments were never consigned to the bookshelves of history.

3 Russian Appeals to Historical Hegemony: Transnistria and Chechnya

Primarily, it is important to grasp the Russian understanding of its historical hegemony. Like every other empire in human history, both Tsarist and Soviet Russia never had a stable borderline – regions came and left, sometimes peacefully, but mostly as a result of military confrontations. So, which map of Russia is post-Soviet Moscow referring to when it speaks of its “natural right” to influence as a *hegemon*? In the early 1990s, the goal of the communists and revanchists was clear: to build a new Russia within the borders of the old USSR. It is often assumed that this imperialism can only be attributed to Putin, but in reality the foundation for it was already developing during the tenure of Boris Yeltsin (1991–1999).

According to what was eventually christened the Yeltsin Doctrine,²⁴ *blizhnee zarubezh'e* (Near Neighborhood) – as a consideration of the post-Soviet space – is an “exclusive” Russian sphere of influence in which Moscow demanded to be recognized by the United Nations as a “guarantor of peace and stability in the region”.²⁵ Then-Foreign Minister Andrey Kozyrev specified this area: it was “the countries of the CIS and the Baltic republics”. According to him, a withdrawal of Russian troops would mean a power vacuum and a security threat to the Russian-speaking population.

23 Adomeit, Hannes: Müssen wir Russland besser verstehen lernen? Eine kritische Auseinandersetzung mit den Argumenten für eine neue Russlandpolitik. In: Sirius – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen, Vol. 3, Issue 3, September 2019, p. 227.

24 Could also be called the “Kozyrev Doctrine”.

25 Adomeit, Putin's 'Greater Russia', 2018.

A member of the Presidential Council at the time, Andranik Migranyan, on the other hand, noted that the post-Soviet states were a temporary phenomenon and that soon they would be united in a new state.²⁶ Shortly after, the new Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov formulated the main basic political doctrine that would determine Russia's foreign and military policy for the next twenty years. According to it, Russia will not accept a unipolar U.S. world; it will seek the restoration of its superpower status and, together with China and India, resist the U.S. dominance.²⁷

The first use of military power by modern Russia took place in the Transnistrian War (1990–1992). The conflict, inherited by Yeltsin from the Soviet era, was actually the first military confrontation, the causes (or preconditions) of which underlie in the collapse of the USSR empire. It is believed that Russia initially had no geopolitical²⁸ or economic interest in the confrontation between the unrecognized Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR) and Moldova.²⁹ However, over the past thirty years, the Kremlin has poured billions of Russian rubles into the PMR's economy (accounting for over 70 percent of its budget)³⁰ and into the local "peacekeeping operation". Was this potential political and military springboard, relatively small and not densely populated, actually worth such investments? In particular, the case of Transnistria has been presented – before the eyes of the West and the UN – as a practical example of Kozyrev's warnings about the danger of a "power vacuum" in the post-Soviet space. If Russia pulls out, similar crises will emerge elsewhere. Moreover, in a sense, Transnistria became a precedent, a first appeal for the restoration of the lost empire. Finally, this experience provided a case study for the Kremlin's future engagement in its *blizhnee zarubezh'e*. Based on the Transnistrian experience, Russian expansionism would adapt and refine instruments such as the following:

26 Litera, Bohuslav: The Kozyrev Doctrine – a Russian Variation on the Monroe Doctrine. In: Perspectives, Vol. 4, 1994/95, p. 45.

27 Kainikara, Sanu: "Russia's Return To The World Stage: The Primakov Doctrine – Analysis", Eurasia Review, 5 November 2019.

28 Until the war in Ukraine, when Transnistria is now available as an additional strategic base for the Russian military if needed.

29 Adomeit, Hannes: Russia and its Near Neighborhood: Competition and Conflict with the EU, College of Europe, Natolin Research Papers, 04/2011, p. 54.

30 Puiiu, Victoria: "Can Russia Afford Transnistria?", Eurasianet, 18 February 2015.

- “Peacekeeping operation”: Russian troops are the peacemaking units, similar to the UN Blue Helmets. Russian politicians actively participate in the drafting of peace agreements (e.g. the Kozak Memorandum of 2003).³¹ Russia does not rely on pre-existing international agreements (since they are “pro-Western”), but creates its own international order and legal space;
- “Protection” of the Russian-speaking population: the use of the *lingua franca* as an argument for belonging to the *russkiy mir* (Russian world);
- Patron-client relationships with separatists:³² a *proxy* method that allows both sides to benefit;
- “Freezing” the conflict:³³ this would allow Russia to exhaust the area economically and prevent building capacity for a counterattack, as well as to delay the confrontation as long as possible to erase the causes of the conflict from public memory and prevent its active resolution from the outside.

Besides *blizhnee zarubezh'e*, one could discover such terms as *russkiy mir* (Russian world) and *bratskiye narody* (brotherly nations) in the Russian media, in official documents, or in speeches of politicians. They refer to a kind of natural, if not explicit, allegiance of neighbor nations to Moscow's authority. Though these concepts are as fluid as the potential borders of such authority. Russian hegemony is not simply the unity of Russian-speaking nations or only of Orthodox believers. As with any other empire, there is no unifying feature that marries the territories unless it is (unenforced) economic advantage,³⁴ (enforced) central power, or military efforts that yoke them. While in the case of Ukraine and Belarus the Kremlin ideologists were able to comfortably use the aforementioned factors such as Orthodoxy or *lingua franca* as unifying factors, there are no such *soft power*

31 For more on the Kozak Memorandum 2003, see: Russian Draft Memorandum on the basic principles of the state structure of a united state in Moldova (Kozak Memorandum), 17 November 2003, <http://stefanwolff.com/files/Kozak-Memorandum.pdf>, 12.11.2022.

32 For more on the concept, see Kosienkowski, Marcin: The patron-client relationship between Russia and Transnistria. In: Hoch, Tomáš/Kopeček, Vincenc (Eds.): *De Facto States in Eurasia*. Routledge: Abingdon 2019, pp. 183–207.

33 See Rác, András: *Russia's Hybrid War in Ukraine. Breaking the Enemy's Ability to Resist*, FIIA Report 43, 2015.

34 In the case of Russia and its own economic challenges, this instrument would be less effective. See Ćwiek-Karpowicz, Jarosław: *Limits to Russian Soft Power in the Post-Soviet Area*, DGAP Analysis No. 8, July 2012.

mechanisms for the predominantly Muslim, ethnically non-Slavic Caucasus region.³⁵

The First (1994–1996) and Second (1999–2009) Chechen Wars fuel a notion about the *stroptiviy Kavkaz* (stubborn Caucasus), which refers to the protracted, complex, and bloody wars of expansion waged by Tsarist Russia in the Caucasus in the early 18th to early 19th centuries.³⁶ The *vol'nye gortsy* (free peoples of the mountains)³⁷ which had been rebelling against Russian imperialism for centuries, wanted to seize the opportunity of the USSR collapse in 1991 and break away from Moscow's rule along with the other Soviet republics. The Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, however, was denied this by the Russian rulers. Yeltsin, fearing that the Chechen rebellious conduct would become a precedent for the secession of other federal districts,³⁸ responded with military might.³⁹ In doing so, the Kremlin also demonstrated to the West that it was prepared to defend Russia's "natural hegemony" militarily. The fragile peace that Yeltsin had concluded after the first Chechen war was more of an operational pause for both sides than a realistic regulation of the confrontation. When Putin took political power, he began to earn a reputation of a "ruler with a strong hand"⁴⁰ who eliminates "unrest" and creates "order". Moreover, from the Kremlin's perspective, it was the West that set Putin a strong example of "decisive and efficient military action" in 1999. NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia provided both "strong public support for the Kremlin's new war" and "a lifting of the

35 See further Hansen, Stefan: Die Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik der Republik Armenien. Komplementäre Entscheidungen in systemischer Konkurrenz zwischen Ost und West. Nomos: Baden-Baden 2021.

36 For more on the history of Russian imperialism in the Caucasus, see Jahn, Hubertus (ed.): Identities and Representations in Georgia from the 19th Century to the Present. De Gruyter/Oldenbourg: Berlin/Bonn 2021.

37 *Vol'nye gortsy* (from Rus.: free peoples of the mountains) is a term referring to the name of a Soviet newspaper in the South Caucasus and akin to the cliché that all Caucasians admire above all their freedom.

38 In March 1992, the newly formed Russian Federation was busy drafting the legal agreement between its federated states (kraj). Chechnya and Tatarstan were the only two republics that refused to sign the agreement. Tatarstan eventually signed the document on more favorable terms.

39 See Kipp, Jacob W.: Russia's Wars in Chechnya. In: The Brown Journal of World Affairs, Vol. 8, Issue 1 (Winter/Spring), 2001, p. 47.

40 Zemtsov A.O.: "Сильная Рука": Авторитарность В Политической Культуре Современных Россиян ["Strong Hand": Authoritarianism In the Political Culture Of Modern Russians]. In: Politija: Analiz. Hronika. Prognoz, Vol. 4, Issue 95, 2019.

taboo against the use of military force as an instrument for resolving ethnic problems".⁴¹

The "special military operation" in Chechnya had little in common with the frozen conflict in Transnistria, but it enriched the Russian toolbox with a new methodology and experience that will eventually be heavily used in the war against Ukraine. Among many other features, the following should be stressed here:

- Disinformation to its own population: Moscow is believed to have provided false information about the number of casualties among its soldiers;⁴²
- Morale factor: although Russian forces outnumbered Chechen guerrillas, they experienced difficulties eliminating them because of the strong morale of the resistance;⁴³
- *Carpet bombing* and *urban fighting*:⁴⁴ use of airstrikes and bombing to eliminate resistance, target civilian infrastructure, and use of terror.⁴⁵

Even though the West showed some reaction and criticized the methods of Russian forces in Chechnya, this war was still predominantly seen as an internal Russian affair, which consciously or unconsciously allowed the Kremlin to act in its "natural hegemony" according to its ambitions. The Russian military experiences of the 1990s not only created a specific toolbox that was later used in other expansionist operations. They also led to the creation of a new national security concept and military doctrine (January–April 2000). Consequently, military spending was increased, nuclear deterrence and nuclear "first use" became the main pillars of Russian security, and "the routine use of armed forces to deal with local, including intra-state, conflicts"⁴⁶ was introduced. In this context, it became clear that "local conflicts" were defined by the Kremlin's own perception of its "natural hegemony" – *blizhnee zarubezh'e* was the major case.

41 Arbatov, A. G.: The Transformation of Russian Military Doctrine: Lessons Learned from Kosovo and Chechnya, The Marshall Center Papers, No. 2, 2000, pp. 2–3.

42 Wines, Michael: "Propaganda's Return. Popular War, Russian Style", The New York Times, 27 February 2000.

43 Kramer, Mark: The Perils of Counterinsurgency: Russia's War in Chechnya. In: International Security, Vol. 29, Issue 3, 2004/2005, p. 5.

44 Myre, Greg: "Russia's wars in Chechnya offer a grim warning of what could be in Ukraine", NPR, 12 March 2022.

45 Hughes, James: Russia's Wars: Ukraine and Chechnya Compared, ZOiS Spotlight 15/2022, 20 April 2022.

46 Arbatov, The Transformation of Russian Military Doctrine, 2000, p. 26.

4 A Decade of Certainty: Putin's Ambition to Transform Russia into a Superpower

Western scholars often assume that Putin's imperialist path began in 2007 with his infamous speech at the Munich Security Conference.⁴⁷ Even though it was indeed a first public international announcement of disagreement with the post-Cold War order, preparations for the restoration of the lost empire started as soon as he took office as president. In addition to the aforementioned changes in military doctrine, Putin pushed ahead with the country's economic development and, once stability was achieved, insisted on centralizing sources of revenue for his future military ambitions. Numerous investigations by the team of the Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny illustrate how *Gazprom* amassed the country's profits from oil and gas trading and became "Putin's wallet" – both for foreign policy and for maintaining the kleptocratic regime.⁴⁸ It was precisely in these early years that the Russian president built two main rocks of his authoritarian rule: *vertikal' vlasti* (the verticality of power) and the group of *siloviki* (people of power). Hannes Adomeit explains:

“...The system he [Putin] has built has aptly been called ‘Putin System’. It is authoritarian, autocratic, and increasingly centralized [...]. Decisions of any significance in domestic and foreign policy cannot be made without participation and consent of the Kremlin's chief. That applies even more to the formation of basic foreign directions.”⁴⁹

The “military adventure” in Ukraine in 2022 gives rise to the observation that it is not only in domestic and foreign policy that the most important decisions are rubber-stamped by the Kremlin ruler. On the battlefield, too, decisions are often made according to Putin's political needs rather than operational-tactical calculus.

Putin's belief in Russia's historical hegemony has evolved, as can be seen from the rhetoric of the past two decades, from the idea of rebuilding a state within Soviet borders to the concept of the Russian Empire – a modern superpower. Especially in recent years, the Kremlin leader has increasingly lauded about Russian imperial glory, comparing himself to

47 Putin, Vladimir: Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy, Kremlin, 10 February 2007.

48 More on Alexei Navalny's investigation of Gazprom, see <https://miller.navalny.com/>.

49 Adomeit, Russia's Strategic Outlook and Policies, 2022, pp. 17–18.

Peter the Great.⁵⁰ However, his foreign policy suggests that Putin wants to restore the supremacy of the Russian Empire from the time of Alexander I (1777–1825). This was not only the height of the Russian Empire's military power, but also the height of Russian influence in Europe, when the Russian leaders were feared as the “gendarmes of Europe”.⁵¹ This elevation of Russian supremacy in Europe was secured by victory in the Napoleonic Wars. In modern times, the Russian “patriots” would expect the same gesture of gratitude from “the West” for the liberation of Europe from the Nazi occupation. During the war in Ukraine in 2022, Putin repeatedly echoed in his speeches⁵² the ideas of Russian imperialistic and chauvinistic philosopher Ivan Ilyin about the political infallibility of Russia, the idea of the “closeness” Russian people and the “fraternal unity” of neighboring Slavic nations around the Russians. Ilyin propagated a concept of post-Soviet Russia in which Ukraine (a non-existent state for him, he even put the word “Ukrainian” in quotation marks) would undeniably be a part of a new Russia.⁵³ These ideas are obviously essential determinants of Putin's foreign policy and his current expansionism in Ukraine.

The Russian neighborhood, however, clearly did not share the Kremlin's imperialist vision. When Eduard Shevardnadze, a pro-Moscow candidate for Georgian presidency, lost the 2003 election to Mikheil Saakashvili, Putin saw the danger of losing a strategically important Transcaucasia. Georgia, with its *Imperial Road* linking Russia to the Middle East, is integral to Russia's superpower status. In Putin's eyes, however, Georgia's Rose Revolution of 2003 that protested Shevardnadze's election fraud was by no means a free decision of the Georgian people, but a clear interference of “the West” (in this case, the United States) in Russia's natural hegemony.⁵⁴

Non-violent regime change through an uprising of masses is something that a KGB man, who favors hierarchy and permissiveness for the strongest,

50 Die Zeit: “Putin vergleicht sich mit Peter dem Großen”, 10 June 2022.

51 Greene, Robert: *The 33 Strategies of War*. Profile Books: London 2007, p. 424.

52 Putin, Vladimir: Подписание договоров о принятии ДНР, ЛНР, Запорожской и Херсонской областей в состав России [Signing of agreements on the admission of the DNR, LNR, Zaporozhye and Kherson regions to Russia], Kremlin, 30 September 2022.

53 Tashevsky, Sergey: “Иван Ильин. Любимый философ Путина и война” [Ivan Ilyin. Putin's Favorite Philosopher and War], Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 19 July 2022.

54 Kommersant: “Блок НАТО разошелся на блокпакеты” [NATO bloc splits into bloc packages], 7 April 2008.

does not believe in. The Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003), the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004), and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan (2005) (the so-called “color revolutions” in Russia’s 2013 foreign policy concept) were viewed by Putin as hybrid warfare by the West.⁵⁵ Nor was it in line with Putin’s belief that smaller sovereign states could (and should) decide their own foreign policy. Saakashvili’s radical democratic reforms, his fight against corruption, and his rapprochement with the EU and NATO were portrayed in Russian propaganda only as a “hostile Western hand”,⁵⁶ not as the will of the people to revamp their country. Even when Georgia’s 2008 application for NATO membership was rejected, Putin continued to see the Georgian development not only as a threat to the security of his state, but also to his system:

“To the extent that external factors influence foreign policy, it is mainly the Russian power elite’s concern that the West’s regulatory model and socio-economic attractiveness pose a threat to the legitimacy of its rule in Russia and undermine its influence in its declared sphere of interest.”⁵⁷

The Russian-Georgian war (August 2008) clearly showed what the Russian armed forces learned from the confrontations of the 1990s. The toolboxes from Transnistria (the Russian army as a “peacemaking force”, “protection” of the Russian-speaking population, freezing the conflict, etc.) and Chechnya (disinformation campaign, aerial bombing) were applied. Henceforth, Putin has understood that it is time to expand his imperial project more intensely.

To achieve this goal, the Kremlin has always been flexible in its choice of mechanisms. In the “near neighborhood”, the installation of a “puppet government” (e.g. Yanukovych in Ukraine, Lukashenka in Belarus) or economic blackmail (e.g. “gas games” in Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania) have been used. But also in Europe, over the past decade, the agenda pursued by the Kremlin has been advanced through the use of hybrid methods, e.g. financial support for radical right-wing or left-wing parties, hiring of lobbyists, cyberattacks, or disinformation campaigns. *Nord Stream 2*, for

55 Nikitina, Yulia: The “Color Revolutions” and “Arab Spring” in Russian Official Discourse. In: *Connections*, Vol. 14, Issue 1, 2014, pp. 87–104.

56 Sterovik, Mikhail: “Рука Запада или советский синдром?” [“Hand of the West” or the Soviet Syndrome?], *Deutsche Welle Russia*, 24 March 2005.

57 Adomeit, Hannes: “Altes Denken statt Neues Russland. Innenpolitische Bestimmungsfaktoren der Außenpolitik”, *Portal für Politikwissenschaft*, 26 September 2017.

example, indeed had an economic benefit for both sides, but the political perspectives were different. Even though Angela Merkel assured that it was about pure “*Verbindung durch Handel*” (connection through trade)⁵⁸ to create peace based on common interests, the development in 2022 shows that Putin actually considered this to be an economic weapon from the very beginning. He was forging the opportunity to become the second Alexander I for Europe, albeit this time with gas instead of a saber.

Similar to *Nord Stream 2*, optimism about stabilizing relations between the West and Russia was noted in the context of the 2010–2011 New START nuclear arms reduction treaty between Washington and Moscow. Russia's newly revised 2010 military doctrine actually limited the use of nuclear weapons to “critical situations for [its] national security”.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, conventional warfare remained a primary means for “local” and “regional” wars. Moreover, since the Georgian War, Russia has begun to actively modernize its armed forces, which has proven to be one of the country's most successful reforms in a decade.⁶⁰ Behind the curtain of Western enthusiasm over START, Russia reinstated a “puppet government” in Ukraine with Viktor Yanukovich and, with his help, actively reduced the Ukrainian army.⁶¹ Whether or not there was a *détente* between Russia and the West, the Kremlin undoubtedly still aimed to regain influence in its immediate neighborhood.

The Ukrainian Maidan uprising (2013–2014) was apparently perceived by the Kremlin as nothing more than the West's encroachment on Russian hegemony. For Putin, Washington “blatantly and arrogantly” deceived Russia.⁶² The Kremlin took advantage of an opportune moment (change of power in Kyiv) and a well-prepared background (weak Ukrainian army, presence of the Black Sea Fleet, propaganda, rhetoric of protection of the Russian-speaking population, etc.) and occupied Crimea within weeks. Such a triumph strengthened Putin's public support in the country, so the *siloviki* seized the opportunity and swiftly pushed ahead with the

58 Die Zeit: “Angela Merkel verteidigt den Bau von Nord Stream 2”, 18 June 2022.

59 Sokov, Nikolai: The New, 2010 Russian Military Doctrine: The Nuclear Angle, Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, James Martin Center for Non-proliferation Studies, 5 February 2010.

60 Giegerich/Terhalle, The Responsibility to Defend, 2021, p. 98.

61 Starostin, Andrii: “Давайте пошвидше роззброюватися!” [Let's disarm as soon as possible!], *Militarnyi*, 28 September 2010.

62 Burnos, Taras: “Путин о Майдане: попытка переписать историю” [Putin on the Maidan: an attempt to rewrite history], *Voice of America Ukraine*, 7 March 2018.

Novorossiia plan. According to the project's architects (headed by Patrushev, Kozak, and Surkov), the goal was to regain political influence in Ukraine and block its integration into the EU and NATO, meanwhile "on the overt level, this was done via the puppet statelets of Donetsk and Luhansk."⁶³ In this new confrontation in its immediate neighborhood, Russia again used the means and tools we have seen in previous attempts at expansion: disinformation, "protection" of the Russian-speaking population, "freezing" the conflict, cyberattacks, etc. The 2014–2021 Donbas crisis became a classic example of the hybrid warfare practice.

In the ongoing debate on the core reasons for the failure to resolve the Donbas crisis, the main arguments are fairly based on the assumption that the initiators of the Minsk agreement misunderstood Putin's beliefs, ideologies, and goals. Firstly, the Kremlin leader does not believe in the independent decision-making of a smaller sovereign state, so he wanted to "resolve the issue" between the superpowers and talk directly to the U.S. president, not Poroshenko or Zelenskyy. Secondly, for twenty years Moscow has cherished in its foreign policy and military doctrines the idea of regaining influence in the near neighborhood. Whether with hybrid or conventional warfare, this reclaim would inevitably be the case in Ukraine – regardless of any Western attempts to make peace. Thirdly, President Putin (after stabilizing the state's economy and centralizing the power), entered his own "Decade of Certainty". His main political goal was to put the Primakov foreign policy doctrine⁶⁴ into practice and to be assigned in the history books as a new Peter the Great or Alexander I.

In 2015, Putin intervened in the Syria war, where the Russian army and the notorious private paramilitary organization "Wagner Group" were able to drill conventional warfare. Step by step, Russia expanded its relations with China, even though the counterparts do not consider each other equals.⁶⁵ Putin tried to rally around his leadership the (mostly authoritarian) regimes that shared his rejection of the existing world order. In addition, the Kremlin carried out reforms in its domestic policy to take control of the Internet, get rid of the opposition, and harm the free press.

63 Shandra, Alya/Seely, Robert: *The Surkov Leaks. The Inner Workings of Russia's Hybrid War in Ukraine*, RUSI Occasional Paper, July 2019, p. 8.

64 In 2014, Russia again changed its military doctrine to more closely align with the Primakov doctrine. See Kainikara, "Russia's Return to The World Stage", 2019.

65 See Bērziņa-Čerenkova, Una Aleksandra: *Perfect Imbalance: China and Russia*. World Scientific Publishing Co: Europe 2022.

It also directed the preparation of the country's economy for war⁶⁶ and pushed through a series of constitutional amendments that secure Putin's authoritarian rule.

In 2018, Moscow unveiled a new Russian hypersonic weapon. The Russian president was clearly purposefully preparing for a large-scale war. Buoyed by the Crimea success story, "pacified" by "the weak West" and motivated to implement his imperialist goals according to Primakov's ideas, Putin launched a *blitzkrieg* in Ukraine in 2022. But the triumph of Crimea was not replicated:

"Applying Max Weber's typology of political systems, the Putin system can be classified as 'charismatic' and as such in need of constant legitimation through domestic and foreign policy victories. The annexation of Crimea was such a victory but one that may very well prove to have been exceptional."⁶⁷

Despite the tremendous losses of manpower, equipment, and reputation in the second year of the declared "three-day war" in Ukraine, Putin and his *siloviki* still hold power in the Kremlin. Hence, the constant attempts, if not to revise, then at least to disrupt the world order, will continue.

5 Conclusion

Modern Russian expansionism and imperialism are based on old ideologies and rudimentary ideas that lie on the surface of Russian history. These ideas, synthesized over the decades and taken up by various political regimes and state leaders, are a useful handbook for understanding Russia's political motives and foreign policy goals. The present Russian regime is a product of Orthodox exceptionalism, the longstanding imposition of the rivalry of "us" versus "the West", belief in the concept of the Great(er) Russia, post-Cold War revanchism, and the Soviet lasting notion that Russia is the nation of victors that liberated Europe from the Nazi regime.

As expected, these ideas coalesced and transformed over time into the main determinants of Russian foreign policy, eventually presenting themselves in several similar foreign policy and military doctrines. Since the

66 President of Russia: Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 02.07.2021 г. № 400 [Decree No. 400 of the President of the Russian Federation from 02.07.2021], Kremlin.

67 Adomeit, Putin's 'Greater Russia', 2018.

1990s, the Kremlin expressed its intention to reconquer the neighborhood states (*blizhnee zarubezh'e*), tried to confront the U.S. dominance, and wanted to destroy democratic world order. Already in the early 1990s, the Kremlin pursued the plan of “restoring historical justice” by using conventional warfare in its immediate neighborhood, Transnistria and Chechnya, to assert Moscow’s dominance. While in 2000s Russia invested in a more powerful military force for future ambitious operations, it adopted from its imperialist experience of the 1990s some primarily political and military tools that would soon be used in Georgia, Syria, and Ukraine.

Thus, the ideas and goals of Russian expansionism and imperialism, as well as the mechanisms for achieving these goals, are strongly influenced by certain patterns. Consciously or unconsciously, this has long been overlooked in the West. In dealing with Russia, political judgment has often been made based on the background of Western ideas, values, and goals, which are obviously different from those of Russia. The last three decades of relations between Russia and the West have shown that even in the highest phase of *détente*, Russia still insists on its “natural right” to a Great(er) Russia. Putin, embracing the ideas of chauvinist thinkers and deriding the right of small sovereignties to independence, pursues an agenda of restoring Russian imperial glory. But Putin’s “new” Russia as a countervailing power to the West, regardless of his personal belief in the superiority of his system, simply does not have sufficient economic, political, and as the battlefield in Ukraine has shown, also military power to keep up.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has revealed several important lessons about Putin’s Russia. Firstly, although Russia has little potential to defeat the West by conventional means, the Kremlin’s mastery of hybrid warfare as well as the use of the nuclear blackmail can still harm the modern world order. Secondly, the Russian military failures in Ukraine combined with Putin’s dangerous play with the “nuclear taboo” have severely damaged the confidence of his partners (India, China, and Iran) in an anti-West coalition under the Kremlin’s leadership. But even if Russia has already squandered its chance to lead this axis, the rivalry between authoritarian regimes and democracies has not been swept off the table. Finally, this time the West should not just see what it wants to see and not repeat the same mistake regarding Russian imperialism. Even if Putin’s regime is overthrown and replaced by a less militant leader, this will not eliminate the Russian imperialist ideas. They are rooted in the history of this country and are unlikely to disappear any time soon. Therefore, the West must already rethink and reshape post-Putin relations with Russia in order to

protect Russian neighbors from Moscow's imperialism and prevent further expansionism.

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