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[Home](#) > [2022](#) > [January](#) > [31](#) >

[Russia's neo-imperial powerplay in Ukraine: The factors of identity and interests](#)

Russia's neo-imperial powerplay in Ukraine: The factors of identity and interests

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Politics



I argue that Russian military aggression and diplomatic pressure against Ukraine stems from the neo-imperial thinking of Russian elites and ordinary citizens. This thinking requires a reproduction of expansionist patterns that once led Russia to its “historical greatness”: construction of a territorially large state, rich in resources and demographically

diverse, with its own distinct voice in international relations. The human cost for “making Russia forever great,” however, has rarely been seriously considered.

Russia as (neo-)empire

The most productive way to understand contemporary Russian *neo-imperialism* is probably to contrast it with *traditional imperialism*. My preferred definition of the latter entails *a state's unilateral desire to project its models of governance, values, and culture onto foreign lands under a pretext that looks plausible to the elites and citizens of that state.*

The pursuit of imperialist goals was not an uncommon practice in the past. As we know, for example, Western European states expanded their colonial reach to Latin America, Asia, and Africa. They portrayed themselves as philanthropists who “brought civilization” to the “underdeveloped” aboriginal communities—like Prometheus who gave fire to people in need. This “civilizing initiative” usually took various forms: propagation of the Christian religion, the dissemination of new technology, and/or promotion of the principles of post-Enlightenment humanism. Later, by the mid-20th century Western European states acknowledged that their Promethean activities had brutally distorted aboriginal cultures and lifeways.^[1] Thus, the citizens and elites of these formerly imperial states declared imperialism to be a policy of evil-doing—the process of decolonization started.

Russian imperialism, on the other hand, has never been properly regarded as destructive or shameful. The pace and breadth of expansion of the Tsardom of Muscovy (that evolved into the Russian Empire under Peter I) into Asia were astounding. East of the Urals there existed many indigenous territories that the authorities in Moscow perceived as “poorly administered” and “isolated.” This perception encouraged aggressive steps to fill the imaginary “power vacuum” with centralized governance. According to Colin Gray, every single year from the mid-16th and to the late 17th century Muscovy/Russia aggrandized itself by the land equivalent of the modern territory of the Netherlands.^[2] These 150 years of almost uninterrupted expansion, including the destruction of indigenous and local cultures have never been reckoned with; no remorse has followed to match that of the former empires in Western Europe. Alexander Morrison notes that migration to new lands and frontiers has always been praised in Russian history, while the negative impact of settler colonialism is fiercely contested.^[3] As a result, contemporary Russian elites—and the citizens who legitimize these elites through voting—preserve an outward-looking, assertive worldview. They are inclined, therefore, to reproduce the expansionist patterns that had formerly led Russia to its “greatness.”

Unlike classical imperialism, which invented honourable justifications for ruthless expansion, Russian neo-imperialism can be said to be milder and more cautious. President Putin and his circle aim to erect a “soft empire” by aggregating the post-Communist republics, as Edward Lucas put it a few years ago.^[4] In other words, the Kremlin strives to influence the governments of these republics to make them more Russia-orientated and/or Russia-obligated instead of physically taking over the land that it deems appealing. To achieve these objectives, new tactics are being used, including *media brainwashing*, *cyber-breaches*, *election manipulation*, *religious indoctrination*, *UN veto power*, “*green man*” *interventions*, and many others. Citing former secretary of Ukraine’s National Security and Defence Council and finance minister Oleksandr Danylyuk, Russian objectives entail in “the establishment of pro-Russian regimes in satellite countries, followed by the violent suppression of attempts to change political course, both at the level of the population and at the level of elites. Relying on the threat of military force, Russia is actively using election fraud, coups, and even revolutions to maintain control in such countries.”^[5]

Another distinctive feature of Russian neo-imperialist thinking resides in the Kremlin’s very specific framing of its foreign policy objectives. In its statements the Kremlin emphasizes Russian national interests and spheres of influence instead of recognizing and respecting the sovereign choices of neighbouring states and their right to national self-identification. This can be seen in the constant demands by Putin and his circle that NATO stop its enlargement—which it naturally perceives, given its own proclivities, as an increase of America’s “sphere of influence.” The self-evident argument that states themselves apply to join NATO, not that NATO seeks to expand itself, seems to fall on deaf ears. The truth is, furthermore, that NATO can hardly be defined as a catch-all and open-to-everybody organization; it is quite a challenge for any sovereign state to join NATO, requiring much political and social dedication, deliberation, and sacrifices.

Similar observations can be made about the Kremlin’s protests in 2014 against Ukraine becoming an Associate Member of the European Union—again, it was objecting to the perceived increase of the EU’s “sphere of influence.” In the direct aftermath of the *Euromaidan*, Russia demanded the renegotiation of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement—a bilateral deal between Ukraine and the EU—to accommodate *its* interests, i.e., the interests of *a third party*. Finally, there is the whole *Russkii Mir* (Russian World) concept, a unilateral attempt to expand the Kremlin’s sphere of influence to all territories where “Russian [serves] as the language of international relations and Russian culture as the shrine of uniform values.”^[6]

In fact, many scholars have described the neo-imperial thinking of Russian elites and citizens, but under different guises. Alena Ledeneva presents it as an external dimension to Putin's *sistema*,^[7] Igor Gretskiy formulated an original "Lukianov Doctrine" that *a priori* limits the sovereignty of Russia's neighbouring states,^[8] and Angela Stent recently introduced the "Putin Doctrine": "The core element...is getting the West to treat Russia as if it were the Soviet Union, a power to be respected and feared, with special rights in its neighborhood and a voice in every serious international matter. The doctrine holds that only a few states should have this kind of authority, along with complete sovereignty, and that others must bow to their wishes...And the doctrine is tied together by Putin's overarching aim: reversing the consequences of the Soviet collapse, splitting the transatlantic alliance, and renegotiating the geographic settlement that ended the Cold War."^[9]

Rather than attributing any doctrinal approach to Putin himself, I prefer to label contemporary Russian foreign policy as *neo-imperial* for two reasons. Firstly, it repeats Russia's historical tradition of expansion, one that proved successful in the past and led to the state's "greatness." Secondly, it has little to do with the figure of Putin, who merely became the latest of many imperial-type leaders coordinating Russian expansion. In other words, Putin "filled the shoes" of the tradition, found that these shoes fit Russia's current ambitions... and he seems to like walking in them.

Putin's justification for Russian neo-imperialism

On 18 March 2014, on the eve of the Russian invasion in the Donbas, Putin delivered a pivotal address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation.^[10] This address entered the history books as the "Crimean speech" and unveiled some of the cornerstones of the Kremlin's neo-imperialist thinking about the world and Ukraine.

Primarily, Putin declared that the US and its allies had undermined the international order and preferred to follow the "rule of the gun" instead of the rule of law. Russia felt humiliated and robbed every time the US ran amok, especially in Central and Eastern Europe. That was not to be tolerated.

Secondly, Russian interests had been systematically ignored since the downfall of the USSR. Putin believed that Western leaders were constantly cheating him with their objectives and actions (i.e., NATO enlargement, EU's enlargement, EU's Eastern Partnerships, and other developments).^[11] Moreover, they were continuing to pursue

“containment” policies regarding Russia and attempting, as Putin defined it, “to sweep us into a corner because we have an independent position.”

Thirdly, Putin underlined that no one should underestimate Russia’s resolve to take decisive actions: “Russia is an independent, active participant in international affairs; like other countries, it has its own national interests that need to be taken into account and respected.”

Fourthly, the downfall of the USSR was yet again portrayed by Putin as the major geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century. Because of that downfall, the world became US-led and, thus, unstable and imbalanced.

Finally, Putin blamed international institutions and organizations for the failure to ensure global security and order. He considered them to be mere tools and agents under the command of Western states.

On top of this, Putin presented the recent revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe—especially the *Euromaidan*—as being Western-initiated and Western-orchestrated.^[12] He alleged that these revolutions brought harm to citizens of the targeted states, especially the Russian minorities. Furthermore, he alleged, the new post-revolutionary order disregarded established lifestyles, traditions, and cultures. Thus, Putin condemned these revolutions as being artificial and propelling illegitimate elites to power. Concerning Ukraine, he stated that the forces behind the *Euromaidan* “resorted to terror, murder, and riots. Nationalists, neo-Nazis, Russophobes, and anti-Semites executed this coup.” In light of these circumstances, Russia was presented as the only actor capable of “restoring the natural order of things” (which was one of the declared reasons for the annexation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea within Ukraine).

Propagating the idea of a treacherous West and a malicious Ukraine, in the eyes of the Russians Putin strove to portray himself and his circle as do-gooders. He also declared that it was Russia’s task and national interest to serve as a safeguard against political destabilization—often Western-orchestrated—in states adjacent to Russia and its allies. Among other things, this solicitude anticipated the protection of Russian citizens and Russian-speaking minorities against prosecution or oppression by any hostile actors, including foreign governments. Decisions regarding “engagement in defensive operations,” according to the Constitution and Military Doctrines of the Russian Federation, deferred to the President.^[13]

Assessing the recent rhetoric of Russian authorities, as well as the flaws in Western analysis of said rhetoric, Aliaksei Kazharski concluded that Putin's statements are emanating from "a decaying authoritarian regime that constructs international threats ('securitises') for its own domestic political purposes, following its own logic of regime survival."^[14] Many of Putin's statements are designed to manipulate emotions and distract citizens from a range of failures of the Russian government, especially in foreign and economic policy. His statements should not be taken literally at all, not as official positions nor scheduled courses of action. This said, targeting Ukraine not only helps to preserve Putin's regime but also strengthens Russian imperial identity.

"Putin's paradox" and Russian foreign policy

In 1997 Zbigniew Brzezinski concluded that Ukraine would soon re-discover itself as a Central European state and drift towards the West: "As the EU and NATO expand, Ukraine will eventually be in the position to choose whether it wishes to be part of either organization. It is likely that in order to reinforce its separate status, Ukraine will wish to join both, once they border upon it and once its own internal transformations begin to qualify it for membership."^[15] Brzezinski believed that such a drift would allow Ukraine to develop its genuine democratic identity. However, he also warned against conflict between the Ukrainians and Russians as the two nations were reconstructing their identities: "Russia cannot be in Europe without Ukraine also being in Europe, whereas Ukraine can be in Europe without Russia being in Europe."^[16] The different paths of identity (re)construction, as well as the obliviousness of Putin and his circle to them, are what continues to nurture Russian resentment of Ukraine.

Current Russian leadership perceives Ukrainians and Russians as the same nation,^[17] even though recent political developments—in line with Brzezinski's predictions—epitomize many differences. I call this discrepancy in the Kremlin's thinking "Putin's paradox." According to the logic of Putin and his circle, the citizens of Ukraine—like the Russians—should respect a tough "imperial" authority and bow down to it. This means that the *Euromaidan* as well as other revolutions and protests since 1989 could not happen without profound coordination and strong leadership. The only power capable of securing such prerequisites, according to Putin, was the West. Therefore, the latest Ukrainian revolution could only have been Western-orchestrated.

Through extrapolating the principles of Russian national identity onto Ukraine, Putin fails to consider the radical assumption that *the power of political self-organization of Ukrainians may be higher than that of Russians*. One consequence of this would be the regular

democratic replacement of the authorities. Thus, Putin simply cannot accept—or does not want to show he accepts—that Ukrainians, while representing the “same nation” as Russians, can follow different behavioural patterns. He also *cannot agree* that Ukrainians and Russians represent different nations, as this contradicts Russia’s major contemporary narratives and may trigger a *crisis of Russian national identity*. What he does instead, then, is continuously reiterate that *Ukraine became a victim of Russophobic political extremists in the West*; its rule is temporary and should be regarded as unnatural, artificial, and illegitimate.

Contemporary Russian policy towards Ukraine may be regarded as an attempt to ensure geopolitical “justice” as Russia unilaterally sees it. Post–Cold War history has revealed that Western values found fertile soil in Ukraine. The painful and uneven but gradual and conscious process of transition started in the 1990s. Thus, it is incorrect to claim, as the Kremlin does, that the West “intervened” and “enforced” liberal democracy among millions of Ukrainians through a series of revolutions and a network of international institutions. On the contrary, the citizens of Ukraine decided to switch to liberal democracy by themselves—as can be seen in the growing support for NATO and EU memberships. What this means is that in Ukraine, the *vozhd*-centred model of governance lost out to its Western alternative.

As a state that favours neo-imperial thinking, Russia could not accept defeat. Moreover, the accelerating transition in post-*Euromaidan* Ukraine appeared for many in the Kremlin as an insult added to the injury of “the biggest catastrophe of the twentieth century.” Therefore, losing the competition but not wanting to lose, Russia started to “forcefully export” its model of governance through the annexation of Crimea, intervention in the Donbas, covert operations in Ukraine’s mainland, saber-rattling at the borders, and blackmailing Kyiv’s allies. This is regarded in the Kremlin as the best way to deal with “Western-seduced” Ukraine before it becomes irreversibly Westernized. Apart from this, conflicts and tensions in Ukraine serve as a message to all post-Communist states that their security and prosperity depend on the extent of their attachment to Russia.

To conclude, regaining geopolitical influence and unilaterally reviving the close ties with Ukraine that were lost after the collapse of the USSR are treated by the Kremlin as a “right” and a “just” thing to do. Through conducting *neo-imperial policies*, Russia strengthens its national integrity, its leaders satisfy their personal ambitions, the Russian feeling of security is bolstered, Russia’s self-proclaimed sphere of influence gets solidified, and presumably the Russian model of governance becomes reconfirmed as functional in the contemporary world. From this perspective, the political preferences and national

interests of people living in Ukraine and other post-Communist states are of minor importance, should be belittled, and obviously must ultimately be defeated.

That said, if things progress as they are going, it is only a matter of time before Ukraine leaves the Russian sphere of influence for good. With every new day Ukraine's national identity is becoming more distinct and confident, though it comes at a heavy price (i.e., the Kremlin's military aggression and diplomatic pressure). When the final breakaway happens *and* Russia lowers its arms, one should expect a major crisis in its neo-imperial thinking and culture of leadership. A contemporary version of the Time of Troubles (*smuta*) may loom then.

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Politics