Ukraine’s current fight against Russian aggression carries deep historic resonances which we ignore at our peril.

Ukraine resides in what Halford Mackinder, the father of geopolitics and geostrategy, referred to more than a century ago as ‘the open spaces of southern Russia’. He described this area as a geopolitical corridor between Asia and Europe which served as a place of interactions between eastern nomads and western ‘tillers’.

Mackinder also defined Russia as the imperial power; It performed the geopolitical functions which were only natural for the biggest state in the region. In other words, the imperial order – represented by Russia in the early twentieth century – may be regarded as best suited to govern over the Eurasian plains. And one tested by history.

Contemporary Russia often confirms Mackinder’s theories about the country’s imperial ‘mission’. For, as Empress Catherine once succinctly put it, ‘I have no way to defend my borders but to extend them’. And to confirm the lineage from the old monarch, one of the most outspoken Russian geopoliticians of today, Alexander Dugin, also stresses that Russia can survive only as a centralised expansionist empire.

Russian imperial mode of existence envisages strong unquestioned leadership (with a clear predilection for autocracy), an assertive way of policymaking – designed to make people proud of their state’s power – and a belief in the superiority of Orthodox Church in explaining and justifying realities.

Russians also fervently believe that their historic experience indicated that that their country plunges into crisis as soon as the nexus between leadership, nationality and Orthodoxy is severed, as has...
happened during Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika of the 1980s, or President Boris Yeltsin's doomed attempts to re-discover Russian identity and anchor it on a different basis during the 1990s.

In turn, Ukraine may be defined as a state of a ‘non-historical’ nation. Regardless of numerous past attempts to gain independence, until 1991 none was successful. Furthermore, several semi-state formations that existed in the ‘Eastern European corridor’ earlier could not nurture the formation of the Ukrainian nation for these were often decentralised and loosely governed formations.

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Ukraine’s successes in statecraft were also modest. Even if proper statesmen emerged on the political horizon, their activities were questioned – and usually sabotaged – by competitive leaders. For instance, Ivan Mazepa’s Cossack rebellion against Russia in 1709 suffocated because parts of Cossack forces joined the armies of Peter the Great, not of king Charles XII of Sweden, Mazepa’s ally.

This was preceded by the 1658–59 Ivan Vyhovsky’s campaign against Muscovy, undermined by the Cossack attack on Crimea, which caused 40,000 allied Tatars to abandon Vyhovsky’s camp. Therefore, the existence of alternative power structures and power holders in Ukraine today – be they revolutionary street chieftains, grassroots commanders of voluntary battalions or the embedded oligarchy – are nothing new for Ukraine, where the fragmentation of power has always been the regional geopolitical modus operandi.

There is also nothing unusual in the instinct of Ukrainian nationals to behave differently from how Russian leaders would expect them to. While Russian President Vladimir Putin made a great deal of his intention to ‘defend compatriots abroad’, a large number of Russian-speaking Ukrainians – regarded by Putin and by many Russians as compatriots – joined voluntary battalions to fight against Moscow’s proxy trouble-makers in Ukraine’s Donbas region.

This may seem odd, given Russia’s imperial tradition of governance and nationality, but is in line with Ukraine’s indigenous geopolitical settings. The change of allegiances and affiliations has never been an unnatural deviation in the ‘dynamic’ corridor between Europe and Asia.

Contemporary Russia is stamping its boots over Ukraine as well as over the broader post-communist space primarily because it continues to treat the region as a ‘zone of its privileged interests’. Second, Russia lashes out because it feels ‘threatened’, and that feeling, in turn is due to the lack of attractiveness of its ‘centralised’ political tradition among the post-communist states.

Third, Moscow feels ‘offended’ by the attraction of Western-led cooperative structures for the post-communist states, which are perceived in the Kremlin as a jeopardy to what Russia sees as the post-Cold War balance. In addition, Russian leaders have accumulated enough resources to feel confident enough to pursue expansionist policies.

Finally, Russia reproduces geopolitical patterns which brought it to historical power and glory, and believes that these patterns also reinforce its domestic integrity.

If the Western actors stand strong with Ukraine, and Russia faces defeat in its Donbas and Crimean campaigns, this will likely trigger political turmoil within Russia. In other words, if the link between leadership, nationality and Orthodoxy is undermined, a crisis of governance will likely follow, with unpredictable outcome. The stakes in Ukraine are, therefore, high for Russia itself.

It is also important to note that Russia cannot fully democratise; the degree of democratisation is limited by the presumption of superiority of a leader who stands above the law and whose position in a political hierarchy should never be challenged.
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By comparison – and using the same historic perspective – Ukraine is democratic ‘by default’. However, this is a very immature and unrefined kind of democracy which evolved in the Eastern European corridor only. It is ‘chaotic’, with numerous authorities and poles of power competing, and this competition has historically led to two major outcomes.

Primarily, semi-states and nations from this corridor usually fell under the assault of more centralised aggressors, so these are political societies under siege. But, when conquered by Russia, these states amount to the core of instability for the central government in Moscow. Instability is, therefore, built into such a society, regardless of what overarching political system is created.

Western actors should be aware of this peculiarity of Ukrainian democracy. Above all, the West should invest into sustaining Ukrainian elites – recognising all their diversity – so that they learn how to reach a consensus.

The West should not, therefore, ‘export’ democracy to Ukraine, but ‘refine’ its indigenous version through working with elites. Without advanced and consensus-based policymaking, Ukraine will likely fall back into the Russian geopolitical orbit.

And Russia’s political orbit cannot free itself from its imperial thinking.

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Banner image: Vladimir Putin addresses a concert in Sevastopol celebrating the first anniversary of Crimea and Sevastopol’s annexation by Russia. Courtesy of the Office of the President of Russia

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