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***Russia, Empire, and Evil: dilemmas and temptations in contemporary Russian political imagination***

“I urge you to beware the temptation [...] to ignore the facts of history and the aggressive impulses of an evil empire”.<sup>1</sup> Many years have passed since President Ronald Reagan used those very words to define the adversary: the Soviet Union. In the following several years, the term “empire” has come to be treated in a more derisive and critical manner by the scholarly circles, as a primitive political picklock rather than a key to understanding the history of Russia and the Soviet system.

Yet the term “empire” would soon return to good books in political science generally, and particularly in reference to Russia.<sup>2</sup> Such was undisputedly the result of the crisis, and a consequent collapse of the soviet system. Both those participating in the process, as well as those undertaking research on the matter, came to seek the key to understanding its nature in the very imperial tradition (the continuation of the Russian Empire), structure (the center-periphery nexus), and its dynamics (with the problem of “overextension”).

The research into the matter would at that particular time be associated with the conviction that it was the last empire that has just collapsed. The (post)modern world, with the end of the Cold War, the world of globalized economy and mass culture, precludes the endurance or revival of empires. To recall, it was the time, when in the political imagination, the triumph of the “End of History” heralded by Francis Fukuyama in 1990, seemed almost unquestionable. The understanding of the term empire was not so much grounded in the moral condemnation, as was the case with the rhetoric of Ronald Reagan, but rather in the belief that it is undeniably bound – as the History itself – to make its prompt recourse from political reality and into the dustbin of (post)modern world.<sup>3</sup>

The Russia that emerged from the dissolution of the Soviet Union was seen primarily from that very perspective: as a former empire; a state that somehow will have to overcome its imperial heritage. In light of the new, most thorough analyses of the Russian and Soviet history emerging at that particular time, the permanence of that imperial legacy was perceived as wrong, or at the least, as a harmful anachronism – not only from the point of view of the non-Russian peripheries (as in the works of Andreas Kappeler or Helène Carrère d’Encausse)<sup>4</sup>, but also of the Russian center itself. For the very center, as much as for the non-Russian peripheries, the path to modernization was to lead through the construction

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Reagan, *Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Assembly of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida*, March 8, 1983, in Stanley Kraemer ed., *The Soviet Union Fight the Cold War* – CD-ROM, The American Foreign Policy Council 1999.

<sup>2</sup> See: Andrzej Nowak, ‘Ab Imperio’ – nowe spojrzenie na historię Rosji, in: idem, *Od imperium do imperium. Sypojrenia na historię Europy Wschodniej*, Kraków: ARCANA, 2004, pp. 13-41.

<sup>3</sup> See: Svyatoslav Kaspe, *Imperia i modernizatsia: obschaia model’ i rossiiskaia spetsifika*, Moskva: Rosspen, 2001, pp. 197-215.

<sup>4</sup> Andreas Kappeler, *Russland als Vielvölkerreich*, München 1992 (first edition; there have been also English, Russian, and French translations of the book); see also A. Kappeler, ‘Rossiia – mnogonatsionalnaia imperiia: niekotorye razmyshlenia vosem let spustia posle publikatsii knigi’, *Ab Imperio*, no. 1/2000, pp. 9-22; Helène Carrère d’Encausse, *The End of the Soviet Empire: The Triumph of Nations*, New York: Basic Books, 1992.

of a modern nation. In his successive syntheses of Russia, Geoffrey Hosking has shown how fatal was the construction of an empire for the creation of the modern Russian nation. Roman Szporluk in turn, with his studies published in the breakthrough period of the declining Soviet Union and the emancipation of the Russian Federation, has described the struggle between the “empire-savers” and the “nation-builders” as the principal ground for political confrontation.<sup>5</sup>

The empire as evil, one that needs to be overcome, and the construction of a modern nation – as means of towards this goal – now coming closer to its realization than at any earlier period in history: those were the two venues vividly marking the reflections of historians on the Russian past, which in the early 1990’s would meet with the conceptions of political scientists on the Russian present and the perspectives of its evolution. “In 1991 Russia became, for the first time in history, a nation rather than an empire”.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless it was not for the first time in its history, not for the first time in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that Russia would come to face this dilemma: an empire or a nation. In 1917 the Russian Empire collapsed, having officially and with much pride carried that very title for the past 196 years since Peter the Great. New nation-states emerged on its peripheries. Yet Russia was not to become a nation-state itself – an empire of a new type was established, encompassing at first only a part, but soon the whole (and more) of its former peripheries once again in its sphere of domination.<sup>7</sup>

It thus is worth recalling that experience, aiming to find comparative grounds for the contemporary evolution of the problem that might be termed: “Russia and empire”. It might be equally worthy to examine the approaches presented by the Russian political thinkers of that period, the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that directly preceded the events of the year 1917, to seek the specifically Russian paths to understanding this particular problem. What is an empire? What is a nation? Instead of making a reference to the definitions that have so multitudinously been offered by modern social and political science, it is perhaps of a distinct value to look at how those terms, the empire and the nation, and their mutual relations have been perceived in the context of Russian tradition and Russian political programs prior to 1917. There is hardly any doubt that those experiences and those reflections constitute a much stronger frame of reference for the contemporary Russian thought and political reality, than the

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<sup>5</sup> Roman Szporluk, *Russia, Ukraine, and the Breakup of the Soviet Union*, Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2000; 1993 Geoffrey Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire. 1552-1917*, London: Harper and Collins, 1997; see also, idem, ‘Can Russia Become a Nation-State?’, *Nations and Nationalism*, 1998, vol. 4, no. 4, pp. 449-462; idem, ‘Imperial Identities in Russia: Some Concluding Thoughts’, in: Chris J. Chulos and Johannes Remy (eds.), *Imperial and National Identities in Pre-Revolutionary, Soviet, and Post-Soviet Russia*, Helsinki: SKS – FLS, 2002, pp. 229-234.

<sup>6</sup> James H. Billington, *Russia in Search of Itself*, Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2004, p. 47.

<sup>7</sup> See: Mark R. Beissinger, ‘Rethinking Empire in the Wake of Soviet Collapse’, in: Zoltan Barany, and Robert G. Moser (eds.), *Ethnic Politics and Post-Communism: Theories and Practice*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005; idem, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002; Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001; Terry Martin, Ronald G. Suny (eds.), *A State of Nations. Empire and Nation-Building in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001; Ronald G. Suny, ‘The Empire Strikes Out: Imperial Russia, „National” Identity, and Theories of Empire’, in: R. G. Suny and T. Martin (eds.), *A State of Nations. Empire and Nation-Building in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001; Y. Slezkine, ‘The USSR as Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism’, *Slavic Review*, no. 53, 1994, pp. 414-452.

imperial models described by Shmuel Eisenstadt, Michael Doyle or Anthony Pagden, or else the definitions of a nation that have been proposed by Anthony Smith, Ernest Gellner, John Armstrong or Eric Hobsbawm.

It was already in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that, for the first time, the Russian Empire has come to face the political problems of a nation – having absorbed the ethnic core of the Polish territories in 1815. The Polish periphery proved to be too strong culture-wise and well too advanced in the process of constructing a modern nationhood, a process interrupted by the partitions, for the imperial center to be able to assimilate it effectively. The answer to that problem came in the form of the first crucial attempt at constructing an “ideological” safeguard for the imperial center by furnishing it with an explicitly national, Russian character. The authorship of that attempt, one so distinctively important for the further evolution of the whole of the Russian political thought, is attributed to Nikolai Karamzin.<sup>8</sup> The founder to the historical myth of the Russian statehood undertook to inscribe thereunto the experiences of the Kievan Rus’, the Muscovy tsardom and the Petersburg Empire, thus presenting a indissoluble, integral concept, to which the single most crucial threat came from the Polish aspirations of restituting its political project – the Commonwealth. The consecutive Polish uprisings, in the years 1830-1831 and 1863-1864, substantiated the verity of the Polish problem within the Russian Empire, whereas the system of repressions carried out by the imperial apparatus verified the ability of the imperial center to deal with that very problem.<sup>9</sup> It was not until the period of Alexander III that the state authorities came to identify the problem of political dynamics not only of uniquely Polish but now also the whole variety of nationalities within the Empire – finding the solution in the intentional Russification policy. Yet the revolution of 1905 gave evidence not only to the crisis in the social structure of the Empire, but equally to the strength of the devolutionary nationalist movements, which the administrative measures of Russification were unable to neutralize. The beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century marked the period, when both the class, as much as the nation stood to be a real alternative to the political construct – an alternative to the empire. The answer furnished by the imperial center to face both of those challenges came in the form of liberal reforms, coupled with the strengthening of the state structure, as well as with the attempts at constructing a modern Russian nation as a backbone and a fundament of that state. For Russia, this was the first project of a “liberal empire” combined with a “dictate of law”. It came to be symbolized by the very author and implementer of this project – Peter Stolypin.

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<sup>8</sup> See: Andrzej Nowak, *Oświecony rosyjski imperializm I Polska (od Piotra I I Katarzyny II do Karamzina I Puszkina)*, in: idem, *Od imperium do imperium...*, pp. 64-89.

<sup>9</sup> See: Mikhail Dolbilov, ‘Kulturnaia idioma wozrozhdeniia Rossii kak faktor imperskoi politiki v Severo-Zapadnom kraie v 1863-1865 gg’, *Ab Imperio*, no. 1-2/2001, pp. 227-269; idem, ‘Russification and the Bureaucratic Mind in the Russian Empire’s Northwestern Region in the 1860s’, *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 5:2 (Spring 2004), pp. 249-58; Henryk Głębocki, *Fatalna sprawa. Kwestia polska w rosyjskiej myśli politycznej (1856-1866)*, Kraków: ARCANA, 2000; L. I. Gorizontov, *Paradoksy imperskoi politiki: Poliaki v Rossii, russkie v Polshie*, Moskva: Indrik, 1999; Witold Rodkiewicz, *Russian Nationality Policy in the Western Provinces of the Empire (1863-1905)*, Lublin: Scientific Society of Lublin, 1998; Darius Staliunas, ‘Etnopoliticheskaia situacia Severo-zapadnogo kraia v ocenke M. N. Murav’eva, in: *Baltiiski arkhiv. Russkaia kultura v Pribaltike*, vol. VII, Vilnius 2002, pp. 258-270; Theodore R. Weeks, *Nation and State in Late Imperial Russia: Nationalism and Russification on the Western Frontier, 1863-1914*, DeKalb 1996.

What is the relation between the modern nationalism, liberalism and the imperial idea? Can those concepts be reconciled? Those questions stimulated the discussions that found their expression in the contemporaneous Russian press. A profound insight into the matter is given in a collection of texts entitled “The nation and the empire in the Russian thought of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century”, which has been published in 2004 by S. M. Sergeev.<sup>10</sup> The author of the work points out to the two distinct currents in the contemporaneous political reflection. One, inspired by biological determinism, the concepts of Social Darwinism and the Nietzschean pathos of strength and struggle, marks the principal aim in the well-being of the ethnos understood as a biological organism. The other current, founded on the reference to the “ethical idealism” of Kant and Fichte, points to the well-being of an individual as the highest aim. Yet both currents relate to liberalism, and both reconcile it with the imperial idea, however differently understood. The first one interprets liberalism essentially as a principle of free competition, creating a springboard for a new aristocracy – also for an aristocracy of nations able to rule others, to create their own empires, primed for rivalry with others. The second of the two perceives liberalism as confirming the equal status of all individuals, of which the empire is a safeguard.<sup>11</sup>

The debate between the representatives of both of those currents reveals the underlying principles, the internal limitations and contradictions in the concept of an empire. Mikhail Menshikov (1859-1918), contributor to the “Novoye Vremia” and the author of the Russian “integral” nationalism, has been extremely powerful in exposing them through his polemic with Alexander Stolypin (brother to the Prime Minister), who attempted to present the ideal of a “liberal empire” as an effective answer to the problem of non-Russian nationalist movements thwarting the Romanov crown. Stolypin endeavors to set the liberal concept of the empire against the earlier, non-liberal reality under the “tsardom”, overly imbued with the spirit of Muscovite uniqueness. He presents the imperial ideal as “leading the diverse nations towards higher aims, properly understood by the ruling nation, under the guidance from that very ruling nation”. He equally expresses the belief that the incorporated tribes “have long willingly accepted the spiritual supremacy of Russia and are disposed to be led towards the Russian imperial aim as a family of nations, united under common ideals”. The Russian Empire is in that perspective merely a step towards the ultimate universal empire.<sup>12</sup> Menshikov answers with the argument that the whole concept of a discretionary empire with a common, supranational aim, itself is a harmful fiction. The empire, recalling the etymology of the term, is simply power. Power constitutes the rule, the imposing of the ruler’s will on those who are the subjects. Just as the Roman Empire was never an idyll, equally the Russian Empire (or any other for that matter) will never fulfill that ideal. There can be no mentioning of its voluntary character: no one, Menshikov once again argues, voluntarily renounces one’s identity (the faith, language, culture). Empire means force – inspiring the continual rebirth of revolt against it. For those very reasons, Menshikov treats the hostility or outright hate on the part of the Poles, Jews, Latvians, Armenians, Georgians, and even Tatars directed against Russia as a natural phenomenon. Empire is not about peace,

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<sup>10</sup> S. M. Sergeev ed., *Natsia i imperia v russkoi mysli nachala XX veka*, Moskva: Skimen, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> Sergeev, ‘Russkij natsionalizm i imperialism nachala XX veka’, in: Sergeev, ed., p. 15.

<sup>12</sup> A. A. Stolypin, *Tsarstvo ili Imperiia* [March 1910], in: Sergeev, p. 61.

but war, a constant struggle for life, the continuous process of subjecting hostile nations. The ultimate aim of an empire is thus, in the arguments posed by Menshikov, the complete assimilation into Russianism – conversion, so to speak, into a Russian nation-state. Being well aware of the limitations in the ability of the Russian national project to assimilate the diverse nationalities, Menshikov did not call for expansion, but quite to the contrary – for confining, perhaps even resigning from part of the territories, where the people can not be assimilated (for instance, the ethnically Polish territories).<sup>13</sup>

The prominent Russian religious writer and the eulogist of the empire as a spiritual mission, Vasily Rozanov (1856-1919), perceived the limiting of the imperial idea as an abnormal state. In his political articles, published in the years 1907-1913 (mainly on the pages of “*Novoye Vremia*”), the author pointed to narrow nationalism as the source of those limitations. It was a quality attributed in his writing to a single nation within the Russian Empire – the Polish nation. Its struggle to defend the distinctive national identity against the imperial principles would come to be outright condemned as “moral atrocity”. In parallel, the Russian imperial idea was described as immensely broad, inclusive, with the attainments of the grand, universal Russian culture fairly offered to all who chose to join it. This distinct openness towards other nations, customs, cultures was contrasted by Rozanov with the clearly narrow national ideals professed by the states in Western Europe. The clash of the Russian imperial idea and the nationalist movement would come to be presented as a confrontation of universalism and egoism. He would caution other nationalities from practicing the very egoism, seeing the signs of that fatal Polish example in the particular aspirations of the Latvians, Fins, Armenians. He cautioned with the claim that without the participation in the Russian endeavor, those nationalities would be deprived of the enlightenment by the higher culture and civilization, which otherwise, at the level of their weak national potency, could never be achieved. They would never be able to have the equals of Schiller or Pushkin, nor be able to construct an effective safeguard for the needs of a civilized individual, in form of a modern state. Stepping out of the imperial grounds onto the individual national project would entail the risk of receding into a state of semi-barbarism. Thus the non-Russian nationalities should not only accept their partaking in the Russian imperial project, but rather adhere to it with much content (Rozanov writes of “*radost’ slijanija*” – the joy of assimilation). The Russian nation, constituting the center of that idea, is able, in all the boundlessness of its spirit, its lack of any envy or complexes whatsoever, to take in the whole sea of different ethnic elements and preserve the diversity of those individual accents – with these words Rozanov gives a truly poetic generalization of his vision.<sup>14</sup>

Should it occur that national egoism comes to obstruct the advance of the imperial universalism, the latter holds the right to defend itself – and strike with all its might, as should be the case with Poles,

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<sup>13</sup> M. O. Menshikov, *Netsarsvennyi Imperialism* [March 1910], in: Sergeev, pp. 61-67; *Prestupnaia romantika* [June 1913], pp. 74-80.

<sup>14</sup> V. V. Rozanov, “*Trudnosti*” *dlia inorodcev*, in: Sergeev [January 1914], p. 143, see also: idem, *Privislinskie publicisty u moskovskogo „kniazia” w gostiakh* [October 1907]; *Belorusy, litowcy i Polsha v okrainnom voprosie Rossii* [September 1909], pp. 100-104 and 114-134).

who are not willing to renounce their national egoism. With this stern caveat Rozanov gives a less poetic apposition of the consequences that his imperial vision might entail.<sup>15</sup>

In fact, the same vision would come to be advanced by Peter Struve (1870-1944), the founder and the most prominent, from 1905 onwards, advocate of the Russian national-liberalism. Contrary to Rozanov (and a whole multitude of other writers), he attempted to turn it into the fundament for practical political activity. Thus he undertook to equip his political vision with a more coherent political program: the program of Great Russia, most clearly reconciling nationalism, liberalism and imperialism. "The Great Russia is a form of Russian statehood as a national Empire-state. [...] The presence of the national core in a multi-ethnic entirety conditions a characteristic that is crucial for all true Empires: their ability and will to expand."<sup>16</sup> Preserving its national (Russian) and spiritual (Orthodox) identity, the Empire shall be founded on the conformity with the legal order introduced after the revolution of 1905. It guarantees the freedom and the ability of unrestrained development on the part of every individual, although precluding the federal nature of the political system that might give autonomy to the non-Russian constituents of the Empire. The Russian liberalism must thus reconcile the respect for individual rights with the acceptance of the national, Russian character of the Empire. Thereby, nationalism will cease to be the domain of the political Right.<sup>17</sup>

Struve has developed his program at a time, when nearly the whole of Eastern Europe was divided between great empires (alongside Russia, also Austro-Hungary, Germany and the Ottoman Empire), which have just begun the struggle for an absolute domination over the entire region. Thus he accepted what Menshikov so strongly underlined, the inevitability of the element of struggle, the unyielding rivalry with others to preserve the Empire. He did not believe in the "joy of assimilation" on the part of other, non-Russian nations within the Empire, yet he was convinced of the attracting force of the liberal legal order, one that the Empire was to guarantee, as well as of the compelling power of the spiritual legacy of Great Russia. Imperialism, as professed by Struve, was finally not an alternative, but rather the highest point of nationalism and liberalism at the same time.

The contradictions that might have arisen from bringing all those ideas into a single equation, have stimulated Peter Savitskij (1895-1968) to make an attempt at appeasing and ordering them by presenting a most refined theory. The later emigrant ideologue of the Eurasian current, already as a twenty-year old, Savitskij developed a mature synthesis of the imperial and nationalist concepts, thus anticipating the theoretical ascertainments offered on both concepts in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He came to note primarily that there is no distinct, clear-cut border line between the nation and the empire. A nation, most generally, is the result of bringing together a whole variety of nationalities, assimilating them into one dominating ethnos. The same holds true for an empire, where a single national

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<sup>15</sup> Rozanov, *Tsentrobezhnye sily v Rossii* [January 1914], in: Sergeev, p. 137.

<sup>16</sup> P. N. Struve, *Velikaia Rossiia i Sviataia Rus'* [1914], in: Sergeev, pp. 230-231.

<sup>17</sup> P. N. Struve, *Natsionalnoe nachalo v liberalizme* [December 1914], in: Sergeev, pp. 235-236; see also: Richard Pipes, *Struve: Liberal on the Right*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980.

core systematically advances its economic, cultural and finally political domination beyond its ethnic borders.<sup>18</sup>

The first stage in erecting an empire is thus the construction of a great nation – the center to the imperial project. For Russia, it is constituted by the unity of the Eastern Slavs, guaranteeing the assimilation of Great-Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians under a single all-Russian model. This very interpretation represented a conscious answer to the problem well evident to the tsarist authorities already in the 1860's, one approached with much apprehension by all the aforementioned authors – the problem of Ukrainian “separatism”. Savitskij regarded the Ukrainians as of equal standing with the Great-Russians, a constituting element of the ethnic core in the Empire, pointing to the significant legacy of the Ukrainian ethnic and cultural element in constructing the Empire during the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, as well as under Peter the Great. Accepting the fact of the centuries-old separation of Ukraine from Moscow, along with the ties of the former to Lithuania, and later to Poland, he nevertheless claimed the natural character of the Muscovite-Ukrainian bonds in the 17<sup>th</sup> century: founded on the common Byzantine civilization and tribal kinship. Ukraine was able to unite with Poland only based on imperial principles, whereas in its relations with Russia, the unity came through the process of constructing a broader form of nationhood.<sup>19</sup>

The second stage in erecting an empire comes with already well-rooted “great nation” – the “imperialising” nation, as described by Savitskij – undertaking the program of consciously incorporating under its sphere of influence, the successive nations and countries, to the point, where they come to be utterly united into a single economic, cultural, and finally political structure. Savitskij, in line with Menshikov and, to a degree, Struve, accepts that an empire is never constructed on the will of its subject nations, but rather is the result of a conscious initiative of the one “imperialising” nation, which, through coercion or treaties, absorbs others into its project. In turn, much as Rozanov and Struve, yet against Menshikov, Savitskij attributes much importance to the aspect of the evident advantages available to the nations incorporated in an empire. Those very advantages are perceived as perhaps the most fundamental test for the empire itself, for the effectiveness of the imperial project. In his arguments, the primary prerequisite for the cultural and economic assimilation is the “historical wisdom and the significance for the world-wide progress”. Any great nation endeavoring to construct an empire must be able to offer something positive to the subjected nations. An empire can grow only when the advantages springing from subjection outweigh the sense of calamity, so natural for the subjects.<sup>20</sup>

Continuing to develop distinct systematics of empires, distinguishing two types, the “economic-colonial” (British, French) and “continental-political” (the empire of Alexander the Great, Rome, Russia), Savitskij points out that the former creates a system of interdependence asymmetrical economically, implying a de facto exploitation of the peripheries (colonies) by the center (metropolis), as well as politically – where the peripheries do not obtain representation within the center. In the case of Russia,

<sup>18</sup> P. N. Savitskij, *Bor'ba za Imperiu* [1915], in: Sergeev, pp. 266-267.

<sup>19</sup> P. N. Savitskij, *Bor'ba za Imperiu* [1915], in: Sergeev, pp. 300-302.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 267-268.

the equal standing in economic terms is preserved, and in parallel, all the nations enjoy political representation in the Russian Duma. Thus only the “continental-political” type of an empire gives the guarantee of reconciling power and justice – argued Savitskij. And, anticipating the ideas of Euroasianism that would come at a later date, delineated, concluding his theory in 1915, the ultimate aim and direction for expanding those principles under Great Russia: “the creation of an organic imperial unity of all the nations and territories of ancient culture – from Constantinople, through Delhi and all the way to Peking”.<sup>21</sup>

Making a reference to the valuable comment by the author of the collection of texts, the source for the above deliberation, it were the liberals who put forth the most ambitious projects for the expansion of the Russian borders. And “only the national-liberals were imperialists in the most direct sense of the term”.<sup>22</sup> Allowing for a personal contribution, it is worth to add an observation that their apology of an empire demonstrated a particular synthesis of the specifically Russian arguments, those older, as well as more modern in character, being introduced from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards into the arsenal of *raison d'être* for the expansion the Empire of Peter the Great and those that followed. The arguments reaching further back in time, rooted in the tradition of the ideal of Holy Rus’ and Moscow’s Third Rome, exposed the uniqueness, the particular universal mission for the Russian political community: adhering to it meant a spiritual conversion, a chance for partaking in a collective salvation, or at the least in a distinctively noble form of culture. The more modern arguments were common to the concept of European Enlightenment, legitimizing political expansion of empires with the consequent advance of order and light of civilization. Incorporating into an empire thus meant civilizing, benefiting from modernization.<sup>23</sup> With this particular synthesis Russian uniqueness was founded on a much greater, than in the case of rival Western empires, openness to other cultures, a lower threshold for imperial assimilation, a weaker civilizational violence. Common to the current of Enlightenment as much as to the tradition of Russian universalism, was the identification of an enemy in form of “nationalistic narrowness” and “egoism” of the political projects undertaken by the modern nations arising at the imperial peripheries.

The reality was yet unwilling to comply with the model. The Empire collapsed in 1917. The national Russian center proved to be too weak to preserve the social and ethnic structure of the Empire, falling apart amidst the war struggle and revolutionary agitation. As the modern Russian nation was still lacking, at the time of crisis the “national Empire”, as envisaged by Rozanov, Struve or Savitskij, could not hold. What came true was the utterly “pessimistic scenario”, one foreseen by the integral nationalist Menshikov: the insurgent peripheries took advantage (with the help of rival empires) of the malaise of the Russian center.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibidem, pp. 306-309. See also a development of this idea in: P. N. Savitskij, ‘Kontinent-Okiean (Rossija i mirovoj rynok)’, in: *Iskhod k Vostoku*, Sofia 1921, pp. 123-125.

<sup>22</sup> S. M. Sergeev, op. cit., p. 16.

<sup>23</sup> See: Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire. A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999, pp. 46-152.

“The synthesis of the traditional Russian values and the socio-politico-economic modernity could be developed by no other but the party, regarding itself as the radical incarnation of the anti-nationalistic spirit. It managed to construct a new modification of the Russian Empire, where as part of the empire-wide transnational ideology, the “older brother” could advance the cultural (but not political) nationalism, one tightly bound by that very ideology”.<sup>24</sup>

It is worth remembering that the course of World War I finally brought about the collapse of other neighboring empires: the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, German. The very principle of an empire, advanced with much pride throughout the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, came to be fundamentally – as was perceived at the time – questioned by the clearly triumphant national principle, the principle of a nation-state, of the right to national self-determination.

The strategists of the Bolshevik revolution initially did not intend to restore the empire. As Ronald Suny points out,<sup>25</sup> the Soviet state was not created as an empire, but turned into one in the course of its advance. This particular shift, I believe, took place in two distinct stages.

Having obtained a stronghold of power in Russia, the Bolsheviks desired to spread the revolution as promptly as would be possible onto Europe, to Germany in the first place, altogether abating the problem of conflicts and unequal status between the different nations by introducing a social revolt of truly continental scale. An attempt at storming Europe proved yet unsuccessful. What the Bolsheviks managed to recover up to the year 1921 was most of the peripheries of the Russian Empire that, after the events of 1917, attempted to part with the Russian kernel, one which now constituted the center of revolutionary power. The new residents of the Kremlin had to face the practical problem of an empire. And they were able to propose a solution, a true novelty. As Mark Beissinger accurately notes, the authority that was not founded on the consensus had been concealed with a discourse on national self-determination, whereas the principles of self-determination and sovereignty had been applied with the aim of distorting the distinction between authoritarian power and voluntary consensus.<sup>26</sup> The architect of this strategy, Lenin, and its administrator – Stalin, both well understood the principle of modern mass politics, where the form comes to play a more vital role than the content itself in shaping social consciousness. Thus they have constructed an “affirmative action empire”, whose principles of functioning in a system of associated republics, autonomous republics and autonomous ethnic regions has recently been so precisely presented by Terry Martin.<sup>27</sup> The ethnic peripheries of the former Empire acquired a prospect of realizing the postulates of cultural nationalism – with their own language finding its way into education, administration, as well as literature, with extended republican institutions. At the same time, they remained under a complete political control from the new center, constituted now not by

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<sup>24</sup> Sergeev, ‘Russkij natsionalizm ...’, p. 19.

<sup>25</sup> Ronald Suny, ‘Ambiguous Categories: States, Empires, and Nations’, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 1995, Vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 185-196.

<sup>26</sup> Mark R. Beissinger, ‘Rethinking Empire...’.

<sup>27</sup> Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire ...*, pp. 1-29.

Russia, but by the communist party. Its empire found a rationale, making a direct reference to the Enlightenment claim of universalism – in the specific cloak of communist modernization.

Nevertheless, by the 1930's, Stalin began to retreat from the model of an “affirmative action empire”. Its form was not infringed upon (apart from eliminating a certain number of ethnic regions – along with their population). Yet in fact, preserving the supreme role for the party, he reinstated quite a number of symbolic elements from the previous system: the Russian center – the non-Russian peripheries. The victory in World War II ultimately sealed the return, as part of the discourse within the Soviet ruling elite, of the role played by the Russian nation as *primus inter pares*, or rather “more equal” than others. This constituted the second stage in the forming of the Soviet empire. The imperial traditions that marked the reigns of Peter the Great, Catherine II, and even Ivan IV, have all been, if not completely rehabilitated than, in any case, effectively employed by the Soviet rule. The ideological fiction of the Soviet brotherhood of nations, from 1945 onwards, began to take shape of what Rozanov would only dream of, when proposing the concept of “*radost' slijanija*” (the joy of assimilation). Equally, in the course of World War II, beginning with the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact and following with the confirmation and expansion of the territorial acquisitions after 1945, the Soviet Union began to construct its external empire. The countries of Central-Eastern Europe constituted its kernel, from which it would reach, under Khrushchev and Brezhnev, onto a global scale – all the way to Cuba, Vietnam, Angola, Ethiopia, Yemen or Afghanistan. The latter symbolizing, in the case of the Soviet Union, the fate of each and every empire – “overextension”.

The term “empire” remained itself, until the very end of the Soviet system, a taboo. It came to be used effectively against that very system at the time of its crisis: the crisis of an unfulfilled promise to bring modernization (it turned out that the ideological rival – the capitalist West – is a much more efficient tool in that process), as well as the crisis of the form of control, which gradually came to identify its communist center with its Russian antecedent. The unsuccessful attempt at containing the crisis in its primary, modernization-related dimension, took the form of the Gorbachev's perestroika. The therein inscribed concept of *glasnost* – or openness necessary in the attempt at “catching up” with the western modernization, led to the disclosing of the second, imperial dimension of that crisis.<sup>28</sup> Experimenting with openness, after years of totalitarian control over remembrance, elicited the memory of great atrocities of the Soviet system, a large portion of which was committed in the process of incorporating the subsequent, non-Russian peripheries and instituting control over them, such atrocities as the Great Famine of the early 1930's in Ukraine, or the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact as the source of Soviet domination over the Baltic republics. Combined with the local struggles on the part of republican nomenclatures to construct new legitimization for their rule and expand their sphere of independence from Moscow, the restitution of that

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<sup>28</sup> Alexei Kara-Murza identifies Gorbachev's perestroika as an effort to construct a hybridic form of „a liberal empire”, which was doomed due to its internal contradictions – see: A. Kara-Murza, “Rossia v treugolnike ‘etnokratia – imperia – natsia’”, in: S. Chernyshev, ed., *Inoe. Khrestomatia novogo rossijskogo samosoznania*, vol. 2, Moskva: Argus, 1995, pp. 41-54.

particular common remembrance acquired political significance. The Soviet Union came to be defined as an oppressive empire.

The forms of sovereign authority vested in the national (republican) peripheries, established as part of the “affirmative action empire” and never removed, forms that throughout nearly their entire history remained unfulfilled, could at the moment of that particularly dual crisis, play a key role. They proved to be well-prepared for the collapse of the empire, as real substance could promptly be bestowed upon them.<sup>29</sup>

In the course of the crisis disclosed by the Gorbachev’s perestroika, the most striking blow to the Soviet empire came not from the “insurgent peripheries”, but from the Russian center itself: in the form of a de facto secession of the Russian Federation from the USSR. As ever new claims made their way from the peripheries to the Moscow-based center, furthered was the sense of their unjustified nature: it was no other than Russia that suffered under the institutional system of the USSR from being disadvantaged (having no separate republican communist party, nor its Academy of Sciences, nor many of the other institutions that were formally established for the other, non-Russian republics). Many of the “ordinary Russians” perceived the crisis of the Soviet system as a result of an overly extensive drainage of its resources by the imperial peripheries. For a significant part of the Russian intellectual elites (with prose writers, such as Valentin Rasputin, extolling the tragic fate of the Russian countryside, as much as historians studying Russian culture, to mention only Dimitrij Lihatshev) the further existence of this very system represented a deadly threat for all that remained of the Russian spiritual identity. For some ambitious politicians (such as Boris Yeltsin), playing the card of Russian autonomy posed an opportunity of acquiring an important advantage in a struggle for power with the pan-Soviet party and state apparatus dominated by Gorbachev.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, there was yet another factor, whose role in the collapse of the Soviet system remains debatable, and which, in the discussions on the empire and its restoration in Russia, constantly returns to the fore. It is the external factor: the issue of rivalry between the USSR and its adversary, one that was first to use the exposing term of the “evil empire” – the United States, and more broadly the West. Has the Soviet Union lost the Cold War, has it been defeated by the United States under the leadership of Ronald Reagan, and have the Russians, along with other nations within the internal and external empire, been liberated from without? This particular approach was undeniably rejected by the advocates of the Soviet legacy. They came to perceive the crisis and the consequent collapse of the USSR as a result of a conspiracy inspired by the American rivals to Moscow, or at least a result of a ploy on the part of the West, which, emerging from the Cold War, it endeavored at the expense of a “naïve” Gorbachev, who agreed to unilateral concessions on behalf of Moscow (for instance, to withdraw the external empire from the Central-Eastern Europe) without effectively safeguarding the geopolitical interests of the Russian

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<sup>29</sup> See the best account of this process: Mark R. Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002

<sup>30</sup> See the best analysis of internal causes of the Soviet Union’s collapse: Włodzimierz Marciniak, *Rozgrabione Imperium. Upadek Związku Sowieckiego I powstanie Federacji Rosyjskiej*, Kraków: ARCANA, 2001.

center.<sup>31</sup> Thus Russia has not been defeated but rather tricked – much as the Second Reich in the view of its advocates in 1918...

In Russia, for many of the active proponents of the breakup of the Soviet system, important was the conviction that it has been achieved primarily with their own efforts – with the hands of the Russian people, who have not been liberated by anyone from the harness of communism, but rather have liberated themselves – and others. In that respect, the key experience came with the containment of the coup attempt aiming to restore the Soviet system in August of 1991. With over 100 thousand citizens of Moscow manifesting their opposition to that attempt, it thus became a symbol of the sense of self-liberation. This sense founded a conviction that the collapse of the Soviet system could not be compared with that of the other 20<sup>th</sup> century totalitarianism: the German nazism. The Germans have been defeated, forced to surrender. They have been liberated from without, and equally from without, forced to come to terms with their historical heritage, one that led to nazism, forced to accept their historical sins. Russia has not been defeated, but rather has managed to liberate itself – and therefore itself it will decide on the interpretation of its past.

Not only the role played by the West, the Cold War geopolitical rival to Moscow, has thus been weakened. To a much greater extent, the imperial aspect came to be marginalized: other nations, the peripheries to the Russian center within the Soviet system were deprived of both any importance in the breakup process of the Soviet Union (since the key role is attributed to Yeltsin and the supporting manifestation of the Muscovites in August 1991, or – against his intentions – to Gorbachev), as much as any right to the claims against Russia, the core and the geopolitical heir to the USSR. Thus Russia could step forth as the principal victim of the system, and equally the principal driving force behind the liberation efforts. It thereby was not to expect any claims or demands concerning compensation for the years under the Soviet empire, which might be made by its provinces (for instance Poland reminding of the Katyn murder, Ukraine reminding of the Great Famine atrocity, or the Baltic republics reminding of the mass persecutions after 1940 and 1944), but rather, in their place, the expressions of gratitude for the successful liberation.<sup>32</sup>

The significance of this particular element in the political imagination of a part of liberal Russian elites would be revealed only later. In 1991, when the fate of the USSR was being decided in strong conflict with its advocates, the pursuits of its Russian and non-Russian opponents seemed entirely convergent. The political symbol of that convergence came in the act of dissolving the Soviet state through a joint decision taken by the Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian leaders in December of that year in Belovezha. The call of “doloi imperiu” (away with the empire) could mean for Kiev, Vilnius or Tbilisi the drive to limit and break away the dependence ties with the Moscow-based center, whereas for Russia

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<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Anatoliy Utkin, ‘Rossia i Zapad’, *Svobodnaia mysl’*, vol. 70, no. 13, pp. 3-14; idem, ‘Pochemu ischez Sovetskii Soyuz’, in: *Na pereput’e (Novye Vekhi)*, Moskva: Logos, 1999, pp. 185-213.

<sup>32</sup> See an example of this reasoning: Alexei Miller, ‘Czy stosunki polsko-rosyjskie mogą być dobre?’, *Arcana*, no. 64-65 (lipiec-październik 2005), pp. 86-90.

– the summon to a most immediate, most energetic retreat from the Soviet reality, from the legacy of the communist system. Nevertheless it was a call common to all.<sup>33</sup> Although not for long.

In the non-Russian states of the former USSR, its consequences brought about the grounding of the new political structures on the nation-state model. In Russia, in turn, the simple alternative of “an empire or a (modern/civic) nation-state”, an alternative, as already mentioned, present also in the colliding visions of “empire-savers” and “nation-builders” – was finally rejected.

The latter element in that alternative, the “nation-builders”, seemed to have found support in the official rhetoric present for the first several months in the Yeltsin administration. Still concentrated, at the time, on the internal struggle with the coalition of its rivals, those strongly attached to the imperial legacy of the USSR, as well as on the new distribution of the administrative market in the process of intense privatization, it tried to ground the new Russian identity in the idea of a civic and political Russian nation (*rossijanie*), uniting the citizens of the Russian Federation.<sup>34</sup> Throughout this first period, no significant attempts were made to reintegrate control over the former imperial domains. The Russian intellectual elites continued to advance the interpretations of the collapse of the Soviet empire perceived as an inevitable process, one that could rescue the remains of Russia’s spiritual and material potential, well exploited in the process of constructing and sustaining that very empire.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, their anti-imperial significance was supported by the claims that the reconciliation of the need to modernize with the enduring imperial structures and continuing imperial policy is virtually unattainable.<sup>36</sup>

Yet it was those very same first several months of independent Russia, which brought into light the conditions for the restoration of the imperial idea. From the perspective of the political elite governing Russia, three aspects were of particular importance. First of all, the decision to recognize, at the international floor, Russia as the heir-state to the USSR. This signified not only the declaration of will, however natural, to uphold the position of Russia as a great power, but also, an issue that was not perhaps well-realized at the beginning, the vision of Russia as a reduced power, a weakened one, which quite naturally will undertake to reconstitute its influence, status, control over the domains, from which it had to retreat. Thus it signified, to an extent, the sanctioning, within the scope of Russian policies (particularly the foreign policy) and Russian identity, of a distinct state of frustration, evident since 1991, resulting from constant comparisons to the former power of the USSR.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> See, for example: Boris L’vin, ‘Doloi imperiu’, *Vek XX i mir*, 1990, no. 8.

<sup>34</sup> See Vera Tolz, *Inventing the Nation: Russia*, London: Arnold, 2001, pp. 237-238.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, V. Tsymburskii: ‘Ostrov Rossia (Perspektivy rossiskoi geopolitiki)’, *Polis*, 1993, no. 5, pp. 6-23.

<sup>36</sup> See: A. M. Salmin, ‘Soyuz posle Soyuz. Problemy uporiadochneniia natsionalno-gosudarstvennykh otnoshenii v byvshem SSSR’, *Polis*, 1992, no. 1-2; A. F. Filippov, ‘Nablyudatel imperii (Imperia kak poniatije sotsyologii i politicheskaja problema)’, *Voprosy sotsiologii*, vol. 1, (1992), no. 1; idem, ‘Smysl imperii: k sotsyologii politicheskogo prostranstva’, in: *Inoe. Khrestomatia novogo rossijskogo samosoznania*, vol. 3, Moskva: Argus, 1995, pp. 423-476; A. Kara-Murza, ‘Mezhdru Evraziei i Aziopoi’, in: *Inoe...*, vol. 3, pp. 163-184; M. V. Ilin, ‘Slova i smysl: Despotia, Imperia, Derzhava’, *Polis*, 1994, no. 2. See also an interesting analysis of these concepts: Włodzimierz Marciniak, ‘Imperium i państwo: historia pojęć w kontekście dziejów Rosji’, in: *Russia and Eastern Europe: Applied ‘Imperiology’*, Andrzej Nowak (ed.), Kraków: ARCANA, 2006, pp. 46-59.

Second of all, the collapse of the USSR raised the question of whether the Russian Federation itself, with nearly 20% of its population composed of ethnic minorities, will not share the fate of the empire – destined to collapse. The shadow of a further devolution thus justified the tendency of renewed strengthening of the authority center and containing the disintegrating predispositions inside the state – and around it. Furthermore, the interest in containing the process of acquiring independence by the former republics of the Soviet Union in their relations with Russia, could be motivated by the fact that over 20 million ethnic Russians continued to live on their territories, disconnected from the Russian Federation. In the nomenclature of the Russian foreign policy, the republics of the former USSR thus earned the title of the *near abroad*.<sup>38</sup>

Finally, third of all, the Yeltsin administration, in its conflict with the *brown-red* coalition, one strongly attached to the Soviet symbols still vibrant in the consciousness of the Russian people, could not venture to find understandable symbols for new identity anywhere else than in the imperial tradition itself – that preceding the post-1917 experiences. Recalling once again, Russia has never functioned politically as a nation, and neither has the Soviet system been able to supply as many national, at least in form, institutions, as enjoyed by the remaining republics of the USSR. To defy the red star, the two-headed eagle could once again be of service (de facto since 1992, de jure only since the year 2000); the official flag of the Romanov Empire waved against the red flag of communism (since December 1993); the anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution substituted, keeping the early November date, by the anniversary of driving out Poles from Kremlin in 1612 (since 1996).<sup>39</sup>

The call to construct a modern Russian nation, as an alternative to the imperial tradition (be it the Soviet or the earlier, tsarist version) found hardly any fertile grounds among the opinion-creating elites in Russia. Explaining this particular situation, a few reasons can be supplied. Thus it is worth noting the broader, not specifically Russian, intellectual context of the imperial collapse in 1991. It was quite different from that of the years 1917 or 1918. Although the imperial principle once again came to be castigated as an anachronism, belonging in the “dustbin of history”, the principle of the nation-state, the right of nations to self-determination, was nevertheless not so explicitly, as was the case seventy years earlier, accepted as a new mode of ordering the political map of the world. For the academic and intellectual circles in the West, which the new Russian elites considered to be the natural frame of reference for their own ideas, the nation was no longer treated as a natural, immemorial center of social community, but rather as a political construct. What is more, the policies pursued in the name of national

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<sup>37</sup> See: Johan Matz, *Constructing a Post-Soviet International Political Reality. Russian foreign policy towards newly independent states 1990-1995*, Uppsala: University of Uppsala, 2001; see also Witold Rodkiewicz, ‘Zachodnie kresy’ imperium w koncepcjach polityki zagranicznej w latach 1991-2004: neoimperializm czy postimperializm?, in: *Russia and Eastern Europe: Applied ‘Imperiology’...*, pp. 88-106; Bobo Lo, *Russian Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era. Reality, Illusion and Mythmaking*, London: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2002; K. E. Sorokin, ‘Geopolitika Rossii v ‘blizhnem’ i ‘srednem’ zarubezh’e: praksologicheskie izmereniia’, *Polis*, 1995, no. 3, pp. 23-39.

<sup>38</sup> James H. Billington, *Russia in Search...*, pp. 47-48.

<sup>39</sup> *Guide to Russia. National Symbols*, in: <http://russiatoday.strana.ru/en/profile/sym/> 2006-02-14; see also Richard Sakwa, *Putin. Russia’s Choice*, London and New York: Routledge, 2003, pp. 164-166.

interests were credited for atrocities as despicable as those committed in the course of constructing and sustaining empires. The *mot du jour* of the early 1990's was not the pursuit of the nation-state, but rather the construction of ever-broader political agglomerations, better equipped for the economic and cultural challenges of globalization. The project of building the European Union or, in a less ambitious scope, instituting, in the western hemisphere, NAFTA at the initiative of the United States, both could have been interpreted as constituting new venues for uniting traditional states and nations, but could equally have been perceived – at least from the perspective of the Russian experience – as forms of empires of a new type, however well, or not, camouflaged. In any case, those very projects could be seen as an opportunity for reviving the positive imperial discourse.

In parallel, the proclamation made by the leading “ideologue” of the end of the Cold War period, Francis Fukuyama, claiming the “end of History” as the triumph of the principles of western liberalism, did not provide for any privileged position to be assigned to Russia. It simply was to join the already given model, as other societies around the world, it was merely to accept the victorious model of western modernization. This presented a blow for the well-rooted in the Russian (as well as Soviet) intellectual tradition, sense of uniqueness in the experiences and the fate of Russia. This very sense could only have been overcome with a prompt success in modernization, in accordance with the most modern, western model. Yet the success was lacking. Quite to the contrary, the reforms officially introduced in 1992, formally liberalizing the economy, while in fact merely confirming the principles of an oligarch-led distribution of the administrative market in Russia, have come to be perceived by both the influential elites (particularly the post-Soviet opposition, but others as well) and the ordinary people, as a great deceit. Accepting the model, one that was identified with the West, brought, within that perspective, not the material improvement in the living standard of the Russian people, but rather a sense of growing inequality and the resulting frustration.<sup>40</sup>

For a significant part of the elites in Russia, the model of a civic nation-state proved, from that particular perspective, to be unattractive. It came to be seen as inappropriate for the tradition and the specific Russian conditions, all of which, after a brief period of blindly replicating the West, once again would be underlined and positively valued.<sup>41</sup> The nation-state seemed such an unoriginal solution, one perhaps fit for the small nations. But for Russia, with her great, tragic, yet noble historical experience in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (as much as in the earlier periods) – pursuing the path recommended for the small countries of Eastern Europe or Latin America – is that not a humiliating and undeserving project? This rhetorical question, put forth in the multitude of articles published in the Russian press since 1992, has best been recapitulated in a novel by a postmodernist writer, Victor Pelevin: “why it was worth exchanging an evil empire for an evil banana republic that imported its banana from Finland”.<sup>42</sup> The nation, a civic republic,

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<sup>40</sup> James H. Billington, *Russia in Search...*, pp. 67-81.

<sup>41</sup> See analyses of this phenomenon in: Iurii Pivovarov, ‘Russkaia mysl’. Sistema russkoi mysli i Russkaia Sistema (opyt kriticheskoi metodologii)’, *stat’ia vtoraia, Russkii Istoricheskii Zhurnal*, vol. I, leto 1998, nr 3, pp. 151-178; idem, ‘Russia’s Political History and Foreign Policy’, *International Affairs: A Russian Journal*, no. 4, 2002; Yuri Pivovarov and Andrei Fursov, ‘Russkaia sistema i reformy’, *Pro et Contra*, no. 4, 1999, pp. 176-197.

<sup>42</sup> Victor Pelevin, *Babylon*, London: Faber 2000, p. 79.

both constitute a limited idea (one not working well in Russia), empire is a grand idea – even if an evil one.

But perhaps not all that evil?

The attempts at defending Russian imperialism and its restoration on the eve of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, have been generally attributed to those political forces and intellectual circles that were considered “marginal”, “radical right-wing”, or outright “neo-fascist”. The group of “empire-savers” would initially be considered to include mainly the advocates of upholding the Soviet Union, the Russian communist authors of the new ideology – led by Alexander Prokhanov and Genady Zugarov, or the grotesque neo-imperialists, such as Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and his “Liberal Democratic” party. Regardless of the extent of manipulation in the election results since 1993 in Russia, it is hardly possible to treat them as marginal players in Russian politics in the 1990’s. The support for their violent, neo-imperial rhetoric in the subsequent elections in 1993, 1995 and 1999 did not fall below the level of 1/3 of the votes cast.<sup>43</sup> The other current, offering ideological grounds for the neo-imperial tendencies, one that in the 1990’s did not play a role of an independent force on the Russian political scene, is Eurasianism. In its tradition, that particular current draws on the radical opposition between Russia and the West, as two distinct and mutually rival civilizations, as presented by the Russian thinkers in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Nikolai Danilevsky and Konstantin Leontiev), restituted by the post-1917 émigré authors of the original concept of Eurasianism – among them prince Nikolai Trubetskoy and the already mentioned Peter Savitskiy, further strengthened by Lev Gumilov in his historical and ethnological studies carried out under the Soviet Union. The new political impulse for the ideology came from Alexander Dugin, who undertook to turn it into a justification for a life-or-death struggle between the continental Eurasianist Russian empire and its sea “Atlanticist” rival (USA). The availability, in nearly all of the bookstores in Russia, and the discussion, in the popular media, of the works authored by Dugin, with the most well-known two volume treaty entitled *Osnovy geopolitiki* (*Foundations of Geopolitics*, the first edition published in 1997), reintroduced into the stream of Russian political thought, the issues pertaining to an empire, understood as a necessary tool in the brutal war fought in defense of Russian survival in face of western aggression.<sup>44</sup> The revival of the sense of a principal civilizational conflict, separating Russia from the West, and thus requiring Russia to muster means of defense, securing its geopolitical interests,

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<sup>43</sup> See a more detailed analyses of neoimperial manifestoes by G. Ziuganov (*Geografiia pobedy. Osnovy rossiiskoi geopolitiki*, Moskva 1998), *Rossii – Rodina moia*, Moskva 1998) and V. Zhirynovskii (*O sud’bakh Rossii. Poslednii brodok na iug*, Moskva 1993) in: A. Nowak, *Od imperium do imperium...*, pp. 248-251; ideas of A. Prokhanov are interestingly presented by John B. Dunlop, *The Rise of Russia and the Fall of the Soviet Empire*, second expanded edition, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995, pp. 169-177; Iver B. Neumann, *Russia and the Idea of Europe. A study in identity and international relations*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996, pp. 173-186. The best analysis of manipulations in Russian post-communist politics: Andrew Wilson, *Virtual Politics. Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005.

<sup>44</sup> See Andrzej Nowak, *Od imperium do imperium*, pp. 247-255; Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World. Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 221-240; Stephen D. Shenfeld, *Russian Fascism: Traditions, Tendencies, and Movements*, New York: ME Sharpe, 2000, pp. 190-220; Charles Clover, ‘Dreams of the Eurasian Heartland’, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 78, no. 2 (March-April 1999); Francoise Thom, ‘Eurasianism: A New Russian Foreign Policy?’, *Uncaptive Minds*, vol. 7, no. 2 (1994).

became a fact readily promulgated in the intellectual circles in Russia, at least since 1993. That was precisely the year that witnessed, on the one hand, the Bosnian conflict, presented in Russia as an attack against the Orthodox Serbs by Muslims and Croat Catholics with the support of the USA and NATO, while on the other hand, the perspective of the former peripheries to the Soviet empire in Central-Eastern Europe (Poland, Czech Republic or Hungary) becoming members in NATO, both stimulating that particular sense with new facts (or rather their ideological interpretations). That was also the year, which, in the West, brought about a new synthesis of the global state of affairs in a thought-provoking piece by Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations* – a synthesis that was received with much interest in Russia, as proving the claim of Russia being equally treated by the West as a separate, alien entity.<sup>45</sup>

One of the possible answers to that sense of isolation and alienation could have come in the form of an attempt at reviving the community founded on the Orthodox-East Slavic unity. The rebirth of the “great nation” idea, to encompass the Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians – an idea rooted into the Russian thought in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Nikolai Karamzin, one which Peter Savitskij would define as a first stage of a much broader idea of imperial Russia – was consistently called for by Alexander Solzhenitsin. Alexei Miller, a historian, would remind of its roots in the Russian imperial policy of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and some of the politicians would make strong references to that very legacy. As part of the course of action undertaken by the state, it would find its expression in the gradually, and not without hesitation, implemented concept of a union with Belarus (since 1996), as well as the policy of systematically strengthening the economic, political and cultural influences in Ukraine. The power of that idea – of treating Belarusians and Ukrainians as not only strategic, but equally important in terms of “identity-building” peripheries of the Russian national center (automatically resulting in a fundamental lack of consent to the preference on the part of those countries, to seek political partners other than Russia), was however grounded in its still large popularity among Russians.<sup>46</sup>

The other answer, alongside the revival of the East-Slavic “great nation”, to the crisis in the belief of the ability to truly integrate Russia into the West, came in the form of a conviction that Russia, quite simply, constitutes a separate civilization. Hundreds of press publications and statements made in the Russian media by the various intellectual authorities and politicians in the mid-1990’s, all expressed the following thought: Indeed, Huntington is right, although he merely restates the concept presented 120 years earlier in the work of a Russian thinker, Nikolai Danilevsky: the world is divided into distinct civilizations. The West does not constitute a sole civilization, which the rest of the world should come to accept. Each civilization has its distinctive value and thus holds the right to defend it from the aggression of foreign models. Russia, in defending its own civilization, thus becomes a safeguard for other civilizations, equally endangered by the global expansion of the atlanticist model.

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<sup>45</sup> The first version of Huntington’s idea (published in *Foreign Affairs*) has been instantly translated into Russian and published in *Polis* quarterly (no. 1 from 1994); substantial parts of the Huntington’s book were also very quickly translated and published in another prestigious quarterly *Pro et Contra* (Spring 1997, pp. 115-154).

<sup>46</sup> Vera Stolz, *Inventing...*, pp. 209-233 and 240-241.

Some, as Dugin does, express that very thought stressing the inevitability of a brutal conflict. Others, as an equally popular among the intellectual circles in Moscow political scientist – professor of the Moscow University, Alexander Panarin, wrote about the civilizational conflict with much regret, entertaining the possibility of averting it with appropriate concessions on the part of the West (USA, or Europe based on the Paris-Berlin axis) in favor of Russia and its geopolitical interests.<sup>47</sup> The ordinary citizens of Russia, with their conscience permeated by the experience of an unsuccessful attempt at westernizing Russia, quite simply returned to the deep-rooted conviction of the essential uniqueness of their model of social life and culture. The sense of civilizational distinctiveness of Russia became, once again, a social reality and not a mere intellectual interpretation.<sup>48</sup>

The search for a political form fit for that particular sense could not have lasted long. The pursuits undertaken by the state authorities proved futile ideologically, even if quite interesting as far as recognizing social attitudes is concerned. In 1996, President Yeltsin requested a sociological opinion poll to be made, aiming to define “an all-Russian, common-national idea” (*rossiskaia, obshchenatsionalnaia ideia*), and in parallel, announced a contest for an essay that would define this very idea for the Russian Federation. The winning piece came to couple the ideas of reforms undertaken since 1991 with the deeply Russian traditions, intended to confront the “global nihilism” exported by the West. Yet in essence, as disclosed by the sociological opinion poll (conducted on a sample of over 1500 respondents) preceding the piece, it was in Russia itself that nihilism proved to be the most prominent problem. Recapitulating the poll results, Georgi Satarov grouped the respondents according to the following inclinations, dominant in the society of the Russian Federation: 17.2% democrats; total 29.6% of communist revanchists (17%) and advocates of a heavy-handed rule (12.6%); 39.9% of nihilists (22.8%) and “disappointed apoliticals” (17.1%); finally 13.3% of “romantics”.<sup>49</sup>

Yeltsin did not venture to formulate the official answer to the question of how the new idea of the state should be construed. The answer to the question of how to reconcile “democrats”, “communist revanchists”, “advocates of a heavy-handed rule”, “romantics”, as well as how to prevent the plague of nihilism that could swiftly be spread by the masses of “disappointed apoliticals” – that very answer was to be given from below. In the articles of various publicists, in the texts of worried sociologists and political scientists, supported with the interpretation offered by historians, in the works of artists, attempting to look for a form of common, positive spiritual experience with the citizens of the “Great State”. That answer would be found in the resuscitated concept of an empire. It came simultaneously in several incarnations.

One was able to reconcile the “democrats” with the “advocates of the heavy-handed rule”, as well as with the “romantics”. Among its artistic manifestations could be found the most prominent Russian

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<sup>47</sup> On Panarin ideas and books see: Andrzej Nowak, *Od imperium...*, pp. 294-304.

<sup>48</sup> Timo Piirainen, *The Sisyphean Mission: New National Identity in Post-Communist Russia*, in: Chris J. Chulos and Johannes Remy (eds.), *Imperial and National Identities in Pre-Revolutionary, Soviet, and Post-Soviet Russia*, Helsinki: SKS – FLS, 2002, pp. 151-176.

<sup>49</sup> James H. Billington, *Russia in Search...*, pp. 97-100.

films of the past decade – such as, for instance, Nikita Mikhalkov's "The Barber of Siberia" (released in 1998 – showing the greatness of the Empire in its most nationalistic, Russificatory phase – in the period of Tsar Alexander III), or Alexander Sokurov's "Russian Ark" (released in 2001 – summarizing, with much nostalgia, the history of the Empire through the prism of the dazzling glare of the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg). In the form, one finding much popularity with the mass viewer, of the NTV television channel, the force and the grandeur of the Empire was well shown by Leonid Parafionov, in the excellent documentary sequel, broadcast finally in 2001. Since 1995, the mainstream intellectual periodicals in Russia feature columns much as that in the "Rodina" monthly - „My v Impierii. Impieria v nas”.<sup>50</sup> They undertake to discuss both the positive and negative aspects of the Empire, yet with what seems to be an inclination towards the former, whereby the Empire, especially in its impressive, Petersburg incarnation, is destined to be perceived as the ideal of high culture – multinational community with the leading role reserved for Russia. As part of that vision, the Empire turns to be for Russia a particular leverage not only to achieving the world power status, but equally to playing the role of a rightful participant in the cultural dialogue with Europe. It likewise constitutes an antithesis of barbarianism and chaos, whose return is thus associated with the collapse of the imperial order, the revealing of inter-ethnic conflicts. (This very antithesis has best been voiced eloquently by a philosopher, editor of the "Voprosy filosofii", Vladimir Kantor, in his paper presented to the grand session dedicated to the comparative history of empires in Moscow, in June 2003: *From the Russian Empire to nationalist despotia*.) In this interpretation, the Russian Empire generally carries the face of Peter the Great (and even better if it has the posture of Peter I as taken from the statue by E. M. Falconet standing in St. Petersburg), it is turned towards Europe, and the role of its most prominent eulogist is credited to (especially at the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth) Alexander Pushkin.<sup>51</sup>

Yet a different, although no less popular, face of the empire has been unveiled with the gradual rehabilitation of its last incarnation, one inspiring most effervescent memories: the Soviet Union. This rehabilitation was not a distinct "specialty" of the Russian Communist Party. It rather concerned the particular regret, one commonly expressed in the post-1991 Russia, at the collapse of the USSR, seen as a specific community, one considered natural and beneficial to all (or at least a significant majority) of its members. Analyzing this very problem, Geoffrey Hosking begins with a statement that has been presented earlier in this piece. Sets that statement, only to question its internal sense: „Today Russia is far closer to being a nation-state than at any time in its history. Yet most educated Russians take no comfort in this development. [...] They believe Russia's identity is not ethnic and exclusive, like that of France or many other European countries, but cultural, multi-ethnic and inclusive. In this widely-held

<sup>50</sup> See: D. Oleinikov, T. Filipova, 'My – v Impierii. Impieria – v nas', *Rodina*, 1995, no. 1.

<sup>51</sup> See the most incisive (and critical) analysis of this way of the Empire's rehabilitation – Georgi Fedotov, *Pevec impierii i svobody (A. S. Pushkin)*, in: G. P. Fedotov, *Dva Grada*, New York 1952, pp. 240-260; see also the above mentioned defense of the empire as the most effective instrument of modernisation and civility in Russia – Vladimir Kantor, *Ot Russkoi Imperii k natsionalisticheskoi despotii*, working paper for the conference *Istoriya imperii; sravnitelnyi podkhod v prepodavanii i issledovaniakh* (Moscow, June 2003, Soros Fund and the Institute of Universal History, Russian Academy of Sciences – unfortunately the text was not published in the post-conference book: *Rossiskaia Imperia v sravnitelnoi perspektive*, pod red. A. I. Millera, Moskva: Novoe izdatelstvo, 2004).

view, the dissolution of the Soviet Union was a disaster, because it destroyed a community of peoples, sacrificing durable human ties to the petty ambitions of politicians.”<sup>52</sup>

The geneticists at the Russian Academy of Sciences have “discovered” the genetic code common to the Soviet people, giving prove to the natural community that has superficially been broken in 1991.<sup>53</sup> In their monumental study devoted to the reforms in the country, the sociologists from the very same institution, already in 1994 made the claim that “the Empire-Union has not been a product of a natural aggressiveness of the Muscovite rulers, but rather a result of the naturally historical, political and economic integration of interests by the nations, willingly and consciously uniting their efforts and seeking defense in one of the most advanced, in the material and spiritual sense, civilizations on the planet – the Rus’/Russian civilization.” They concluded with a hope that the natural unity of peoples, which has been preserved and intensified during the Soviet period, will inevitably be reconstructed soon: “the time is working for Russia and the union of brotherly nations.”<sup>54</sup> A similar statement, although in much more refined terms, has been made in 1996 by the Council (with the President of the Russian Federation) on foreign and defense policy, seating the elite of Russian political scientists. Its principal theses, presented in the form of an answer to the question: “Will the (Soviet) Union be revived before the year 2005?”, pointed to the need of conducting Russian state policies in a way that would foster the revival of the Union – under Russian leadership.<sup>55</sup>

It was equally the kind of policies that the ordinary people in Russia expected as well. The subsequent public opinion polls conducted in the country showed the gradually growing sense of longing for the Soviet Union. The characteristics of the Soviet system, which found their positive interpretation in the minds of respondents, mainly came down to the imperial dimension of the Union. The most prominent research centers demonstrated that, for instance, whereas in 2001, 57% of Russians wanted the restoration of the USSR, two years later, already 74% of them expressed their regret at the dissolution of the Soviet Union; in that same year, 2003, 45% of respondents still considered the Soviet system superior to the current one. In answer to the question (in November 2003) of how they would desire their country to be perceived by other nations, 48% of Russians stated: as “mighty, unbeatable, indestructible, a great world power”, 3% as “peace-loving and friendly”, and a mere 1% as “law-abiding and democratic”. In a poll conducted in 2003, the Russian Center for Public Opinion found that 53 per cent of Russians still regard Stalin as a „great” leader.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Geoffrey Hosking, *Imperial Identities in Russia: Some Concluding Thoughts*, in: Chris J. Chulos and Johannes Remy (eds.), *Imperial and National Identities...*, pp. 233-234.

<sup>53</sup> „Pravda”, September 9, 1992; see also: V. Tolz, *Inventing the Nation...*, p. 239.

<sup>54</sup> *Reformirovaniie Rossiji: mify i realnost’*, eds. G. V. Osipow and others, Moskva: Institut Socjalno-politicheskikh Issledovanii RAN, Academia, 1994, pp. 370-371.

<sup>55</sup> *Vozrodit’sia li (Sovetskij) Soyuz v 2005 godu?. Tezisy Soveta po vneshnei i oboronnoi politike. Proekt dlia obsuzhdenia*, [Moscow 1995 – working paper edited by V. V. Tret’jakov, S. A. Karaganov, with collaboration of S. V. Kortunov, A. K. Pushkov and A. A. Belkin]. As for real developments in the Russian Federation’s neoimperial policy towards the former Soviet republics, see: W. Rodkiewicz, op. cit., pp. 88-103; Bobo Lo, *Vladimir Putin and the Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2003.

<sup>56</sup> All these data has been presented in *Izvestia* and based on surveys of Russian opinion prepared by two most authoritative polling organisations in Russia: the All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion, directed by Iurii Levada (so-called Levada Center – see an excellent bi-monthly presenting in-depths analyses of the Center’s

The might, with the respect and even fear that it arises abroad – that is an imperial attribute that remains in the memories of the Soviet Union, reconciling it with the memory of the earlier Tsarist Empire. The other important attribute – that is the conviction referred to in the above presented opinion of G. Hosking, that the Soviet system managed to construct (or, depending on the interpretation, continued the legacy of the earlier Empire), under the leadership of the Russian people, an original and natural community: “cultural, multi-ethnic and inclusive.” As formulated in the latest fundamental synthesis prepared by the Institute of Russian History at the Russian Academy of Sciences, Russia has given shape to a distinct, independent civilization, whose unique feature is founded not in multi-ethnicity itself, but in policonfessionality.<sup>57</sup>

Generally, those observing the political and intellectual scene in Russia, associate the perilous neo-imperial tendencies solely with the fascination for the first of those attributes, fascination mainly credited to the marginal political forces and the individualities most often described as “right-wing”. In fact, their popularity, and thus the threat of strengthening the neo-imperial tendencies in Russia, is associated with the wide-spread support that those tendencies enjoy, not only among the “communist revanchists” or “romantics”, but most unfortunately by a significant part of the Russian “democrats” and their intellectual representatives.

In that respect, it is quite striking to make a thorough review of argument used by the panelists invited to attend a series of colloquia organized by James Billington and Kathleen Parthé under the auspices of the Carnegie Foundation in the years 1998-1999. They managed to bring together, in the words of the organizers, “the most creative Russian politicians and thinkers”, who were to consider the current state of affairs and the future of their country. From the materials published in recapitulation of the colloquia, it is possible to reconstruct the state of consciousness of the Russian elites: the consciousness of the elites of a humiliated empire. Those materials, as much as the texts presented by the ideologues of the unsuccessful coup of August 1991, reveal the motif of the disintegration of the USSR as the “greatest tragedy”, and the period following the Russian retreat from the Soviet empire as a period of a new “Time of Troubles” (the downfall of the state that took place in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century and has been overcome with a popular uprising directed against the western “interventionists” – the Poles, and the institution of a new dynasty, which managed to resurrect the empire). Lev Anninsky, a prominent literary critic, aiming to explicate the significance of the collapse of the Soviet Union to his American interlocutors, compares it to the American Civil War... Many of those participating in the debates stressed with much regret, that they find no understanding in the West for their feelings, hurt by the dissolution of the multi-ethnic community, which functioned for centuries under Russian patronage.

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polls: *Vestnik obschestvennogo mnenija. Dannye. Analiz. Diskussii*), and Validata, a center for market and opinion research headed by Maria Volkenstein; see also: Richard Pipes, ‘Flight from freedom. What Russians Think and Want’, *Foreign Affairs*, May-June, 2004; Jean-Marie Chauvier, „Russia: Nostalgic for the Soviet Era”, *Le Monde diplomatique*, March 2004; Niall Ferguson, ‘The’ve got used to freedom, so why do Russians still hunger for the USSR?’, *Sunday Telegraph*, June 19, 2005.

<sup>57</sup> V. V. Trepalov, *Monogonatsionalnaia cywilizacia Rossii: poiski zakonomernostei*, in: *Rossiskaia mnogonatsionalnaia cywilizacia. Edinstvo i protivorechia*, Moskva: Nauka, 2003, pp. 343-377.

Some of the participants, in an extremely aggressive manner, came to underline the absurdity of separating nation-states out of that community, the superficiality of Ukrainian or Belarusian breakaway from Russia. Some have stressed the chauvinism of the “small nations”, which have left the Russian community, and the resulting threat to the civil freedoms and the cultural development in their new, meager statehoods. Finally, many of the speakers voiced the opinion that Russia has always constructed its political community for others, for the good of other nations and religions, that Russia, in its historic imperial project, has always played the role of a “natural defender of justice and truth” (with a particular weight assigned to this perspective in the statements by, among others, Viktor Aksiuchits, the Moscow-based philosopher and the leader of the Christian-Democratic movement, as well as Vladimir Baranovsky, the deputy director of the prestigious Institut Mirovoi Ekonomiki i Mezhdunarodnikh Otnosheniii RAN). Not all of the representatives of the Russian elites invited by James Billington to participate in the discussions, would share those views. It is undeniably true. They were contested by, among others, Georgi Satarov, the author of the aforementioned sociological study, aimed at preparing a new state ideology back in 1996. Satarov warned of the perils that might result from merging the specific Russian “messianic” vision with the imperial tendencies: “For years we told our neighbors how to conduct their lives.”<sup>58</sup>

However, the voices such as that of Satarov, calling for the Russians to concentrate their efforts on reforming their own life, and to stop thinking of making others happy, would gradually become less significant in the choir of Russian political debate. The state policies would, with an ever greater dynamism, adapt to the new discourse: the positive discourse of empire.

To list only its most prominent manifestations. The first symbol, representing the consensus, one finally arrived at – on that level – by the authorities of the Russian Federation, the larger part of its intellectual elites and the public opinion, would come in the form of the subsequent phases in the war against Chechnya, enjoying a growing social support in Russia. It was that very war and its popularity among the Russian society, that laid fundamentals for the “enthronement” of Yeltsin’s successor – Vladimir Putin.<sup>59</sup> It is worth reminding that the imperial mission in the case of this war, is presented not only in the rhetoric of the apology of violence, but in the rhetoric of the pathos of liberation. Just as Struve or Rozanov before him, so does Putin, at the counsel of his advisors, present the stubborn nation, unwilling to share the political community with Russia, as “a nation not conquered but liberated” – liberated by the Russian Army from the bounds of its narrow, chauvinist, and even terrorist project of political breakaway.<sup>60</sup>

The policy towards Ukraine lately became yet another, quite naturally a less drastic than the Chechen issue, although hardly less interesting testing-ground for the concept of an empire, an instrument

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<sup>58</sup> James H. Billington and Kathleen Parthé, *The Search for a New Russian National Identity: Russian Perspectives*, Washington, D.C.: The Library of Congress, February 2003, pp. 12 (Georgi Satarov), 24 (Viktor Aksiuchits), 80 (Vladimir Baranovsky), and passim. See also more instructive examples of contemporary Russian „democratic messianism” in: J. H. Billington, *Russia in Search of Itself*, pp. 106-124.

<sup>59</sup> See: Boris Reitschuster, *Wohin steuert er Russland?*, Berlin: Rowohlt, 2004.

<sup>60</sup> Quoted after: *The New York Times Magazine*, 2000, March 19, p. 65.

of “liberating” and “safeguarding human rights” in the domains neighboring Russia. Precisely such was the meaning of the words spoken by Sergei Markov, head of the Institute for Political Studies and an advisor to President Putin, in 2001: „Russia should pursue a policy with regard to Ukraine, a policy that would promote democracy. If a democratic way is used, only a pro-Russian president would be elected there, and an anti-Russian policy may only be imposed on Ukrainian voters.”<sup>61</sup> And thus Russia conducted such a policy, grounded on the conviction, or perhaps rather on a make-believe assumption, that a test of democracy in Ukraine would come with the revealing of the pro-Russian attitudes. Any other stance, other choice may only be a non-democratic one, may only come as part of a plot by foreign (American or Polish in that case) forces, backed by the narrow nationalism of Ukraine itself. This make-believe assumption proved effective with the Russian public, but not effective enough with the Ukrainians. It brought about the shock, when the mass intervention on the part of Russia in the Ukrainian presidential election in the Fall of 2004 ended up with the “orange revolution”...<sup>62</sup> With this defeat, the Russian neo-imperialism reverted to a less liberal tone, keeping in line with the spirit of geopolitical realism, much closer to the vision developed by Dugin (or – as was the case a century earlier – Menshikov) than to the doctrine of a benign “liberating” empire. Konstantin Zatulin, the head of the Institute for the CIS Countries in Moscow, would capture the situation in the words that once again seem worth quoting: “If Ukraine, even being independent, is not part of the special, ally relations with Russia, under its newly acquired statehood, an anti-Russian fundament is installed and thus it turns into a second Poland. That is into a cultural and historical project, a *kulturträger* alien to Russia, which we must learn to deal with. Otherwise it will ‘deal’ with us.”<sup>63</sup>

An independence of a neighbor, even if as large as Ukraine, seems to be in the above words – uttered by a representative of the political elite in contemporary Russia – a temporary anomaly, one becoming extremely irritating when acquiring true independence FROM Russia. At that point, there is no mention of “radost’ slijanija”, of “liberating”, of “democratizing” – there is only the mention of unyielding defense of empire’s interests in the territories of the periphery.

Similarly, the leap between the two visions, the two faces of the empire, was clearly visible during the grand celebrations of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of victory over fascism, held in Moscow on May 9, 2005. For president Putin, it posed an ideal opportunity to present a synthesis of the Russian imperial tradition with its Soviet incarnation.

A particular foreshadowing of that very synthesis came with the declaration made by president Putin in his “State of the Union” speech to the Russian Federal Assembly on April 25, 2005, when he called the breakup of the Soviet Union to be the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century”. This

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<sup>61</sup> Sergei Markov, *Only a pro-Russia president can be elected democratically in Ukraine*, [www.strana.ru](http://www.strana.ru), May 15, 2001.

<sup>62</sup> See the best description of these events in: Andrew Wilson, *Ukraine’s Orange Revolution*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005.

<sup>63</sup> Konstantin F. Zatulin, ‘Bor’ba za Ukrainu: chto dalshe?’, *Rossiia v globalnoi politike*, vol. 3, no. 1, p. 79. See also an incisive polemic with this position in: Andrei Zorin, ‘Why We Don’t Like Ukraine’, *Kommersant online*, January 25, 2006.

declaration inspired quite a number of polemic statements, especially abroad, claiming that perhaps there were greater catastrophes, to mention only World War I and II, the crimes of the Soviet and the Nazi system. Yet only a few took note of the specifically imperial aspect of the view presented by the Russian president. For him, the greatest geopolitical catastrophe was the dissolution of the greatest empire. The thought never crossed his mind, nor the minds of his western polemicists, that, taking them as an example, for Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, or for Poland the greatest geopolitical catastrophe could have been their incorporation into the Soviet empire with the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, whereas for the whole of Central-Eastern Europe – their surrender to the sphere of domination of the Soviet center and exclusion, with the “iron curtain”, from the rest of Europe, following the Yalta accords. In the logic presented by Putin, the collapse of the Great State meant the collapse of the great order, order that can not be preserved by the small countries created on its ruin. The collapse of the great, Soviet “order” opened the door to nationalisms, disputes over borders, to “terrorist intervention” (that is precisely the term used by Putin in his statement, aiming to justify his methods of fighting that very “intervention”, that is Chenchya).<sup>64</sup>

Just as the expansion of influence and domination by the Russian center in the domains of the former USSR is presented, in that perspective by the Kremlin “polittechnologies”<sup>65</sup>, as the expansion of stability and democracy, but most of all as a safeguard from the greatest challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – terrorism, so the expansion of the Soviet empire during World War II was to be presented, at the anniversary celebrations in May 2005 in Moscow, in a perspective recalled and forced into the minds of the Soviet people by the official propaganda under Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Gorbachev – as the expansion and liberation of a sphere of progress. The propagandists of the Putin era came up with claims unheard since the times of Stalin: if it was not for the Yalta accord, surrendering Central-Eastern Europe to the Moscow rule, those countries would never enjoy democracy, nor electricity – all of which, along with the liberation from “fascism” (not only its German version, but most of all, its local, national one) was brought by the Red Army. The Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact in turn, was a savior for the Baltic states from their own “fascist” regimes, whereas for the Soviet Union, from the allegedly planned attack by the joint forces of Poland and Hitler (sic!).<sup>66</sup>

The Baltic states as much as Poland, and to a certain degree also Ukraine with its recent experience of the “orange revolution”, found much difficulty with accepting that particular vision of history. The vision of the “good empire”, stumbling on the refusal to accept it as good by its very victims, was transformed into a vision of an empire – one transcending good and evil. An empire, whose *raison d'être* is power. It was most forthrightly expressed by President Putin in an interview given to the German television channels ARD and ZDF only a few days before the Moscow celebrations, on May 6, 2005,

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<sup>64</sup> See an interesting of the address: Ethan Burgher and Marc Greenfield, *Interpreting the Enigmatic Vladimir Putin*, in: [www.untimely-thoughts.com/?art.=1692&action](http://www.untimely-thoughts.com/?art.=1692&action) (retrieved 2005-08-08).

<sup>65</sup> See: Andrew Wilson, *Virtual Politics. Faking Democracy...*, pp. 49-72.

<sup>66</sup> See, for example: Nataia Eliseeva, ‘Kto otdalial Pobedu’, [www.Strana.Ru](http://www.Strana.Ru), 17.01.2005; eadem, ‘Jaltinskoe okno v Evropu’, [www.Strana.Ru](http://www.Strana.Ru), 04.02.2005; Angelina Timofeeva, ‘Infantilizm kak glavnyi stimul polskoi politiki’, [www.Strana.Ru](http://www.Strana.Ru), 25.02.2005; Natalia Narochnitskaia, ‘Vse oskorblenia v adres SSSR dolzhny byt’ peresecheny’, [www.Strana.Ru](http://www.Strana.Ru), 06.05.2005.

repeating, in identical form, those claims in a polemic with an Estonian journalist three days later. The Russian president stated that the Baltic republics acquired independence only at the good-will of Russia and Germany, owing to the agreement reached between Lenin and the Second Reich under the Brest Litovsk treaty in March of 1918. Thus both powers had the full right to deprive the Baltic republics of that independence – so doing with the agreement reached between Stalin and the Third Reich (under the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact). „In 1939, Germany returned them to us, and these territories joined (*voshli v sostav*) the Soviet Union. [...] We could not possibly have occupied them, inasmuch as they were already a part of the USSR”.<sup>67</sup>

It was not merely a shocking historical lie, but most of all imperialism exposed. The kind that Mikhail Menshikov would applaud: stripped of all moral ornaments. The great and strong decide on the fate of the small and weak according to their own will and interests. When convenient for them, they may and should crush the small. They can take their independence away, dictate arbitrary prices on gas (as Russia attempted in its relations with Ukraine and Georgia on the eve of 2006), level their homes, whole cities and villages to the ground (as Russia systematically does in Chechnya since 1995).

At the beginning of this piece, a reference was made to the imperial theories circulating at the outset of the last century, when the Russian Empire was entering its phase of decline, pointing to the two distinctly diverging trends in the arguments presented by those theories. One, termed “Social Darwinist”, held the empire as a tool of constant, unyielding struggle with its internal enemies and external rivals. The other, termed “liberal”, set out to couple the imperial idea with the call for carrying prosperity, progress, cultural and “stabilizing” mission to the countries being incorporated into the imperial center.

In the fifteen years that have passed since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, a significant part of the Russian intellectual and political elites, followed by a majority of Russian public opinion, and finally the very center of political power in Russia, have gradually returned to the idea of empire – principally in line with the latter of the two presented interpretations. It is by no accident that in the year 2003, the term, which enjoyed most wide-spread interest in the Russian intellectual debate, was made by a liberal politician, the author of the Russian privatization program of the early 1990’s, Anatoly Chubais: that of the “liberal empire”.<sup>68</sup> (Let us add that four years earlier another prominent representative of the ruling elite, governor of Penza, Vladimir Bochkarev, made a similar call: “to create a new federal empire, [...] which will bring together not only Tatars, Chechens, Armenians, but equally the nations of near and far Eurasian abroad”.<sup>69</sup>)

The sense of restored might would once again be coupled with the sense of mission, restoration of control over the domains of the former Soviet empire with the idea of restoring proper order. The

<sup>67</sup> ‘My ne pozvolim khvatat’ nas za rukava’ [full text of Vladimir Putin’s interview to ARD/ZDF on May 6th, 2005], in: [www.Strana.Ru/stories/05/05/05/3605/247372.html](http://www.Strana.Ru/stories/05/05/05/3605/247372.html), see also: Vladimir Socor, ‘Kremlin Assails Baltic States’, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 2, Number 93, May 12, 2005 (quotations from Vladimir Putin’s answer to an Estonian female journalist’s question during a press conference in Moscow, on May 9, 2005).

<sup>68</sup> Anatoly Chubais, ‘Missia Rossii v XXI veke’, *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 2003, October 1st, p. 1; see also: Ilya Gerasimov, ‘Kutezh triokh kniazei v zelenom dvorikie, ili rozhdenie ‘libealnoi imperii’’, *Ab Imperio*, 2003, no. 3, pp. 423-435.

<sup>69</sup> A statement of governor Vladimir Bochkarev in: „Rossiiskaia gazieta”, 1999, December 4th, p. 2.

Russians have once again come to believe in the GOOD empire. In a public opinion poll conducted shortly after Chubais proclaimed the idea of a “liberal empire”, only 1% of Russian respondents stated that an empire can not be liberal – that an empire can not be good...<sup>70</sup>

The empire, presented from the most favorable perspective a century ago by Rozanov or Struve (ridiculing or diminishing the importance of its opponents), must at some point come to face the problem of regarding it not as good, but as evil – face the challenge from those groups or communities, which regard themselves as its victims: past, present or potential. That is the point when the question of choice comes to the fore: departing from the imperial project, accepting that it can not be reconciled with a liberal order, or – defending that very project. Yet the latter case inevitably reveals the dimension of imperial policy that was described by the austere realist interpretation offered by Menshikov, one that has been visible on various occasions in the past several months, in the words and actions of the Russian ruling center. The grandeur of the empire and its interests are set as an aim, in the name of which the category of good and evil can be disregarded. What counts is power.

In the speech quoted at the outset of this paper, Ronald Reagan founded his beliefs in the interpretation of evil’s nature proposed by C. S. Lewis. Yet he made no mention of the fact, that according to the author of “The Chronicles of Narnia”, “the devil’s greatest trick is to make you believe that he doesn’t exist”. The imperial idea’s greatest trick is “to make you believe that there is no evil in it, or – that evil doesn’t exist”. In Russia many fell for this trick once again. Those who did not – be they in Russia or around it – will fall for the imperial idea in one way only: forced through violence.

*Translation: Dariusz Serówka*

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<sup>70</sup> Sviatoslav Kaspe, ‘Imperia kak ruina i stroitelnyi material: „Nation-building” v sovremennoi Rossii’, in: *Russia and Eastern Europe...*, pp. 67-68.