Institute of European Right

COMMENTARY

Not only Putin: Russian Culture and Imperialism

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This document outlines the historical, ideological, and political nature of Russian imperialism, examines contemporary analytical approaches, and details the profound consequences experienced by formerly occupied nations. The analysis stresses the critical importance of non-Russian perspectives and concludes with key political recommendations for future strategy. It is based on the talks given at the conference "Not only Putin: Russian Culture and Imperialism" in Vilnius, organized by the Institute of European Right and Konrad Adenauer Foundation Lithuanian Office, on November 14th by scholars Prof. Donnacha Ó Beachain (Dublin City University), Prof. Nataliia Kryvda (Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv), Prof. Gintautas Mažeikis (Vytautas Magnus University), Prof. Danutė Gailienė (Vilnius University), Edgaras Bolšakovas (Vilnius University), journalist Nikolai Klimeniouk and former Lithuanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Gabrielius Landsbergis.

Explaining Russian Imperialism

Russian imperialism is defined by an enduring state ideology that rejects the full sovereignty of, the so-called former Soviet republics, treating the "near abroad" as territory rightfully within Moscow's sphere of influence. The current regime, led by Vladimir Putin, represents the latest manifestation of Russia's long authoritarian tradition, built upon centralised control, nationalism, and the persistent promise of achieving "great power" status. Moreover, Russia has never been a democracy, so authoritarianism remains the historical pattern there and has significantly formed cultural practices.

The fundamental linkage between domestic politics and foreign policy is a core feature of this imperialism: dictatorship at home fuels expansionism abroad, with war serving as a tool to consolidate regime legitimacy. This expansionism is deeply rooted in state ideology, which rehabilitates Stalin and mythologises the victory in WWII, thereby normalising conquest and projecting a narrative of moral exceptionalism.

A segment of Western thought views Russia as fundamentally weak (defeated after the Cold War, economically declining, possessing only nuclear weapons). However, this view is dangerous, as a declining power can still inflict immense damage, as seen in Ukraine, and poses a significant risk to European countries, necessitating serious deterrence.

Another prevalent notion is that Russia is a great power unjustly treated, akin to post-WWI Germany and the Treaty of Versailles, suggesting the West should have shown more respect for Russia's "reasonable interests" beyond its borders. But Russia is not a victim of Western action but of its own leadership's choices.

The West still consistently underestimates the historical continuity of Russian (or Soviet) imperialism – a continuous thread of Russian imperial thinking, from Tsarism through the Soviet Union to contemporary Putinism. Additionally, the Baltic states' experience of 50 years of Soviet occupation as colonialism is often not recognised in the West, partly due to Russia's self-portrayal as an anti-imperialist power, despite its actions (colonisation of Eurasia, Russification, suppression of identities).

This lack of understanding may stem from the inability of Eastern and Central European countries to effectively convey their historical narrative, a persistent belief in Russia's anti-imperialist claims, or even the West's own unresolved imperial past. There is an ongoing need to highlight this imperial continuity.

Russian imperialism also operates through internal colonialism, disproportionately extracting resources and manpower from non-Russian regions while simultaneously positioning Russia as a victim, not a perpetrator, of colonialism. The invasion of Ukraine is overtly imperial and genocidal, seeking not merely territory but the erasure of Ukrainian identity, history, and statehood. This is carried out through cultural cleansing, which the Parliamentary Assembly holds as a weapon of war, demonstrating specific genocidal intent.

The perpetuation of empire relies heavily on cultural mechanisms, which are used as weapons to conquer hearts before subjugating lands. This mechanism involves "myth-design" – the deliberate creation of meaning systems, symbols, and cultural codes that shape community self-perception and worldview. Russian cultural expansion uses art, language, and culture as tools of foreign policy to foster pro-Russian sentiments and influence international politics. Key to this is the concept of the "Russian World" (Russkiy mir), which is not merely a cultural initiative, but an aggressive political project adopted by the Kremlin in the 2000s, aimed at creating a Russian-dominated civilizational space and enabling intervention in the affairs of other states. The continuity in myth-design, from the Tsarist mission to the Soviet myth of liberation and the modern myth of "traditional values," serves the singular goal of justifying control, expansion, and hierarchy.

Approaches to Understanding Russian Imperialism

Traditional academic approaches have often failed to adequately recognise the nature of Russian imperialism. The West previously underestimated this threat, focusing excessively on Moscow-centric "Soviet studies" and neglecting the agency and experiences of non-Russian peoples. Classical postcolonial theory, dominated by Eurocentrism (the idea that only the West can colonise), has often been blind to the imperialism of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union. This theoretical blindness was compounded by Soviet propaganda, which systematically denied the reality of colonisation.

To achieve a coherent understanding, new analytical frameworks are necessary:

- Imperialism as the Colonisation of the Future: A central thesis suggests that empires colonise the future of their subjects, not just their territory. Colonial domination employs coercion and historical narration to distort the relationship between the space of experience (the collective past) and the horizon of expectation (the anticipated future). This systemic coercion deforms the horizon of the future, replacing healthy expectations with destructive nostalgia.
- The Primacy of Experience over Language: For states like the Baltics, colonisation occurred *after* they had established independence and statehood. Their political memory and self-perception differ from those of other decolonised regions, implying that the primary source for colonial research must be direct experience, rather than solely focusing on language-based discourse analysis.

- Deconstructing Cultural Camouflage: Scholars must analyse Russian culture not as a victim of politics but as its co-author. The myth of the “Russian soul” successfully seduced Western academia and art, blinding generations to the underlying violence. This cultural mechanism is an “imperial unconscious” that makes domination appear noble and expansion poetic.

New conceptual terms, such as “Imperialism of sameness” and “Retro Imperialism,” reflect the contemporary attempts to define this unique form of domination.

Consequences of Russian Imperialism in Formerly Occupied Countries

The consequences of Russian imperialism and long-lasting totalitarian regimes are profound and span the political, cultural, and psychological domains.

Cultural Cleansing and Identity Erasure

In occupied Ukrainian territories, Russian policy employs a systematic, state-driven process of Russification and neocolonial historical revisionism, denying distinct cultural identities. This includes:

- Confiscation or replacement of history textbooks.
- Removal of archives.
- Systematic destruction and looting of cultural objects and heritage sites.
- Imposing new symbols justifying aggression and neo-imperial renaming of geographical sites.

By August 2025, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine had resulted in damage to approximately 3800 cultural and religious institutions, with the total estimated damage exceeding $1.8 billion. The systematic denial of Ukrainian language and culture often portrays Ukrainians as a lower caste, ethnicity, or race.

Systemic Trauma and Psychological Impact

The long-term effects of occupations, genocides, and systematic violence constitute a collective trauma impacting families, communities, ethnic groups, and society at large, often manifesting in social pathologies such as crime and violence.

In Lithuania, the repressive period from 1940 to 1953, covering both Soviet rule and the 1941–1944 Nazi occupation, led to the loss of about 33% of the country’s population through killings, deportations, or forced emigration. Totalitarian trauma is characterised by deliberate abuse and persecution, accompanied by indoctrination, brainwashing, and moral confusion, with the main goal of changing cultural identity and, in the case of Soviet occupation, creating a “Soviet man”.

The trauma was sustained by the unpredictability of terror. Consequences among repressed individuals include afflicted health, being prevented from pursuing professional and educational goals, and loss of family members. Even non-repressed citizens suffered: a significant portion of the population lost family members, and about a third could not achieve personal or professional goals, with high levels of fatigue, sadness, and depression.

Crucially, trauma transmission is intergenerational, with high levels of post-traumatic stress symptoms found in the second generation. However, research has revealed a paradox:

- Offspring from families that experienced Soviet political repressions are sometimes less affected and psychologically sturdier than people from non-repressed families.
- This suggests that adjusting to a totalitarian system is more harmful than experiencing its repressions (the “Captive Mind” phenomenon).

This resilience is often associated with the fact that repression targeted the most active and educated segment of society, meaning survivors possessed greater psychological resources that were passed on.

The Importance of Non-Russian Perspectives in Studies and Discourse

Non-Russian perspectives are paramount for accurately assessing and countering Russian imperialism, given the historical tendency of Western institutions to ignore or downplay the experiences of colonised peoples.

- Correcting Historical Blindness: Focusing on non-Russian experiences counters the dominance of Moscow-centric “Soviet studies”. Non-Russian discourse is essential to address the historical failure to acknowledge the crimes of communism, which has limited trauma research in the region.
- Defining Unique Colonial Experiences.
- Revealing Resistance and Agency: Non-Russian perspectives offer powerful counter-myth-designs. Ukrainian culture, for instance, articulates coexistence, dignity, and freedom, rather than conquest, building a decolonial imagination where memory provides moral clarity and cultural sovereignty.
- Unmasking Imperial Culture: Recognising the role of Russian culture as a co-author of empire requires acknowledging the narratives of those who have suffered under its “aesthetic conviction”.
- Fostering Resilience: Studies of formerly repressed families in Lithuania demonstrate that the experience of political repression, when coupled with family identification with history, can become a protective factor that fosters resilience, optimism, and psychological well-being in subsequent generations. This insight into the transgenerational transmission of resilience is vital for post-conflict recovery planning.

Political Recommendations for the Future in Dealing with Russian Imperialism

Addressing Russian imperialism requires a strategic, multifaceted approach that combines political accountability, military deterrence, and deep cultural decolonisation. In order to achieve this we should:

1. Mandate Russian Defeat and Accountability: Sustainable peace is contingent upon achieving Russian defeat and ensuring accountability for its actions. If Russia is allowed to freeze the

conflict, it will inevitably regroup and continue its imperial project. Global security requires Russia to shed its imperial ideology and accept limits.

2. Support Euro-Atlantic Integration: Strategically reinforce the structural failures caused by Russia's expansionism. The invasion of Ukraine strategically backfired by driving Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia toward applying to join the EU, and Finland and Sweden to join NATO. Supporting these integration processes consolidates European security.
3. Prioritise Cultural Sovereignty: Treat Russia's campaign of cultural cleansing as war crimes. Culture must be treated as the foundation of modern democratic society, not merely a decoration.
4. Invest in Trauma Research and Restorative Justice: Recognise the severe, long-term impact of the Russian war of aggression on the mental health of Ukrainian people (and more broadly, the whole region). Implement policies that support restorative justice.
5. Amplify Non-Russian Voices in Discourse: Integrate non-Russian perspectives into academic, policy, and media discourse to counter the lingering effects of the "Russian soul" myth. This requires shifting focus away from Moscow-centric analyses toward the lived experiences and decolonial imaginations of formerly occupied nations. The global message promoted should be one of dignity, freedom, humanism, and renewal, reflecting the counter-narratives of the colonised, rather than victimhood.
6. **Ceasing to "Romanticise" the Russian Opposition:** The Russian opposition is fragmented, with varying ideologies and approaches. Many opposition figures face a dilemma: to be electable within a post-Putin Russia, they often adopt positions (e.g., on Ukrainian territorial integrity, Western sanctions) that reflect the prevailing imperialistic sentiments within Russian society. If even the opposition cannot shed these imperialistic ideas, it implies the war is "Russia's war," not just "Putin's war." This pursuit of domestic electability often clashes with Western expectations. There is a shrinking space for the Russian opposition in the West if they cling to imperialistic views, forcing them to choose between appealing to the Russian populace and aligning with Western democratic values.
7. Challenging Outdated International Relations Frameworks: Current international relations teaching and understanding of Russia are often stuck in outdated Cold War or 1990s frameworks, failing to grasp the present reality. We may have entered a "Cold War 2.0," characterised by great power competition between the United States and China. Another new aspect to consider – Russia becoming a Chinese Proxy. Russia's war against Ukraine is not an isolated event but a clear part of this larger geopolitical coalition, with China as the de facto leader, and Russia effectively fighting a proxy war. The West must fundamentally rethink Eurasian geopolitics, recognising that addressing Russia is inextricably linked to dealing with China. A victory or loss in Ukraine will have direct implications for the broader competition with China. This new era demands a fresh analytical perspective, rather than a continuation of past paradigms.



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