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Modern Imperialism and the Origins of the Russia-Ukraine War

Konstantin Sonin

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MODERN IMPERIALISM AND THE ORIGINS OF THE RUSSIA - UKRAINE WAR¹

Konstantin Sonin
University of Chicago

Abstract

The Russia-Ukraine war that started in February 2022 and has resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths by mid-2024 is the largest and bloodiest inter-state conflict in the world in decades; it has already re-shaped and will be further re-shaping European economic and security landscape. As with any individual historical episode, the origins of war could hardly be studied within a single model. In this short essay, I draw on the classic notion of imperialism and modern structural models of authoritarian rule to explain the Putin's decision to launch the invasion. It would not happen without the Russian imperial tradition; it would also not happen without the Russian state degeneration into a corrupt, de-institutionalized, and personalistic regime.

Keywords: Russia-Ukraine war, imperialism, authoritarian regime.

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Russian imperialism, with its deep historical roots, has been offered as one of the main explanations for Russia's military aggression against Ukraine. The imperial rhetoric of Russian officials and propagandists, the active introduction of imperial practices in the occupied territories, and, finally, the formal inclusion of the occupied territories of Ukraine into Russia in September 2023 only emphasized the unique role of Russian imperial consciousness in explaining the causes of the war.² However, a closer look makes this simple explanation unsatisfactory. On its own, Russian imperialism cannot be a fundamental reason for the Russia-Ukraine war. Imperial sentiments persisted for decades in many countries that lost their colonies in the 20th century. Yet in most cases this did not lead to neo-colonial wars: after the end of World War II, a number of powers that had lost their overseas colonies did not try to restore the status quo by force. For imperial ideology to become a driving force for a war of conquest in the 21st century, it is necessary to have a political mechanism fundamentally different from those in countries, in which imperial aspirations had deep historical traditions and which were able to halt their own imperial expansion.

At the same time, Russia's aggression against Ukraine is poorly explained by theories that view Putin's regime as a modern or even advanced form of authoritarian rule.³ In February 2022, the invasion of Ukraine by Russian troops could have been considered as something relatively minor, not going beyond the scope of local military operations. In fact, statements by Russian officials even used special language designed to downplay the scale of what was happening, designating it as “special military operation”. Two years later, by mid-2024, the war led, according to the most conservative estimates, to the deaths at the battlefield and in the rear of hundreds of thousands of people, civilians in Ukraine, Russian and Ukrainian soldiers, and the forced displacement of millions, including an approximately million Russians who fled the country. By many parameters, including the confirmed number of soldiers killed on each side, the intensity of hostilities, the use of the most modern weapons, this is the largest war in the 21st century and in the entire eighty years that have passed since the end of World War II, including the Iran-Iraq War, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the 1991 and 2003 Gulf Wars and other inter-country conflicts. This is by no means a historical footnote.

The problems that this war created for Russia and its citizens, including problems at the front, sanctions and the breakdown of international economic ties are massive. By any reasonable estimates,

² See, for example, Khodarkosvky (2022), Kordan (2022), Mankoff (2022), Ploky (2023), Zaporozhchenko (2023). John Meirsheimer, citing US actions to expand NATO as the main reason for the Russian-Ukrainian War, devotes most of his article to listing Russia's imperial claims to control over Ukraine (Meirsheimer, 2022). McFaul and Person (2024) consider the main reasons for the Russian-Ukrainian War to be the structure of Putin's power and the imbalance of power between Russia and Ukraine; they mention but dismiss imperial ideology as an important cause of the war. However, they devote a significant part of the article to analyzing the perception of Putin and his circle about Ukraine as an artificial entity that does not have its own statehood, a variant of the standard imperial view of the world.

³ For an overview of the debate on the ideological basis of Putinism, see Snegovaya and McGlynn (2024). Guriev and Triesman (2022) offer a non-ideological, technological model of modern authoritarianism. The Putin regime is a key example in their theory (see also Taylor, 2018).

they will exacerbate in the future. At the same time, they were well predicted. The fact that the Russian army and other state institutions were unprepared for these problems is additional evidence of the ineffectiveness of the decision-making system in the Putin regime. At the same time, this is a regime that has been extremely successful in solving the problem of holding power by one person for a quarter of a century. How did it happen that a regime built institutionally and personally to preserve power and preserve ideology led to decisions that dramatically undermine its own stability?

In this essay, I try to synthesize the two different approaches to analyzing the causes of the Russia-Ukraine War, “ideological” and “structural.” As a result, the main cause of this war will be a combination of two fundamental factors: the imperial ideology, which has successfully become the full-fledged ideology of Putin’s Russia, and the primitive, archaic structure of a personalistic regime. Without the ideology, that justifies their stay in power with minimal accountability to citizens, Putin and a narrow circle of people close to him would not have the desire to start a war against Ukraine. Without a personalistic, ineffective system of power based on nepotism and corruption, the decision to start a war, consistent with imperial ideology, but contrary to rational logic, systematic consideration of existing circumstances and sustainable forecasts, would not have been made.⁴

Vladimir Gel’man proposed the theory of “bad governance” to explain the organization and functioning of the Russian state in the 21st century (Gelman, 2019). According to this theory, state institutions and political practices are designed in such a way as to maximize the rent extracted by individuals in power; practical decisions made at all levels of government are subordinated primarily to this goal. The interests of the country and its citizens are taken into account only to the extent that this does not contradict the enrichment of people in power and their families.

The theory of “bad governance” is part of a broad consensus emerging in the academic literature on the problems of long-term development.⁵ In two grand theories, the theory of “inclusive vs. extractive institutions” by Acemoglu and Robinson and in the theory of “open access societies vs. limited access societies” by North, Wallis, and Weingast, countries end up in a bad long-run equilibrium in which elites limit competition in the economic sphere as monopoly rents are easier to extract, and limit competition in the political sphere so that the circle of those who share between

⁴ There is a number of good journalistic descriptions of how the fateful decision to go to war with Ukraine was made: see, for example, [“Putin's Colossal Intelligence Failure”](#), *The Russia File*, Kennan Center, 12/3/2022; [“Hubris and isolation led Vladimir Putin to misjudge Ukraine”](#), *Washington Post*, 12/4/2022; [“ Putin, Isolated and Distrustful, Leans on Handful of Hard-Line Advisers.”](#) *Wall Street Journal*, 12/23/2022; [“What Russia Got Wrong”](#), *Foreign Affairs*, 8/2/2023; [“Putin Should Have Known “His Invasion Would Fail”](#), *Foreign Policy*, 23/2/2023.

⁵ Thousands of articles in economics and political science published in recent decades have been devoted to the analysis of long-term development. The book *Why Nations Fail* by Acemoglu and Robinson can be used as a popular introduction to this literature (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012). An alternative presentation of the same essentially general theory of long-term development can be found in North, Wallis, and Weingast (2009). Yakovlev (2021) uses the North-Wallis-Weingast theory to analyze the Russian experience since 1991.

themselves, the “rent pie” was as small as possible.⁶ Examples of extractive economic institutions in the modern world include the legalization of monopolies and the effective absence of antitrust policies, excessive government regulation that limits the access of new firms and technologies to the market, tariffs and quotas that protect owners of domestic industries from external competition; examples of extractive political institutions are restrictions, legal or factual, on the rights to participate in political activities, laws and practices that reduce accountability and turnover of power, corruption, etc.

Both general theories of Acemoglu and Robinson and North, Wallis, and Weingast, and the applied “Russian” theory of Gel’man would well explain the inert status quo in today’s Russia. Economic stagnation, dismantling of international trade, growing primitivization of the state structure, prevalence and normalization of corruption in law enforcement agencies, revival of archaic ideology, etc. – all this is described in numerous examples of extractive institutions in the histories of other countries. What these theories would not explain is the start of a major war, an attack on a large neighboring country, that is, a sharp, radical action that would have to seriously change the status quo regardless of how events at the battlefield would eventually develop. This kind of action fundamentally contradicts theories in which the answer to the question “why are some countries rich and others poor?” is the presence of a bad, persistent long-term equilibrium.

The vast literature in political science on the nature of modern wars has, in fact, an entire subsection devoted to wars that result from the specific nature of decision-making in authoritarian regimes.⁷ There are several explanations why dictators start wars more often than democratic leaders and wage them less successfully. First, dictators are less accountable to citizens than citizens of democracies and, accordingly, are more easily able to make decisions that serve their personal interests only. Second, in the absence of political competition, opponents of war are forced not to fight for power in elections on the level-playing field but compete with dictators in a far less favorable terrain. Third, dictators are more likely to make risky, poorly informed decisions, while democratic leaders are better able to make good use of available resources.

Despite the advanced academic machinery of the rationalist approach to analyzing the causes of wars, the large-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 came as a surprise to many experts. The emphasis on rationality played a cruel joke on them: limited in scale and cost, a victorious military operation could be rationalized. A large-scale war of conquest, requiring the use of hundreds of

⁶ The idea of “multiple equilibria,” which explains how two countries that are similar in all fundamental economic indicators end up on fundamentally different development trajectories, goes back to North (1977). For the simplest model, see Murphy, Shleifer, and Vishny (1993). See also the discussion of the current status of this theory in the review by Egorov and Sonin (2024).

⁷ For reviews of the current literature on the causes of war, see Fearon (1995), Powell (1999), Jackson and Morelli (2011), Blattman (2022). Models and data analysis in the theory of “dictatorial wars-democratic peace” see, for example, Bueno de Mesquita et al (1999), Debs and Goemans (2010); B.Bueno de Mesquita and Smith (2012); Weeks (2012).

thousands of soldiers and thousands of pieces of equipment, filtration camps, and a permanent occupation administration, is almost impossible to justify as a rational choice. Accordingly, it was precisely those analysts who correctly assessed the costs associated with the war who made a mistake in their forecast: the presence of these costs made the choice, obviously, not optimal. The theory proposed in this article explains how the imperial ideology that dominates Putin's elite and Russian society is connected to the structure of government in Russia during the Putin era - and led to decisions that cannot be rationalized.

Imperialism in the 21st Century

In modern theoretical literature, political regimes emerge as a result of the actions of rational actors. In basic models of this kind there is no place for ideology per se. Yet imperialism as an ideology did play an important role in Putin's consolidation of power. Originally, the term "imperialism" was used to refer to a period when the world's major powers were openly competing for colonies. The 20th century required an extension of the classical definition. Authors as different as Joseph Schumpeter (1972 [1921]) and Hannah Arendt (1968 [1951]) made central to their definitions of imperialism the constant desire of countries to expand their sphere of influence, regardless of the specific objectives for this expansion. "Imperialism," according to Schumpeter, is opportunistic in the sense that the question of each specific action is decided not depending on how much it is needed by the people (or some faction), but by the probability of success (Knorr, 1952).

There is a great temptation to define "imperialism" so that the term covers a wider area than just a direct territorial expansion. It would become possible to include, within the borders of empires, the entities (possibly sovereign states) that are controlled by the metropolis with a threat of the use of force, rather than of an actual use of force. For example, the USSR used the army to regain control over Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968 but did not use the army in Poland in the early 1980s, although the ultimate results were very similar. In 1981, the Polish government declared martial law and repressed the opposition, realizing that if it did not do so, a military operation similar to the Hungarian one in 1956 or the Czechoslovak one in 1968 would follow. Similarly, a broad interpretation of "imperial control" would allow us to include many cases in which a country was essentially colonially dependent. For example, Vichy France was not part of the German Reich and was nevertheless completely controlled by it. In political science, there is a whole palette of classifying concepts: vassal states, puppet states, etc.

The advantage of a definition of empire that is tied to direct control – that is, the inclusion of territory in a state entity – is that the analysis does not get bogged down in endless discussions about the degree of control. For example, it is easy to imagine a lengthy discussion about the extent to which Cuba, part of the "socialist camp," was controlled by the USSR. In accordance with the narrow, territorial definition, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia were part of the "Soviet Empire", since they were,

from the point of view of the USSR government, part of it, but socialist Bulgaria, Hungary, or Cuba were not. Formal incorporation of territories controlled by the Russian army in Ukraine into Russia in September 2023 is a clear indicator of the imperial nature of the Russia-Ukraine war.⁸

The imperial nature of the state actions might be couched in a variety of words and terms, sometimes not mentioning anything related to an “empire”. For example, describing the target of imperial aggression as an artificial formation, the result of accidental rather than “natural” historical development, is an imperial worldview, even if the words “empire” or “colony” are not spoken directly. As a classic example, Soviet Prime Minister Molotov, called Poland, after the USSR attacked it in September 1939, “the ugly child of the Versailles Treaty,” thus setting the official narrative for annexation.⁹ It would seem that the communist government of the USSR should not consider the government of the Russian Empire, which it overthrown during the Russian Revolution, as the point of reference. However, at the moment when the former part of the empire, which gained independence during the revolution and civil war, was to be re-occupied, its annexation as a new part of the USSR was justified by the alleged illegality of its creation. In the same way, the imperial aspirations of Putin and his entourage over Ukraine were expressed most clearly in the formulations “Russians and Ukrainians are one people” or “Ukraine is an artificial state created by the Soviet authorities.” It is no coincidence that the works of the philosopher Ivan Ilyin, the “father of Russian fascism”, play an important role in the ideology of Putinism, in which Ukrainians and Russians are part of a single nation (Snyder, 2018). Note how well this attitude towards Ukraine fits the definition of imperialism according to Schumpeter: the need to seize Ukraine is justified by arguments that do not imply any specific goals or benefits for Russia. Rather, it is a restoration of some historical truth.

Not surprisingly, the propaganda support for the war with Ukraine has been based on long-standing imperial traditions.¹⁰ Of the large countries that were former empires, Russia is unique in its lack of anti-imperial sentiment. In England, France, Spain, Germany, and other historical winners of colonialism, imperial expansion ceased after wars or upheavals that led to the loss of colonies and the loss of political dominance by supporters of colonialism in the metropolises.¹¹ In the US, isolationist, anti-imperial ideology has traditionally been strong - even during a period when imperial expansion was the standard *modus operandi* of the world's leading powers. After victory in the war with Spain

⁸ Of course, the inclusion of the occupied territories of Ukraine into Russia as a unilateral act does not make these territories Russian; from the standpoint of Ukrainian and international law, they are the territory of Ukraine. In the future it is not necessary to repeat this clause: to determine “imperiality” it is enough that the territories are included in the composition of the country from the point of view of that country.

⁹ To be sure, Soviet Russia was not a part of the Treaty of Versailles; Poland gained independence when the Russian Empire collapsed in 1918 and protected it in a war against Soviet Russia in 1919-1920. The Treaty of Versailles

¹⁰ See comprehensive analyzes of Russian imperial history in Mironov (2023) and politics in Kaspe (2001).

¹¹ See Gaidar (2013) for numerous examples. An interesting and underexplored phenomenon is that most historical empires were, at their colonial heyday, world leaders in economic, intellectual, technological or military development. Russia in 2022 was not such an example.

in 1898, for example, annexation of the Philippines was one of the issues on which politicians across the spectrum took fundamentally different positions. During the 20th century, the United States have repeatedly refused the opportunity to annex or place certain territories under their direct control. Periodically, isolationist tendencies become so dominant that a country refrains from participating in international operations, even then this would be natural with an “imperial” approach.

In Russia, an open and conscious refusal of expansion and agitation against “foreign wars” is practically unheard of. Even in situations where there was a noticeable movement in the country against participation in wars (for example, against the war in Afghanistan in 1979-87 or against the war in Chechnya in 1995-96), the main argument of opponents of war was its costs, and not the lack of need for expansion (or keeping Chechnya a part of Russia).¹² In 2022-24, state propaganda easily justified a war of conquest precisely because imperial expansion under the guise of “protecting one’s own interests” has been a Russian tradition for centuries. Yegor Gaidar, the leader of the reformist wing of the Russian government in 1991-1993, in his monograph “The Collapse of an Empire,” considered the economic and political catastrophe of the USSR as a result of the neo-imperial policy of the Soviet authorities (Gaidar, 2013). Nevertheless, imperial rhetoric was so well received by citizens that even liberal, reformist, and progressive politicians tried to make it part of their political strategy.¹³

A Different “Failed State”

Originally, the concept of a “failed state” emerged to describe countries in which public authorities are unable to perform their most basic functions, including maintaining internal security and the stability of government. By this definition, Russia in 2022, of course, was not a “failed state” because most government functions were being performed. Moreover, many government agencies, including the security agencies, had large staff, budgets, and effective powers – large both historically and comparatively. On the other hand, the security agencies performed their functions only in some new, special sense – if by security we mean the preservation of power and rents of a small elite. These same agencies not only did not protect the security of the state in terms of maintaining economic, military, and personal security, but, instead, made the people’s life less secure, actively participating in the redistribution of property and personal enrichment.¹⁴

In the literature on structure and functioning of authoritarian regimes, government bodies dealing with internal security are viewed, most often, as instruments with which a dictator or the ruling

¹² The imperial tradition was so rooted that even at the acute moment of the collapse of the USSR, when imperial sentiments were at a minimum, Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s anti-imperial manifesto “How can we settle in Russia,” published in more than 20 million copies, was completely ignored on this exact topic, its explicit anti-imperialism.

¹³ See Kaspé (2004).

¹⁴ Soldatov, Borogan (2010).

elite maintains power.¹⁵ In this case, the tasks of “maintaining state security” and “preserving power for a specific leader” become indistinguishable. This understanding fully coincides with the interests of the leader in such a regime: many authoritarian leaders promote, one way or another, an ideology in which the stability of their personal power is equated with the stability of the political system and even the existence of the state or the country as such. The Putin regime is not specific in this regard. “Without Putin, there is no Russia” in the mouth of a Putin functionary is simply a variation of the German Nazi slogan “One people, one state, one leader.”¹⁶ In a democratic state, the task of maintaining the stability of the political system is ideally separated from the task of maintaining power by the same group of individuals. Of course, democratic politicians are also trying to stay in power, blurring the line between the “stability of the state” and the irreplaceability of individuals holding certain positions. Still, the fundamental feature of democratic states is that there is a system of turnover in power that does not threaten the stability of the state itself.¹⁷ Otherwise, when government bodies work to maintain power for specific individuals, one might want to say that these bodies do not fulfill their function. Instead, their activities are destructive to state stability, if by stability we mean the continuous and safe existence of the country.¹⁸

In modern times, the low turnover in power has often been accompanied by economic and social stagnation. There are numerous examples of authoritarian regimes of the second half of the 20th century, in which the retention of a leader in power for 20 or more years was almost always, with the exception of rare cases, accompanied by stagnation.¹⁹ Almost all of the famed “development failures” of the 20th century—North Korea, Cuba, Zimbabwe, and etc. — happened in countries where one leader or one family held power for decades. The Russian 21st century example turned out to be even more extreme. In addition to economic stagnation, the dominance of state security agencies led to a war in which at least 100 thousand Russian citizens died in the first two years and almost a million Russians became refugees all around the world. It would seem paradoxical that the dominance of state security agencies led to the opposite of the state being secure.

Methodologically, there is a temptation to make a distinction between intelligence services (and other government agencies) by the goals they serve. Let's say, in one country, the state security agencies set their task to preserve the political system, ensuring the regular replacement of the political leadership. In another country, the state security agencies set their task to preserve the personal power

¹⁵ See, for example, B.Bueno de Mesquita, Smith, Siverson, and Morrow (2003), Svoboda (2012), Egorov and Sonin (2024).

¹⁶ Laruelle (2021) discusses in detail the similarities and differences between Putin and the prototypical fascist regime.

¹⁷It should be noted that the existence of an institutionalized system of changing individuals in power is not an exclusive characteristic of democracies. For example, in Mexico in the 1930s-1990s or China in the 1970s-2010s, there were non-democratic political institutions that ensured regular changes in power.

¹⁸In a new book, historian Mark Harrison shows how damaging, in terms of economic and social development, secrecy was justified on grounds of national security (Harrison, 2023).

¹⁹See also Rogov, Snegovaya (2009).

of the current leader. Under this approach, it is possible to have both countries, in which the secret services “succeeded”. It is just that they succeeded in pursuing different goals. This approach is not analytically satisfactory, though: with goal set differently in different countries, a comparativist is left with too many degrees of freedom. Whatever the result of the activities of a special service, it can be said that this very result was the goal of its activities. Any failure in the field of security can, with this approach, be explained by some special goal setting. For example, the Stalin’s state security apparatus was “successful” in the run up to the World War II, despite of their dismal results in terms of maintaining state security – if a success is defined as preserving Stalin’s power. In contrast, if we assume, that the task of the security agencies was to ensure the safety of citizens, the result of the activities of the Soviet state security in the 1930-40s was dismal. The result of the terror, the purpose of which was to keep Stalin and his henchmen in power, was a massive loss of the citizens’ lives – first, as a result of repression, then during the course of the war, preparations for which have not been able to prevent a string of defeats that costed millions of lives.

Instead of assuming that same state bodies set different goals in different countries, it is more productive to assume the same goals among the actors that have the same function and explain differences in performance by focusing on differences in constraints or resources. That is, in both countries from the above example, the task of the state security is security in the same sense, but in the former country, the task is being accomplished, and in the latter country, it has failed. With this approach, the activities of the NKVD, Stalin’s police, during the times of Yezhov and Beria turn out to be a failure from the point of view of the “ideal function”: the task of these bodies was the safety of citizens, and their activities led to the opposite result. This approach corresponds, metaphorically, to the classical approach in medicine: there is normal organ function, and there are various diseases, that is, deviations from normality. For example, with coronary heart disease, normal blood supply is interrupted. One could call such a heart “a heart that sets its task to hypoxia” (“the task of the NKVD was terror against Stalin’s political rivals”), but it would be more adequate to describe it as a painful condition in which the organ does not perform its function (“the task of any the Ministry of Internal Affairs is to maintain the safety of citizens; the NKVD under Beria and Yezhov did not perform this function”).

In 21st century Russia, not only security agencies have lost their functions, but also other, more important bodies of state power. A striking example is the Russian parliament, which, by the end of the first quarter of the 21st century, lost both the role of a legislative and representative body. As a legislative body, parliament has returned to its state of the USSR era, when its functionality was reduced to rubber-stamping decisions made by other bodies (the Politburo and the apparatus of the CPSU Central Committee in Soviet times; the presidential administration and Putin’s entourage in ours). As a representative body, the 2011-2024 parliaments, elected with significant irregularities or

outright electoral fraud that exclude the presence of political opposition, consist only of people approved personally by Putin or his administration.

The evolution of government agencies into a state of dysfunction has continued for many years. The general direction of this evolution was well in line with the goal of maintaining power for Putin and his circle. On the one hand, there is a temptation to explain this evolution – of the security forces, the parliament, and the judiciary – by the purposeful activities of the “beneficiaries,” that is, Putin and his friends. This is consistent with both older models of “clientelist dictatorships,” in which the dictator buys loyalty through the distribution of rents, and modern models of “extractive institutions,” in which the system of power is structured to maximize the rent that the elite extracts through access to resources (e.g., due to the ability to use security forces and law enforcement agencies against those who do not have access to these resources).²⁰

On the other hand, researchers who try to view the existing system of power as an end result of someone’s purposeful activity risk falling into the same trap as popular conspiracy theorists. As a metaphor, imagine a LEGO model that was broken down into a huge pile of parts and dumped out of the bag onto the floor. This pile of parts, just dumped on the floor, will have a certain structure - for example, it will be shaped like a cone. An external observer, looking at a cone-shaped mountain of parts, can attribute this shape to some cunning design and come up with a theory why it is a cone and not a cylinder or parallelepiped or some random structure. Of course, parts dumped on the floor fall into a cone-shaped mound under the influence of gravity. The arrangement of parts on the floor is as primitive as possible and is not the result of anyone’s action. Nevertheless, it is a specific form. It would be a mistake to assume that someone chose the shape of the slide based on some criteria and then achieved its implementation. Similarly, it is not true that any form of government, system of institutions, etc. is certainly the result of some grand plan. Douglas North and his co-authors argued that the “natural” state, the default organization of society, is monopolies in the economic sphere and dictatorship in the political. Democratic constitutional structure and institutions of market competition are, in our metaphor, complex and meaningful models assembled from LEGO parts. Monopoly and dictatorship are a pile of parts on the floor, making its form under the influence of gravity.

When applied to the structure of the Russian state, North's theory provides a regime that ensures a political monopoly at the highest level and creates local economic monopolies that maximize opportunities for rent extraction. In the modern world, almost all episodes of “country failures” in the sphere of economics, foreign policy, etc., are associated with the protracted stay in power of one

²⁰ See reviews of modern literature on the institutions of authoritarianism in political science (Gehlbach, Svobik, and Sonin, 2016) and economic science (Egorov and Sonin, 2024). For Russia, see the “bad governance” theory in Gelman (2019) and the apt “weak strongman” description in Frye (2022).

or another leader. The idea of a political opposition in sharp conflict with the current leadership, and having a real chance of gaining power, is an idea that is approximately 250 years old. In recent decades, it has been practically implemented in dozens of countries well-beyond the mature democracies of the West. The fact that Russian citizens have shown minimal interest in protecting the “right to choose” for three decades since the collapse of the USSR is both evidence of backwardness and an important reason for the degradation of state power under Putin.²¹

Speaking about institutional evolution, we must not forget that the degradation of government bodies was accompanied, or even anticipated, by constant “reverse selection” for government positions. The main selection criteria were loyalty to the leader and connections, family or corrupt, through joint participation in business, with members of the current management. As a result, by 2022, the top leadership of Russia consisted of two types of people - either incompetent and corrupt loyalists like Shoigu, Patrushev, Sechin, or Volodin, or spineless and corrupt “technocrats” like Lavrov, Kiriienko, Sobyenin, or Mishustin.²² Both of them not only did not represent any political force of their own, but consciously refused any external differentiation in politics. This is exactly the result predicted by the competence vs. loyalty theory of authoritarian regimes and a constituent part of the “bad governance” system.²³

Imperialism, Militarization, and Corruption

From a structural perspective, in which rational actors change the rules of the game in ways that make it easier for them to maintain power and maximize rents, the imperial, nationalist narrative was important for strengthening the Putin regime primarily because it justified the militarization of public spending and the militarization of public administration. In terms of budget spending, militarization made it much easier to profit from proximity to power. First, the more militarized a country is, the more funds are distributed through decisions at the very top level. Second, military spending is the least transparent and accountable for society. In Putin’s Russia, this turned into feeding Putin’s entourage and loyalists at the expense of defense orders. Of course, as always happens, in addition to the loyalists, enterprising businessmen receive a significant share of the distributed national wealth, which, in turn, creates a stable “military-industrial complex lobby,” which in Russia eventually became simply the “war lobby.”

²¹ We do not discuss the issue of the historical evolution of the Putin regime (see, for example, Golosov, 2024). For our question, what is interesting is the regime that emerged in Russia in February 2022, when the decision was made to launch a war against Ukraine.

²² It is not surprising that, unlike modernizing authoritarian regimes, Putin’s “technocrats” were selected on the basis of political loyalty and controllability. Accordingly, their expert skills, instead of somehow serving Russia and its citizens, were used only to fulfill Putin’s wishes. (See, for example, [How Putin's technocrats saved the economy to fight a war they opposed](#), *Financial Times*, 16/12/2022.)

²³ Egorov, Sonin (2011, 2023), Zakharov (2015), Shih (2022).

Another classic reason why the imperial narrative was beneficial for Putin to strengthen his own power is that a country in need of military expansion more readily accepts a reduction in the role of parliaments, from municipal to national, expansion of the powers of security agencies, restrictions on personal freedoms, etc. That is, Putin's imperialism, in addition to its historical roots, also served his political pragmatics from the very beginning. By constantly threatening its neighbors that were once part of the USSR and, at least rhetorically, other large countries, Russia constantly maintained fear in its citizens. This fear forced us to tacitly agree with the militarization of society, the expansion of the powers of security agencies and the corruption of Putin's circle.

Take, in an extremely simplified manner, a specific example. Russia's participation in the civil war in Syria since 2015 has brought nothing but losses to Russian citizens. First, direct losses due to money spent on military intervention on the side of the regime, cooperation with which does not bring any benefits to Russian citizens. Second, even greater indirect losses, because intervention in the civil war on the side of a dictator who retains power through brutal repression has reduced Russia's attractiveness as an international partner for those countries with which cooperation is most needed for economic development. However, the Syrian operation was beneficial to the elite in a narrow sense – primarily to the owners of military-industrial complex enterprises and the military. In addition, through increasing international isolation, it strengthened Putin's power in Russia.

At first glance, economic and political isolationism contradicts imperial ideology. However, the opposition between isolationism and imperialism is illusory. Historian Stephen Kotkin, in the first volume of his biography of Stalin shows how Stalin and his associates brilliantly used isolationist narratives to strengthen their own power.²⁴ The ideology of the communists who took power in 1917 was as expansionist as possible: Lenin and his comrades perceived themselves as the vanguard of the world communist movement and from the very beginning were ready to help, ideologically and materially, the revolutionary left-wing politicians of Europe and the whole world. Even after the adoption of the doctrine of “building socialism in one particular country” in 1925, which replaced the focus on world revolution, the policy of the USSR leadership was consistently expansionist, and when possible (in 1939-40, 1945-85) simply neo-imperial. Yet the outward expansionist ideology did not prevent Stalin from using isolationism as means of political control at home.

After Stalin's death, the USSR leaders used the same strategy, albeit less brutally. The isolationist strategy included two elements. First, an active and confrontational policy towards neighbors and major world powers. Second, using this confrontation to maintain power within the country - citizens should always feel that the country is under threat, and, accordingly, not raise the question of changing leadership. To take advantage of the “don't change horses in midstream” dogma,

²⁴ Kotkin (2014).

the current leadership is trying to create the feeling that every moment in time, year after year, is a “moment of crossing.” International isolation, which is the result of an aggressive and even adventurous foreign policy, becomes an instrument of domestic political strategy to retain power.

Isolationism, in economic terms, is a suicidal strategy. Refusal to fully participate in international trade is one of the main reasons for the economic catastrophe of the USSR. This reason is rarely mentioned directly among the main causes of the Soviet Union collapse, because the discourse of analyzing the Soviet economy in both its successful and unsuccessful periods was formed long before the emergence of a modern understanding of the role of international trade in economic development. However, the often-mentioned reasons for the stagnation and subsequent collapse of the Soviet economy – the technological backwardness of industry, the inability to transform the achievements of fundamental science into practical applications – were among the direct results of economic isolationism. Further evidence of the role of isolationism in the economic stagnation of the Soviet economy is the rapid rise in well-being of Russians since the end of the recession in the 1990s and early 2000s. Obviously, it would be absolutely impossible without international trade and constant borrowing of technology. Most of the goods and services that provided this increase in prosperity were either produced abroad or produced in Russia using borrowed technologies. Conversely, the fact that fifteen years ago rapid growth gave way to long stagnation is partly the result of isolationist policies that benefited Putin, as we have seen, for domestic political reasons.

During Soviet times, isolationist policies in the economic sphere were accompanied by imperial ideology and expansionist rhetoric. The Putin era has complemented the policy of isolationism with corruption. Although the population and business of the country as a whole lose from economic protectionism, losses from restrictions on competition are “spread out” across broad sections of the population, and gains, which are overall smaller than losses, are concentrated in the hands of a narrow number of actors.²⁵ For example, the 2014 ban on food imports from the EU and the USA resulted in a net welfare loss for almost all Russian citizens, 140 million people, as were forced to pay higher prices for substitute goods of lower quality. The total gain of the owners of agricultural holdings and those who they paid for political and security cover, is significantly less than these losses, but, due to concentration, results a significantly greater political impact. Under Putin's rule, the combination of a "state security rationale" plus a "protectionist restriction" that gives monopoly profits to selected businessmen and officials has become standard policy in a variety of industries. In a democratic system, corruption and monopolization, leading to the extraction of rent from citizens through high prices, would, at a minimum, lead to political pressure on the government. In the government does not respond, it is changed. In Putin's Russia, isolationist ideology provides

²⁵See, for example, Grossman and Helpman (2001) for a review of political economic theories and basic models of international trade and protectionism.

the rationale for the introduction of monopolies, the destruction of democratic political institutions reduces the pressure on the government to deal with these monopolies, and monopoly excess profits, in turn, finance the protection of the status quo from change.

Conclusion

Historical Russian imperialism gave the Putin regime two things. First, the basis for formation of narratives in which the construction of the regime of Putin's personal power and the enrichment of the beneficiaries of his regime turned out to be necessary for the fulfillment of the "historical mission of Russia." Second, tools and practices from the institutional legacy of the Soviet empire turned out to be convenient for use in a situation where new tools and practices did not appear. For example, the experience and practice of imposing the Russian language and a special version of Russian history, which were used during the colonial conquests in Soviet times, were ready for use both within the country and in the occupied territories of Ukraine. Both elements of the imperial legacy, narratives and practices, turned out to be convenient tools for maintaining power.

Still, it is impossible to reduce the origins of the Russia-Ukraine War to imperial legacies, traditions, institutions, and narratives. Imperialism alone could well explain a war of conquest that would have had a reasonable chance of success. However, a war with Ukraine is a war for which Russia is paying a huge price, regardless of where the border between Ukraine and Russia ends up. Huge, in hundreds of billions of dollars, directed losses and even greater, in decades of development, indirect losses as a result of the war are guaranteed. Importantly, these losses were suffered not only by ordinary citizens, but also by the Putin's elite. Members of the cabinet, parliament, management of state-owned companies and quasi-private companies, etc. have incurred significant costs associated with overseas holdings, future opportunities to travel abroad, etc. A political system, in which decisions that benefit no one except a very narrow group of the population, is a rarity – yet there was such a system in place in February 2022, when Putin made the fateful decision to start a major war, and nobody attempted to stop him. It required years of gradual descend into a primitive, inefficient, personalistic regime, which could act basing on ideology alone. With imperialism settled as both historical and pragmatic ideology, a war against Ukraine, a crime but also a strategic blunder of historical proportions, was all but inevitable.

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