

Russia's invasion of Ukraine made obvious what some people thought but was not widely acknowledged, at least in the West: Russia has not given up on its lost empire and this is a major problem, firstly for its former imperial subjects, for a wider world, and ultimately for Russia itself.

There is no longer a need to argue that this is the case. Neither is the objective of this paper to yet again condemn Russia for its blatant violation of international law and the barbarous methods it uses against the people of Ukraine. I fully share this legal and moral assessment, but here I want to ask the following question: What makes Russia different from other former empires that have long given up on their imperial identities and past colonial possessions?

Asking this question naturally sets me on a collision course with the growing body of literature on neo- or post-colonial theory largely inspired by a seminal book by Edward Said (Said 2003 [1978]). The main among them is that the liberation of colonies under the rule of western empires (British, French, and others), mostly completed in the 1960s, did not end western imperialism, but only transformed it into new, more subtle forms. Hence, the world of former western colonies (also referred to as “the Third World”, “the developing world”, “the Global South”, etc) continues to be a victim of western domination in one way or another.

However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as well as reactions to it in different parts of the world underscored a glaring contrast between the Russian and western attitudes to the idea of the empire. This invasion clearly looks like an old-fashioned attempt to conquer and annex the territory of a neighboring state, something that is associated with the concepts of “imperialism” or colonialism in a traditional sense¹ (Snyder 2022). The actual invasion was preceded by open and emphatic expressions of nostalgia for the lost empire, most famously in Vladimir Putin's 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference (Putin 2007). This attitude is believed to be shared by a large part of the Russian population. The invasion, while unexpected, was a logical next step in a pattern of Russia's military invasions followed by formal or informal annexations (Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014).

The West, on the other hand, has not only forsaken its political control over former colonies but turned the very word colonialism into a derogatory one, making its imperial past into something that must be condemned and repented. The fact that mentioned post-colonial theories now constitute a dominant approach in leading western universities may be considered yet another expression of the West's collective repentance over its sins of imperialism.

This contrast, however, is accompanied by a striking paradox. While waging a colonial war, the Russian president and his propaganda machine consistently present his war against Ukraine as an episode in a fight against western imperial domination (Putin 2022; Kirillova 2022; Belafatti 2022; Dickinson 2022). This spin is obviously based on tenets of the mentioned neo/postcolonial theory. One can legitimately deride this as a bizarre and especially hypocritical example of shameless propaganda; however, there is more to it. Putin's narrative appears to work for the public opinion in the former

¹ There is an interesting gap between the usage of the two words: empire/imperialism and colony/colonialism. The latter is almost exclusively (exceptions are very rare) used in a pejorative sense, while empire/imperialism may sometimes be used as a neutral term, while some authors even dare to speak about certain advantages of the imperial order over that of nation-states (Burbank and Cooper, 2010; Ferguson, 2002; Kumar 2017; West 2020). However, even Niall Ferguson who not only stresses some positive sides of the western (especially British) imperial record but also urges the United States to openly embrace its imperial role and use methods borrowed from the traditional imperial repertoire more openly, concedes that this is unlikely to happen because the very idea of empire contradicts values and attitudes prevalent in the US and other democracies (Ferguson 2005).

western colonies which are at least reluctant to condemn the Russian aggression, as well as for the part of far-left and far-right in the West (Mills 2022; Al-Jazeera 2022; Dutkiewicz and Stecuła, 2022).

I take it for a fact that the western democratic world has undergone a genuine and fundamental transformation in its attitudes towards imperialist/colonialist principles, while Russia failed to do so. Moreover, it resents the very anticolonialist attitude of the West, the norms and rules prohibiting the traditional policies of conquests and annexations, as its imperial imposition.

Motives and countermotives for imperialism

In dealing with this paradox, I will not start by analyzing the motives of the Russian political elite or the deep mysteries of the Russian soul. I will start by asking a question: why did western powers eventually reconcile to their loss? This, I believe, should be preceded by a broader question: What urged past empires to strive for aggrandizement through conquest in the first place? This would prepare us to make sense of the West eventually abandoning those policies.

Based on the vast literature on imperialism (Doyle 1986; Pagden 1995; Burbank and Cooper 2010; Kumar 2017) I would put forward three main motives of the imperial conquest: security, enrichment, and prestige. The first one is the most obvious and corresponds to the precepts of classical Realist vision. In the Hobbesian jungle of international relations, where conquest constituted the “normal” behavior of states, only large and strong players could survive: a failure to conquer others implied a threat of being conquered by them. Moreover, having vast territories with numerous subjects allowed for mustering larger armies, which was the only way to make a country genuinely competitive.

Conquest could also be a way of enrichment. This could imply looting by victorious armies, exploiting populations and natural resources of subject peoples, or using colonies as markets for domestic products. This factor, most famously put forward by J.A. Hobson (Hobson 1902), was, for obvious reasons, championed by Marxist commentators.

Last but not least, there is a factor of prestige or glory. As prominent German philosopher Hegel said, strife for recognition is the main immediate driver of history; conquering and annexing territory was the most glorious thing a political leader could do. This is also an excellent way to mobilize domestic support – as Machiavelli had suggested, and Vladimir Putin knows very well indeed. Apparently, not only princes, but their subjects also like being associated with the glory of their nations.

The combination of these three factors is sufficient to explain why for millennia, imperialism was the “normal” mode of behavior and was taken for granted; the grand narrative of world history was centered on the rise, decline, and fall of great empires. But in the 20th century, it all changed. Why?

One of the most important features of the modern era, especially the 19th and 20th centuries, is a huge development gap that (for whatever reasons) emerged between the West and other parts of the world. This corresponded to the fact that the global political system was based on the imperial domination of several western countries over the rest of the world. Moreover, the west pioneered a new kind of imperialism: while traditional empires were continental or contiguous (like Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, or Russian), western domination was mostly associated with overseas empires (Abernethy, 2000).

Hence, explaining the end of the imperial era should be narrowed down to the question: why did western empires give up on their imperial domination? Did the aforementioned motives stop

working for them? Let's start with the core issue, that of security. By the 20th century, it became obvious that possession of overseas colonies did not guarantee the security of metropolitan states within Europe. For instance, the colonies-rich France was militarily considerably weaker than colonies-poor Germany. It would be hard to argue that control over Congo or Indonesia strengthened the security of Belgium or the Netherlands respectively. This logic even extended to the old-fashioned continental empires: The huge Ottoman empire became a Sick Man of Europe; arguably, structural vulnerabilities of the Austro-Hungarian Empire triggered WW1. The outcomes of both world wars drove this point home; the first of them led to the break-up of contiguous empires within Europe, save for the Russian empire recreated under the auspices of proletarian internationalism. As colonial possessions did not enhance states' security, a new architecture of international security had to be created, embodied in institutions such as the League of Nations, the UN, NATO, the European Union, and others. However may one evaluate the success or failure of these organizations, all of them explicitly rejected the imperial principle.

As to the economic factor, its importance for imperial conquests had been exaggerated to start with. It may be difficult to calculate an exact balance sheet for the imperial conquest, but it is obvious that for most cases – if one excludes territories rich for oil or other mineral resources, expenses needed to create and maintain colonies were not cost-effective (Burbank and Cooper 2010, 311; Gat 2010, 52). However, even directly extracting natural resources from colonial possessions did not guarantee successful economic development. The example of the Spanish empire may be the most striking: in the long run, a capacity to extricate gold and silver from its South American possession not only failed to make the metropole richer as compared to other European powers but may have contributed to its eventual decline. This and other cases illustrated a general truth that it were proper political and economic institutions rather than control over natural resources that determined the “wealth of nations” (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012).

This allows us to presume that, by the early 20th century, prestige or national glory was left as the principal motive for imperial aggrandizement. Considerations of security and enrichment could be still invoked, but rather as rationalizations. This form may be called imperial nationalism (Smith 1979, 9-10): empire became primarily a symbol of national greatness.

Hypothetically, even if we exclude security and economic considerations, national glory can still be strong enough motive to inspire strife for colonial possessions. However, a new powerful factor emerged that delivered the final death blow to the legitimacy of the imperial principle in the West. This was liberal democracy and the influence of the rising international hegemon, the United States.

Reconstructions of History

ისტორიის რეკონსტრუქციები

Liberal Democracy vs Imperialism

It is hardly arguable that the core principles of liberal democracy contradict those of imperialism. According to the former, the government must be acceptable and accountable to its subjects who are now called citizens. By definition, an empire cannot satisfy this condition: It is created by conquest and maintained through coercion.

However evident this might be on the level of theory, European democracies such as Great Britain, France, the Netherlands, and others maintained their overseas colonial possessions until the mid-20th century. In doing this, they exercised a double standard: an accountable government at home,

and coercive rule – overseas. This needed to be rationalized and explained. Racism or claimed cultural superiority performed that function; hence, new legitimating formulas like *white man's burden* or *mission civilatrice*. These theories implied that some societies are not mature enough to exercise self-government, and have no genuine understanding of rule of law and human rights; enlightened Europeans, apart from their self-interest or considerations of national prestige, have a moral obligation to impose benefits of progressive civilization on backward peoples, even against the latter's will.

This theory had an important kernel of truth: the development gap was real, and it implied not only grossly different levels of economic well-being but also those of institutions of governance. Western imperial masters, while exercising repression and demonstrating racist and culturally arrogant attitudes that we find deplorable today, did at the same time contribute to modernizing their colonial subjects, hence at least partly narrowing the said development gap. To be sure, one can imagine the same nations being more successful in closing the mentioned gap without colonial supervision, but whether that would have been the case, we will never know.

Most importantly, the *mission civilatrice* also worked in ways that were unanticipated by the European imperialists, though these outcomes look quite logical in hindsight. The empires created new local elites that, among other things, learned European ideas of democracy and self-determination that set them on a collision course with their imperial masters. Unlike capitalism, European imperialism did produce its own gravedigger, which was colonial nationalism. It became increasingly difficult for the Europeans to counter appeals to values that they themselves had taught their subjects.

It was also extremely important that starting from the aftermath of the WW1, the United States increasingly became the leading power on the international scene. For this country that had historically emerged from an anti-imperial rebellion, liberal democracy was a national creed, a civil religion. For the US, unlike its European partners, the imperial principle was morally unacceptable. It was America's idealistic president, Woodrow Wilson who imposed on other victorious powers of the Great War a principle of national self-determination that was directly inimical to that of empire (MacMillan 2002). Initially, this principle was only applied to European nations, but this prepared ground for the eventual delegitimizing of the overseas colonial empires as well.

After WW2, the imperial authorities gradually transferred power to local elites in their overseas possessions, in some cases following long fights, in others even without that. There were a number of reasons for that – the American influence, indigenous insurgencies often supported by the Soviet Union, scarcity of economic and military resources necessary to maintain imperial control. However, it was also true that the glaring contradiction between coercive colonial control and liberal democratic values now fully dominant in western Europe could not be maintained indefinitely. It is no coincidence that as soon as the last western European dictatorships of Spain and Portugal were replaced by democracies, their colonies were swiftly granted independence as well.

As said, critics espousing different versions of the neo/postcolonial theory question the very fact of the western powers having forsaken their control over their colonies. The United States, the very country whose rise I considered conducive to the process of decolonization, is often considered a new global “informal empire” (Ludden 2004) that dominates weaker countries through different methods, sometimes in cooperation with its other western partners. It is this perceived hypocrisy of the post-imperial West that the Russian leadership repeatedly refers to for justifying its endeavors like the invasion of Ukraine.

Indeed, some practices used by the US or collectively “the West” may be similar to policy repertoires of erstwhile empires, especially when it comes to dealing with international crises. This includes occasional military invasions against “rogue regimes”, among which those in Afghanistan and Iraq were most important (Hardt and Negri, 2000; Ferguson 2005).

The ultimate reason for that is that the development gap (including that concerning institutional development) and asymmetry of power are still there, and one cannot expect them to go away any time soon. This means that stronger countries will always wield disproportionate influence on weaker ones, while the latter will seek the protection of the former. Moreover, in an anarchic international system, there is a real need for maintaining some modicum of order. International organizations like the UN where the most powerful and the tiniest states have one vote each, or its Security Council which can act only if consensus between major powers is achieved, cannot possibly be effective enforcers of such order. The most powerful international actors such as the US or collectively the West are expected to and have a natural interest to take steps to ensure that some rules are observed and things don’t go out of control. The very fact that they have superior resources and capacities imposes an obligation on them to act. As soon as a serious political and/or humanitarian crisis emerges in some part of the world, questions are immediately asked: Where is America? Where is the West? They are damned both ways: accused of “imperialism” when they act or chastised for selfishness and callousness when they don’t.

This doesn’t in any way suggest that western powers cannot be legitimately criticized for their specific actions and policies of the postcolonial era. While they claim to base their political choices on values and norms such as the protection of democracy and human rights, they continue to be self-interested actors pursuing their own political and economic interests. There is always a trade-off between interests and values that inevitably leads to accusations of double standards. Moreover, democratic governments have to take into account their domestic public opinion which may be fickle and inconsistent. While it is recognized that the case for the so-called “humanitarian interventions”, that is violations of national sovereignty for the prevention of massive violations of human rights, shall be extremely strong, and such interventions can only be made in exceptional cases, any decisions (including those of *not* intervening) are bound to be controversial.

However, even if we call the actions of western powers “imperial” in some sense, differences from traditional empires far outweigh the similarities. Objectives of conquest and annexation are no longer deemed acceptable and not less importantly, they are fully and completely rejected by the civil societies of these countries. Foreign interventions tend to be unpopular (or quickly become unpopular) within domestic societies as a result of which democratic governments are often pressured to avoid or terminate them even if strategic considerations may suggest otherwise. Nostalgia for lost empires is absent from the political discourse of former empires, be it the UK, France, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, Belgium, Austria, or Turkey.

Western response to the Russian aggression in Ukraine is an important indicator. Against many expectations, a strong moral consensus has been created around an anti-colonial cause. Western societies are ready to accept sacrifices (though limited ones) to support that cause. This creates a paradoxical contrast with societies of those countries where the sense of being victimized by past colonial experiences and alleged “neocolonial” injustices constitute an important part of their political discourse, but are at least equivocal concerning assessing the Russian colonial endeavor.

The delegitimization of imperialism and the Russian case

To sum up, leading European states could reconcile themselves to the loss of their colonial possessions for three main reasons: (1) the West succeeded in creating a new security architecture that was successful enough to make empires redundant; (2) it became too obvious that empires were wasteful from an economic point of view; (3) being incompatible with liberal democracy deprived the empire as a form of the political order of its legitimacy.

What about considerations of international prestige (or status, reputation, pride, etc)? It continues to be an important driver of the behavior of countries, even if often underestimated in the international relations theory (Etzioni 1962; Wood 2013). Countries may pursue prestige even if this does not translate into sizeable gains in the areas of security or economics.

One may say that western states (including their political classes and civil societies) became rational enough actors so that security and economic considerations, as well as a new understanding of political legitimacy based on liberal democratic norms, beat irrational factors like prestige or status. However, I believe that prestige is still important and that giving up on their statuses of great empires was not an altogether welcome development for western European powers even if security or economic considerations suggested otherwise. However, this blow to their prestige was at least cushioned, or adequately enough compensated, by the fact that they were still rich in resources of international prestige that later came to be also denominated as “soft power”. Giving up on the domination of vast territories and populations might have demoted them to the traditional hard-power-based hierarchies but this was compensated by the “soft power”. For most of the rest of the world, post-imperial western European countries were still models of development, objects of envy, and destinations of migration due to their level of economic well-being, stability, and orderliness of their political systems and public spaces, high level of protection of human rights, cultural achievements, etc. They have also been expected to, and have been exporting these public goods to less fortunate parts of the world through various programs of development aid and democracy assistance. These programs are often criticized for their limited efficiency; however, whatever the neo/postcolonial theorists may have to say, as a rule, the former colonies believe that can derive important benefits from their relationships with former metropolises, or with the West in general as represented by different organizations.

The European Union as one of those organizations, despite its multiple problems, also became another source of such soft power: participant nations, or at least their elites, tend to believe that they participate in the most progressive political project of the contemporary world that may (and should) become the model for the rest of humanity. They also hope that by bringing their resources together, nations who used to possess global empires may compensate for the demotion of their international status caused by the rise of the United States, and later also Russia and China.

The main point on which Russia differs from former western empires is that it is lacking in these compensatory mechanisms. This is the chief source of *ressentiment* on which its new imperialism is built. As a result of the break-up of its empire, Russia, arguably, did not lose in security or economic resources. However, it did lose on account of its status, and this loss was truly dramatic. It used to be one pole in the bipolar international security system; given that, it didn't matter that its people lived much worse than people in western countries, at least until it became clear that economic underdevelopment constrained Russia's capacity to effectively participate in the arms race with the US. But

since the end of the Cold War, it was swiftly relegated to the category of economically and institutionally underdeveloped nations. The Communist ideology, whatever its real merits, allowed for at least maintaining an illusion that its political system was more progressive than that of the West; for at least part of humanity, Russia was the beacon of this imagined bright future. Having rejected this ideology, it also gave up on the main source of soft power it could dispose of. By embracing the normative framework of capitalism and (at least initially) democracy, it settled for a role of a humble disciple to former opponents. Moreover, on this account, it lagged not only traditionally powerful western countries but even its former satellites and subjects, like Baltic states: they were much better students in the class. It might still maintain some development advantage as compared to its other former colonial subjects, but even those could now directly learn the basics of democracy of market economy from the internationally renowned teachers and did not need Russia for that: there is nothing anybody can learn from Russia anymore.

This is the real substance of the geopolitical catastrophe that exists in Putin's (and party in general Russian) mind. Russia lost its status and, with it, a large portion of its self-esteem. Nations, large or small, must have something to be proud of, and to respect themselves for; Russia had difficulty finding such a thing. Hence the feeling of *ressentiment* that dominated its spirit. For comparison, representatives of some western European nations may display signs of *ressentiment* towards the United States: these uncouth New World upstarts demoted them to the secondary status in the global security system, and even sometimes dared to express some feeling of moral superiority (Markowitz 2007). However, Russia's demotion was incomparably sharper and more hurting.

The complex emotion of *ressentiment* is not only painful; it is also shameful, so usually, people do not admit to having it. Therefore, it needs rationalization. The myth of NATO expansion as a source of existential threat to Russia plays this role. Very few people in the West, save for a couple of hardcore *Realists*, take it seriously, but it does not stop it from being widely shared in Russia, and the root of this should be understood. NATO expansion was not a source of security threat, but an affront, a blow at Russia's self-esteem because it underscored Russia's demoted status. Nations that might have hated Russia but recognized it as its boss now can look down on it as a not quite developed country.

Imagining that even Ukrainians and Georgians may join in this attitude of looking down on Russia is especially unbearable. One cannot even admit that this is what Ukrainians genuinely the West to Russia: it should be said that Ukrainians do not even exist, they are just deluded Russians hypnotized and taken hostage by a bunch of Nazis on behalf of Americans (Putin 2021). This does sound crazy, but there is a logic to this craziness.

Another such myth that, reportedly, Putin believes in, is that all pro-democracy movements in the former Soviet countries that may occasionally end in so-called "color revolutions", are in fact happenings financed and organized by Americans to weaken Russia's influence in its neighborhood (Mitchell 2022). While absurd if taken at face value, these theories contain some kernel of truth. These movements, whether successful or not, are always inspired by the "soft power" of western democracies; they indeed weaken Russia's influence in its neighborhood. It should not be discounted, of course, that Russian themselves may follow that example as well, which would be Russians yet again (after the cursed times of *Perestroika*) recognizing the superiority of western ways.

What can Russia do about this? So far, its game has been to play on weaknesses of its perceived opponent, the West, and this way get some satisfaction for its wounded pride. If one cannot be respected, at least one can be feared. Russia was certainly not the first to hit upon this formula; what

matters, however, is that, until invading Ukraine, Putin played the game more or less skillfully. Russia got away with the invasions of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, formally or informally expanding its imperial space. If forced its way back to the center of Middle Eastern politics. The West was confused by all this alleging that Putin's policies are irrational, that they are "19th century" (Epstein 2014) hence contrary to Russia's interest, but it could console itself by the assumption that Russia was a declining power, not being a match to rising China. This only pushed Putin to continue punching above his weight. Even if we presume that his actions were counter-productive to his country's long-term interests, when it came to the short-term tactical calculations, his judgment was superior to that of his western opponents, especially reasonable liberal politicians like Barack Obama (Haddad and Poliakova, 2018). Maybe, one should rethink dominant political theories of international relations to take better account of supposedly old-fashioned concepts like national glory or wounded pride.

To be sure, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has changed all this. We don't know how the war will end, but we know that this time, Putin miscalculated: he did not expect this level of resistance either from Ukraine or from the West and he has hardly any chance to achieve his initial war aims. He tries desperately to redefine the war aims in a way that will allow him to sell the result as a victory, but it may prove too difficult to cheat even his staunchest supporters.

The outcome of the war in specific military terms of territorial control is not the only thing that we don't know at this moment, however. We don't have the answer to a larger, more strategic question: will the outcome of the war, even if it will be a clear enough defeat for Russia, change its future behavior in a substantive way? The answer to this question does not depend on the prospects of political survival for Vladimir Putin. This is an important issue, but not a decisive one. What matters is whether the Russian political elite, even without Putin, reconciles itself to its post-imperial status. Can Russia feel great again, or at least develop a modicum of self-respect necessary for a functional state, without trying to revise the results of the Cold War? We cannot answer this question without figuring out what can genuinely compensate Russia for its loss of imperial status. This compensation cannot come from the outside: it has to be found by the Russians themselves.

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