

GIES OCCASIONAL PAPER

THE WAR IN UKRAINE | March 2022

BETWEEN IMPERIALISM AND SOFT POWER: RECKONING WITH RUSSIA'S PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE NATIONAL IDEA

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The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine tends to be seen as concerning not only for Ukraine's existence, but also Russia's future.¹²³ Although it seemed that Putin singlehandedly ordered this invasion⁴, his fateful decision is bringing to a crescendo Russia's long time reckoning with its own *national idea* over the past three decades since the collapse of the Soviet Union. This war is unravelling deeply existentialist questions about the trajectory of the Russian Federation as a successor state of the USSR: how to reckon itself with its past legacy of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, how to conceptualise its *national idea* of the present, and what to make of Russia's paths for its future.

Reckonings with Russia's past:

A dissection of Putin's two speeches immediately before the war finds a concoction of pure ideological arguments derived from Russian imperialist thinking which contends the simple existence of Ukraine.⁵ While the specific support of such revisionist perceptions of the past among the Russian public as justifying a full scale invasion of Ukraine is contentious amongst Russia's increasingly totalitarian environment⁶, this war will trigger a fundamental soul-searching

in Russian society concerning the broader question of Russia's imperial legacy one way or another. Emerging from the unique historical trajectory of a 'subaltern' Russian empire⁷ *vis-a-vis* the West followed by the internationalist and rhetorically anti-imperialist project of the Soviet Union which nonetheless exhibited imperialistic practices⁸, while ironically compounded by both the USSR's relatively peaceful collapse and Russia's subsequently painful decade of capitalist transition and perceived humiliation, Russian society as a whole has not only to yet come to sufficient terms with its imperialist legacy, but also saw its imperialistic sentiments amplified by Putin's regime in pursuit of its political trajectory. As a post-imperial nation⁹, the broader resonance of Russian imperialist sentiments thus reaches beyond the core Russian monarchic circles, especially concerning the status of Ukraine. Here, the phenomenon of imperial syndrome¹⁰ in Russia, especially concerning such a closely perceived nation whose status is seen as fundamentally linked to Russia's own identity construction, thus resulted in the current scenario of a Russian society particularly sympathetic with such an imperialistic view towards Ukraine. However, as the devastations of this war, defiant

Ukrainian resistance, and international geopolitical consequences steadily dawn on Russian society, the Putin regime's identity construction of Russia based on the political legitimacy derived from the memory of Russia's anti-fascist credentials of World War II will be increasingly shaken to its core by the counternarrative of Russia as a perennially imperialistic power of its own towards its 'brotherly nations' like Ukraine.

Reckonings of Russia's present:

The progress of this war will also provide a painful reckoning with Russia's current manifestation and what it stands for in the present. Putin's regime, in the pursuit of Russia's perceived interests in Ukraine, has over the last eight years since the Maidan revolution chosen to pursue a policy based on coercion and then, with its initiation of full scale war, on pure compellence, abandoning any soft power efforts of winning the hearts and minds of the Ukrainian people in favour of utilizing hard power to prevent Ukraine from moving closer towards Europe and the West at all costs. Such a logic is hardly surprising considering the current state of Russia's soft power capacities, especially for the Eastern European countries on its Western flank between itself and the EU. Today's Russia, Ishchenko argues, offers little in terms of attraction to the world even compared to the Soviet Union, whose universal ideology and economic achievements, however flawed they may be, once drew mass movements of admiration. Instead, for countries like Ukraine, the question of "what can Russia offer" now provides little except for the violent absorption of the country into Russia and the denial of Ukrainians as a distinct people.¹¹ Meanwhile, Putin's war will likely render even the niche soft power attractions of Russia's cultural heritage and political positioning as a joker on the international scene¹² much less effective due to the negative impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on its international reputation. Regardless of the military outcomes, this war thus reveals to Russian society that the ultimate transformation of the *Russian idea* under Putin is towards the logic of autocratic

imperialism, formulated with little consideration for the logic of voluntary attraction at home and abroad.

Wither the paths of Russia's future

Finally, the reckonings with Russia's past and the realization of Russia's current trajectory under the Putin regime clearly presents the crossroads Russia is now facing in terms of its future as a nation. Provided that a more global catastrophe does not immediately follow, this war will provide the final acceleration towards a most repressive form of Russian imperialism as well as the demonstration of its limitations. Putin's regime seems to increasingly abandon its soft power efforts in favour of solely hard power compellence, but as Russia's hard power limitations are increasingly apparent due to the country's economic fragility¹³ and military weakness¹⁴, it seems increasingly likely that Russia simply lacks the hard power capacities to carry through its brute force approach to impose its will on Ukraine, let alone for its other objectives. The question to the agency of Russian leaders and Russian society is thus whether they will ultimately prove to support Putin's imperialist legacy, or whether this war will prove the catalyst to shift their country, in light of such realistic constraints, towards another *national idea* away from hard power imperialism towards the greater utilization of soft power as the basis of its global standing. As Kenya's Ambassador to the United Nations argue¹⁵, it is normal for countries to want closer relations with their perceived brethren, but such yearnings should not be pursued by force. An alternative path for Russia can thus take inspiration from Germany, where only after the abandonment of its imperialistic hard power ambitions faded after World War II did its soft power successfully manifest, allowing Germany to arguably achieve a greater leadership role in Europe by attraction than what its preceding imperialist rulers cannot achieve by compellence. The chances of such a radical reconceptualization of Russia's *national idea* is uncertain, but such an evolution seems plausible, even likely in the long term due to the unsustainability of the

current Russian model. A shift towards the German model would thus similarly push Russia to abandon imperialism towards soft power, although the precise manifestations such a new Russian regime would be difficult

to predict due to the different geopolitical landscape in the centre of Eurasia.

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- ¹ Joschka Fischer, "Russia's Stolen Future" *Project Syndicate*, February 24, 2022. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/putin-invade-ukraine-european-and-global-implications-by-joschka-fischer-2022-02>.
 - ² Harold Cooper, Ryan Meyerson. "Worse Than a Crime; It's a Blunder." *The American Prospect*, February 25, 2022. <https://prospect.org/api/content/48e50c5e-95d9-11ec-8741-12f1225286c6/>.
 - ³ Kadri Liik. "War of Obsession: Why Putin Is Risking Russia's Future – European Council on Foreign Relations." *ECFR* (blog), February 25, 2022. <https://ecfr.eu/article/war-of-obsession-why-putin-is-risking-russias-future/>.
 - ⁴ James Risen. "U.S. Intelligence Says Putin Made a Last-Minute Decision to Invade Ukraine." *The Intercept*, 2022. <https://theintercept.com/2022/03/11/russia-putin-ukraine-invasion-us-intelligence/>.
 - ⁵ Marlene Laruelle. "Decoding Putin's Speeches: The Three Ideological Lines of Russia's Military Intervention in Ukraine". *Russia Matters*. Feb 25, 2022. <https://russiamatters.org/analysis/decoding-putins-speeches-three-ideological-lines-russias-military-intervention-ukraine>.
 - ⁶ Alexei Minialo. "Хотят Ли Русские Войны." *Хроники - Chronicles*, 2022. <https://www.dorussianswantwar.com/en>.
 - ⁷ Viatcheslav Morozov. *Russia's postcolonial identity: a subaltern empire in a Eurocentric world*. Springer, 2015.
 - ⁸ Francine Hirsch. *Empire of nations*. Cornell University Press, 2014.
 - ⁹ Marlene Laruelle. "Marlene Laruelle: Russian Society Is Very Different from Its Regime" *Review of Democracy*, February 21, 2022. <https://revdem.ceu.edu/2022/02/21/marlene-laruelle-russian-society-is-very-different-from-its-regime/>.
 - ¹⁰ Emil Pain. "The Imperial Syndrome and Its Influence on Russian Nationalism." In *The New Russian Nationalism*, 30, 2022.
 - ¹¹ Volodymyr Ishchenko. "A Russian Invasion of Ukraine Could Destabilize Russia's Political Order." *Truthout*, 2022. <https://truthout.org/articles/a-russian-invasion-of-ukraine-could-destabilize-russias-political-order/>.
 - ¹² Marlène Laruelle. "Russia's Niche Soft Power: Sources, Targets, and Channels of Influence." *French Institute of International Relations*, 2021, 30.
 - ¹³ Paul De Grauwe. "Russia Is Too Small to Win" *Project Syndicate*, March 17, 2022. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/russia-economy-too-small-to-sustain-war-in-ukraine-by-paul-de-grauwe-2022-03>.
 - ¹⁴ Amy Mackinnon, Robbie Gramer, Jack Detsch. "Where Does Putin's War Go From Here?" *Foreign Policy*, 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/28/russia-ukraine-putin-war-what-happens-next/>.
 - ¹⁵ Bill Chappell. "Kenyan U.N. Ambassador Compares Ukraine's Plight to Colonial Legacy in Africa." *NPR*, February 22, 2022, sec. Europe. <https://www.npr.org/2022/02/22/1082334172/kenya-security-council-russia>.