

Institutional and Discursive Attributes of the Imperial Project in Modern Russia

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Abstract

This paper aims to enhance the understanding of how the Russian imperial project has been sustained from the collapse of the Soviet Union to the present, by examining its institutional and discursive attributes and their interplay. We argue that the 1990s witnessed a marked weakening of imperial patterns in both institutional structures and official discourse, even as significant segments of Russian society were permeated by grassroots post-imperial resentment. This resentment was strategically mobilized by Vladimir Putin upon assuming power in 2000, as he initiated a consistent restoration of imperial institutions both domestically and abroad, alongside a revival of imperial civilizational discourse. Later, the “Crimean Consensus” of 2014 marked a pivotal moment, synchronizing the development of imperial institutions with both official and popular imperial discourse. However, the 2022 war against Ukraine has introduced a new phase, characterized by the strengthening of imperial discourse while the institutional dimension has either stagnated domestically or been frozen externally in the post-Soviet space. This divergence—a reinforcement of imperial discourse alongside institutional stagnation—may serve as one of the explanations for Russia’s further political dynamics.

Keywords

Russia, imperial project, institutions, discourse, nationalism, federalism, war against Ukraine

Russia’s war against Ukraine has sparked a renewed awareness of the Russian imperial project—its sources, attributes, and mechanisms of persistence. Writing in June 2022, Anatol Lieven argued that the conflict could only be understood as a bloody post-imperial struggle, necessitating placement within the broader context of imperial collapse (Lieven, 2022). While this observation is insightful, even if one concedes that the Russian imperial project is in decline, the process of its dissolution is likely to be protracted and uneven across different geographies. As of now, the project remains active and is reproduced across multiple levels and dimensions.

Domestically, the imperial project centers on the relationship between Moscow and subnational regions. Externally, it is manifested in Russia’s structuring of relations with smaller post-Soviet nations—whether through integration initiatives orchestrated by Russia or direct territorial aggression, as exemplified by the case of Ukraine. An integral part of the imperial project is also the maintenance of

imperial discourse within contemporary Russia as well as its “adaptation” to emerging challenges.

Our central question in this paper concerns how the imperial project has been and continues to be manifested in Russia. We focus specifically on the institutional and discursive attributes of the Russian imperial project, proceeding from the premise that both are indispensable to the functioning of any imperial polity.

Indeed, empires are characterized by distinct institutions tailored to expansive geography, dynamic boundaries, and relationships between center and periphery. Doyle (1986,

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p.12) defined an empire as “a system of interaction between two political entities, one of which, the dominant metropole, exerts political control over the internal and external policy—the effective sovereignty—of the other, the subordinate periphery.” In this view, empires share certain characteristics with federations, though the distinctions are no less significant (Beaud, 2018). Imperial discourse, in turn, legitimizes the imperial project within society. Like other national narratives, it fosters group identity, structures historical memory, and constructs a worldview that justifies claims to global or regional primacy. A defining element of imperial discourse is its messianic orientation and universalist claims. According to Hardt and Negri (2000, pp.10–11, 14), the imperial phenomenon is ideocratic by nature: it conceives itself as a mission to establish eternal peace through imperial spatial order. Within this framework, one can interpret such projects as the British civilizational mission, the Russian “Third Rome” and Pan Slavism, and the American idea of a “Shining City upon a Hill.”

Over time, imperial elites maintain and expand imperial institutions while simultaneously cultivating and strengthening imperial discourses. Ideally, these attributes develop symbiotically, reinforcing the broader imperial project. In practice, however, their development is often asynchronous due to various internal and external pressures. For example, rapid territorial expansion may necessitate immediate institutional development, with discourse following later. Such was the case with the British Empire, where the discourse of imperial civilizational mission emerged well after the establishment of core imperial institutions (Dennehy, 2019; Go, 2014; Hechter, 1999; Hingley, 2000; Pawlisch, 1985; Thompson, 1997). Conversely, in the Russian case, the emergence of an imperial discourse preceded institutional formation, with roots traced to the early 16th century (Dmitriev et al., 2023; Laats, 2009), while institutional practices of governance over heterogeneous territories developed more gradually in the 17th century and beyond (Bakhlov & Napalkova, 2011; Gerasimov, 2017).

Thus, this article investigates the temporal dynamics between institutional and discursive attributes of the Russian imperial project. We ask the following question: How have these attributes evolved over time? At what stages have they reinforced or diverged from each other? How has the war against Ukraine altered this relationship? Institutionally, we examine Russia’s center-regional relations and its interactions with post-Soviet states. Discursively, we focus on both official narratives and grassroots sentiment.

We contend that Russia’s post-Soviet evolution reflects significant fluctuations in the relationship between imperial institutions and discourse. The 1990s saw a sharp institutional and discursive retreat from imperial norms, accompanied by widespread post-imperial resentment. This

grassroots nostalgia later became a foundation for Putin’s restoration of imperial structures.

In the early 2000s, Russia pursued institutional reconstruction: domestically through a revamped center-regional framework, and externally via integration efforts in the post-Soviet region. The return of imperial discourse was initially muted among the population but became increasingly prominent in state rhetoric. A key inflection point occurred in 2014 with the “Crimean Consensus,” aligning institutional, official, and grassroots discourses around a renewed imperial vision. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 marked an overtly imperial move, reinforcing discursive dimensions at both elite and popular levels. Institutionally, however, the war has led to stagnation: while domestic arrangements remain stable, external advances have been curtailed.

This article proceeds as follows. First, we offer a historical overview of Russian imperial institutions and discourses prior to the Soviet collapse. We then analyze the post-Soviet evolution in two periods: the 1990s and 2000–2022. Finally, we assess the effects of the Ukraine war on institutional and discursive dynamics and reflect on the implications for the persistence of Russia’s imperial project.

Imperial Institutions and Discourses in Russia: Historical Background

In Russia, the emergence of imperial discourse preceded the development of imperial institutions. Scholars trace the origins of the discourse of autocratic Orthodox uniqueness in the Muscovite state to the 16th century, while the earliest imperial practices of governing heterogeneous territories emerged later, in the 17th century. These include the yasak system of administration and taxation in Siberia and the Hetmanshchina, a special autonomous territory within the Muscovite domain. By the 19th century, these evolved into multilevel governance structures characteristic of the Russian imperial state (Bakhlov & Napalkova, 2011; Gerasimov, 2017).

Ivan III’s marriage to Sophia Palaeologus enabled Muscovite elites to symbolically link their state to the legacy of the Roman Empire. In the early 16th century, this symbolic connection was formalized in the doctrine of the “Third Rome,” which posited a *translatio imperii* from ancient Rome to Byzantine Constantinople and ultimately to Moscow. At this stage, however, Muscovite foreign policy was not yet overtly imperial. Its primary imperatives included defense against nomadic threats and the consolidation of Russian principalities around Moscow. Only later, under Ivan IV (“the Terrible”), did Muscovite policy shift from this defensive orientation toward outward expansion and colonization beyond the Russian civilizational core. The annexation of the Kazan and Astrakhan Khanates, the unsuccessful Livonian War, and the beginning of the conquest

of Siberia marked the initial steps of this new strategy. This outward orientation was supported by the messianic logic of the “Third Rome” and the imperative to secure a vast and porous frontier. In this way, a stable imperial foreign policy reflex began to take shape.

Concurrently, imperial institutions began to form. The Russian Empire emerged as a quintessential continental empire, in which colonies were not distant overseas possessions, but rather contiguous extensions of the metropolitan territory. Unlike the British Empire, whose expansion was driven by maritime trade and distant acquisitions, the territorial unity of the Russian Empire was maintained through the deployment of a large standing army and a centralized bureaucratic apparatus, rather than economic exchange (Achiezer, 2000).

Before Peter the Great’s reign, the Russian state was a collection of fragmented regions, with the national capital exerting minimal influence over the peripheries. Communication infrastructure remained rudimentary, limiting administrative coherence. Peter’s two-stage guberniya reform (1708–1720), followed by Catherine II’s extended administrative reforms (lasting until 1785), laid the foundations of Russia’s modern imperial structure. These reforms created a two-tiered regional administration, comprising guberniyas (provinces) and uyezds (districts), although irregular administrative units such as oblasts, krais, and general-governorships persisted well into the Soviet period. Notably, the current boundaries of many Russian regions still reflect the administrative divisions drawn over two centuries ago.

To maintain control over such a vast and heterogeneous polity, Russian imperial authorities adopted a flexible approach to centralization. In practice, full centralization remained an aspiration rather than a reality. Peripheral regions often enjoyed substantial autonomy. For example, in the 17th and 18th centuries, travel from Moscow or St Petersburg to Yakutsk could take several months, making direct rule from the center impractical. Autonomy thus became a necessary concession to secure loyalty and stability in frontier territories. Autocracy was replicated at every administrative level, but governors—appointed by the capital—were frequently compelled to balance local concerns with central directives. The Russian Empire’s most autonomous territories were the Grand Duchy of Finland and the Kingdom of Poland. Prior to the 1917 revolution, Finland maintained its own police, education system, currency, and official language, with all tax revenues remaining in the duchy. As such, the Russian Empire contained “proto-federal” elements, which lent a degree of elasticity to its otherwise autocratic structure.

The defeat in World War I, the revolutionary upheaval of 1917, and the fall of the monarchy precipitated the collapse of the Russian Empire. The leaders of Soviet Russia proposed a new model of governance grounded in the idea of world revolution, combining messianic universalism with

an imperial claim to global leadership. Very soon, however, the restoration of empire under Soviet guise began. In December 1922, Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and the Transcaucasian Federation signed a treaty establishing the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Over time, additional republics joined, bringing the total to fifteen.

The USSR evolved into a highly centralized, vertically integrated state, characterized by a rigid system of administrative and Communist Party control. The early Soviet period was marked by intense experimentation with territorial organization, alternating between consolidation and fragmentation. Only in the 1950s did the territorial-administrative structure stabilize. Of the 15 union republics, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) was the only one formally designated a federation. Paradoxically, however, it lacked key republican institutions present in other union republics, including a regional Communist Party and law enforcement bodies such as the KGB and Ministry of Internal Affairs.

The territorial organization of the Soviet Union was extraordinarily complex, comprising 15 union republics, 20 autonomous republics, 8 autonomous oblasts, 10 autonomous okrugs, 6 krais, and 123 oblasts.

By the mid-1980s, on the eve of perestroika, traces of imperial discourse were primarily evident in Soviet foreign policy, which retained its universalist aspiration to global leadership. Domestically, however, the 1977 Soviet Constitution introduced the concept of a “multinational Soviet people,” signaling an attempt to supplant traditional imperial narratives with a new civic identity. This reframing was preserved through Gorbachev’s perestroika period. The “Soviet people” concept stood in contrast to the rising national-democratic movements across the union and autonomous republics (Tishkov, 1996). Simultaneously, the messianic aspects of Soviet foreign policy assumed a paradoxically pacifist form, embodied in the doctrine of “new thinking” (Gorbachev, 1987; Holloway, 1989).

Institutionally, the mid-1980s witnessed a gradual erosion of centralized control—though notably not within Russia proper, but among other union republics. This erosion manifested in weakened loyalty to Moscow and increased demands for decentralization by republican elites. In 1990, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia adopted declarations of independence. In 1991, the Belovezh Accords formally dissolved the USSR. Already in June 1990, the Russian Federation had proclaimed its sovereignty. A new sovereign entity—the Russian Federation—thus emerged from the imperial and Soviet legacy.

Imperial Institutions and Discourses in Modern Russia (1991–2022)

In this section, we examine the development of imperial institutions and imperial discourse in post-Soviet Russia

over two time periods: the 1990s and the period from 2000 to 2022.

1990s

After the collapse of the “Soviet empire,” Russia—the only country in the post-Soviet space—opted for a federal solution. This approach was chosen not only to prevent the territorial disintegration of the vast country but also to abandon the Soviet, imperial-style governance over its regions. However, a genuine federation was never established, even though the 1993 Russian Constitution introduced the formal institutions of federalism. Radical economic reforms—privatization and price liberalization—plunged the country into a deep structural crisis. The severe social consequences of these reforms led to a steady decline in President Yeltsin’s credibility throughout the 1990s. The State Duma in Moscow strongly opposed many of the president’s initiatives. Under these conditions, Yeltsin was forced to “flirt” with regional elites, seeking their support through exclusive deals and promises of increased political status (Busygina & Filippov, 2024).

The introduction of direct gubernatorial elections in 1996, changes to the composition of the upper chamber of the national parliament (the Federation Council, where regional governors became deputies), and bilateral treaties between Moscow and the regions during the 1990s contributed to a dramatic increase in regional autonomy. During this period, the federal center progressively lost its influence over the regions, and the degree of uncontrolled decentralization reached its zenith. Political regimes in the regions were centered around regional executive heads, while the federal center operated more like an external actor (Gel’man et al., 2000). Regional executives viewed federalism as a tool for exerting constant pressure on the center. As the central state weakened, regional elites were able to capture their own “pieces” of the state, presenting themselves as “complete masters” of their territories (Busygina & Filippov, 2020). The Russian state was effectively captured by vested interests, particularly those of regional executives and oligarchic business groups.

Given Moscow’s progressively weakened position, it became impossible to either complete the formation of a genuine federation or to reestablish imperial-like relations with the regions. The former would have required both a strong center and empowered regions, while the latter presupposed the dominance of the center—something that Moscow could no longer ensure. By the end of the 1990s, amid the weakness of the national capital and prevailing disorder, few believed that Russia could quickly return to imperial principles in its regional governance.

Outside Russia, the breakup of the Soviet Union meant the near-instantaneous removal of the Soviet imperial project from the global geopolitical map. The collapse of the Union triggered acute crises in all newly formed states,

which were forced to construct new foundations for political existence (Panov, 2010). In the post-Soviet space, while the USSR ceased to exist, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was established almost immediately, in 1991. Trenin (2002, pp. 100–101) described the role of the CIS as that of a “shock absorber, which it accomplished brilliantly; the promise of integration was nothing but a great illusion, which turned out to be a most useful instrument of separation.” The CIS, as a loosely structured institution, failed to facilitate real integration “owing to the general lack of mutual interest, the paucity of resources, and the absence of political will.” Within its first 8 years, the CIS produced over 800 agreements—most of which were never implemented. While many viewed the CIS as increasingly irrelevant, the fiction of “integration” helped maintain communication channels among post-Soviet elites, cushioning the blow of fragmentation and buying critical time for state- and nation-building (Trenin, 2002).

This “power vacuum” in the post-Soviet region began to be filled in the latter half of the 1990s. In 1996, Yevgeny Primakov replaced the pro-Western Andrei Kozyrev as Russia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, signaling a major shift in Russia’s foreign policy priorities. The “Primakov Doctrine” held that a unipolar world dominated by the United States was unacceptable to Russia and affirmed that Russia should assert primacy in the post-Soviet space and lead regional integration efforts (Rumer, 2019). In 1999, Russia and Belarus created the Union State—a supranational entity aimed at strengthening bilateral cooperation in economic and defense policy.

The initial stage of post-Soviet Russian official discourse was characterized by a dualism: a rhetorical rejection of global dominance, accompanied by assertions of Russia’s continued status as a great power. The 1993 Foreign Policy Concept enshrined this vision, stating that “the main content of the foreign policy of the Russian Federation should be [...] its active and full-fledged participation as a great power in the creation of a world order that would be truly based on the principles of universal security, respect for the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of states, democratic choice, compliance with international obligations, protection of human rights, and mutually beneficial economic cooperation”—while also emphasizing Russia’s natural interests in the post-Soviet space (Kuznetsov, 2023).

The Foreign Policy Concepts of 1993 and 2000, as well as public statements by Russian officials, emphasized the high priority of the post-Soviet region to Russian national interests. These formulations, however, should not be viewed as expressions of post-imperial syndrome but rather as discursive tools designed to address the complex challenges that emerged after the USSR’s collapse—from resolving border disputes and protecting ethnic minorities in newly independent states to preserving trade, economic, and cultural ties in a previously integrated space. While Russia’s imperial past undoubtedly influenced its approach, the goal

during this period was more aligned with post-imperial regulation than a deliberate attempt to construct a new imperial center.

In contrast, within society, the realization of Russia's post-imperial status—that the new Russia was merely a fragment of a once-great country—generated growing imperial resentment, which began to manifest in political projects. The key political vehicles for this resentment were the Liberal Democratic Party, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, and the National Bolshevik Party, although many other parties and organizations espousing Soviet or Orthodox-monarchist nostalgia emerged during this period (Verhovskij & Pribylovskij, 1996).

Organized political expressions of imperial resentment reflected a broader nostalgia within society for imperial prestige, order, and, for many, the perceived socio-economic security of the past. In popular culture, this nostalgia was embodied in a distinct genre of fantasy action books and films about “accidentals” (“popadantsy”)—modern Russians who travel back in time to change the course of history and correct its mistakes (Fishman, 2010; Kocyubinskij, 2019). These cultural narratives fed into the dispersed imperial resentment gradually accumulating in society, setting the stage for its eventual transformation into a mainstream political discourse.

Thus, in the 1990s, the external dimension of imperial institution-building was somewhat more advanced than the internal one: while centrifugal processes dominated inside Russia, its foreign policy leadership at least rhetorically aimed to restore dominance in the post-Soviet region. At the same time, popular imperial discourse—rooted in post-imperial resentment—was steadily rising. Throughout this period, the institutional and discursive dimensions of Russia's political system were not yet coordinated. Russia was, in effect, “entering” the imperial project unconsciously and reactively. It was only later that Putin's political technologists would recognize and strategically harness this imperial undercurrent in the population for their own political ends.¹

2000–2022

As Brown (2001) concluded, “the Russia Putin inherited from Yeltsin was in substantially worse shape than the Soviet Union of the perestroika years, or for that matter, the Brezhnev era.” After assuming power in 2000, President Putin focused his primary efforts on restoring Moscow's dominance over Russia's regions. The new president introduced a series of institutional reforms aimed at fundamentally curtailing regional autonomy. As Kryshankovskaya (2009, p. 28) noted, “with these reforms, the governors were transformed from independent politicians with their own power bases into executives who were fully dependent on Moscow's favour.”

The most significant of these reforms targeted what was seen as the major federalist achievement of the Yeltsin era: the direct election of regional governors. In 2004, President Putin abolished these elections, replacing them with presidential appointments. Although direct elections were formally reinstated under President Medvedev in 2008, their democratic nature was undermined by the introduction of “municipal filters.” This new system of center–regional relations has got the name of “power vertical.” However, it did not imply rigid centralization characteristic of a unitary state. Instead, it constituted a more sophisticated, empire-like configuration—a blend of centralization and strategic non-centralization. While the power vertical implied ultimate political centralization, it simultaneously permitted and, at times encouraged, limited non-centralization in regional governance. Total centralization was both unattainable and impractical in a country as vast and diverse as Russia. Crucially, Moscow retained the sole authority to determine in which areas and to what extent such non-centralization was acceptable, eliminating any bargaining process between the center and the regions (Busygina & Filippov, 2020).

From Moscow's perspective, maintaining strict control over a few strategically important domains was vital. These included securing electoral outcomes in favor of the dominant candidate and the “United Russia” party, as well as ensuring the implementation of federal social policies—such as national programs and the May 2012 Presidential Decrees. Beyond these areas, Moscow demonstrated relative indifference to regional governance, allowing governors a degree of discretionary autonomy. In some cases, the center even encouraged decentralization—for example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, when regional governors were tasked with balancing public health restrictions against economic considerations (Busygina & Filippov, 2021). Thus, while Putin's Russia became politically more centralized, functional regional autonomy persisted in select areas due to administrative or economic pragmatism.

A defining feature of imperial rule is the dominant role of the capital. Under Putin, Moscow rapidly regained its status as the imperial center, wielding exceptional economic, social, cultural, and political influence (Bater, 2004). The capital effectively monopolized Russia's interactions with the global economy, international institutions, and cultural networks. As Brade and Rudolph (2004, p. 69) observed, “the development of Moscow was characterized by an increasing separation from the national urban system and a growing international orientation... measured against the relevant economic indicators, the Russian capital is a long way ahead of the remaining Russian cities.”

Just as Moscow managed its internal regions through hierarchical yet flexible mechanisms, it framed its relationships with post-Soviet neighbors in a similar imperial style. Domestically, constitutional federalism served as the formal framework; externally, Russia promoted

regional integration initiatives—although often with limited success.

The 2010s marked a high point in Russia-led institution-building across the post-Soviet space. Restoring hegemony over this region became integral to Russia's national strategy. With the economic rebound following the 1990s recession, Russia intensified its so-called "treaty activism." Notable milestones included the 2000 treaty establishing the Eurasian Economic Community (involving Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan) and the 2002 creation of the Collective Security Treaty Organization. An attempt to form a Single Economic Space with Ukraine also emerged though ultimately failed following the Orange Revolution.

In 2010, Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan launched the Customs Union, marking a renewed effort to construct a post-Soviet empire under Russia's leadership. These institutions were used as tools of economic, political, military, and cultural dominance (Busygina & Filippov, 2020). While the fear of Russian domination discouraged many smaller post-Soviet states from full integration, Russia advanced its agenda through bilateral negotiations with national elites.

The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), founded in 2015 and including Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia, represented the apex of these efforts (Wolczuk & Dragneva, 2022). Though formally based on equality and supranationalism (Dragneva & Wolczuk, 2017; Popescu, 2014), the EAEU retained distinct imperial characteristics, having been initiated and controlled by Moscow. According to Wolczuk (2021), the EAEU was designed less to promote genuine economic integration than to reassert Russia's lost regional dominance and bolster its great power image (Busygina & Filippov, 2020).

Importantly, the EAEU was established through a bilateral bargaining process between Moscow and the national leaders of future member states—an approach consistent with Russia's broader post-Soviet policy strategy (Sakwa, 2008, p. 429). Moreover, Moscow's stance toward the EAEU reflected a pragmatic mix of centralization and concession. The 2014 Ukraine crisis accelerated the institutionalization of the Union, as Moscow made urgent compromises to advance its strategic goals (Busygina & Filippov, 2020, p. 2). Maintaining the EAEU also required significant economic subsidies. Libman (2017, p. 91) noted that the Union functioned as a mechanism for redistributing resources to smaller states. For example, Kyrgyzstan's primary benefit was access to Russia's labor market, given that roughly one-third of its workforce was employed abroad, predominantly in Russia. Article 97 of the EAEU Treaty guaranteed citizens of member states the right to work in Russia without permits, under conditions similar to those for Russian citizens (Busygina & Filippov, 2020).

While the gradual development of imperial-style institutions constituted Russia's long-term strategy in the post-Soviet region, it was also punctuated by overt acts of

aggression. The 2008 war with Georgia resulted in Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This trend intensified with the 2014 annexation of Crimea (Treisman, 2016).

Between the early 2000s and 2015, the construction of imperial-like institutions—both internally and externally—progressed steadily and according to similar logics. However, the trajectory of imperial discourse was more erratic. During Putin's first decade, official and popular discourses diverged. Economic stabilization seemed to suppress societal imperial resentment. Survey data show a decline in imperial attitudes: support for obstructing external actors in the CIS fell from 30% in 2005 to 23% in 2015 (Levada Center, 2016, p. 212). Nevertheless, imperial rhetoric re-emerged in elite discourse. The idea of a "liberal empire," proposed by Anatoly Chubais, and multipolarity, advanced by Medvedev (2008), offered non-antagonistic formulations of Russian great power status. Domestically, imperial discourse became normalized within the ruling political consensus, spanning from the centrist United Russia to the more explicitly imperial LDPR and Communist Party.

Putin's Munich Speech (2022) marked a rhetorical shift toward antagonism in foreign policy. This shift found material expression in the 2008 war with Georgia and the subsequent deterioration of relations with the West. Simultaneously, Russian elites—Putin among them—increasingly adopted ideological tenets from far-right thinkers such as Konstantin Pobedonostsev, Ivan Ilyin, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and Aleksandr Dugin (Kutlu, 2022). As Teper (2016) observed, official discourse shifted from focusing on the state to emphasizing the nation—specifically in its imperial dimension. This evolution became particularly evident in the 2013 Foreign Policy Concept and culminated in the 2023 version, where Russia was explicitly defined as a "civilizational state" (Kuznetsov, 2023).

In the early 2010s, popular attitudes toward imperial discourse remained ambivalent. Meanwhile, the third Putin presidency saw a surge in the institutionalization of religious traditionalism. Starting with the 2012 prosecution of Pussy Riot (Uchastnic Pussy Riot prigovorili k dvum godam kolonii, 2012) and followed by the 2013 law on protecting believers' feelings (Federal'nyj zakon ozashhite religioznyh ubezhdenij i chuvstv grazhdan, 2013), the Kremlin increasingly targeted "non-traditional" religions—including the eventual banning of Jehovah's Witnesses in 2017 (Verhovnyj sud zapretit dejatel'nost, 2017). This clerical turn coincided with the mass protests of 2011–12 and reflected the regime's need to mobilize conservative constituencies against liberal critics.

The 2014 annexation of Crimea inaugurated a new phase of imperial consensus between state and society. This so-called "Crimean consensus" marked a red line in public discourse—criticism of the government remained permissible, but not of Crimea's annexation (Gudkov, 2014). The concept of the "Russian world" also gained official

prominence, justifying Russia's claim to protect Russian-speaking populations abroad (Kushnir, 2022). Since 2014, both regular troops and paramilitary forces in the Donbas have adopted imperial symbols and rhetoric—most notably the groups led by Igor Girkin (Strelkov) and the Russian Imperial Legion (Webber & Bertina, 2023). The apology of the empire as the optimal format of state structure for Russia sounded at the official level. For example, Director of the Foreign Intelligence Service Sergei Naryshkin said in December 2021 that “the imperial period in the history of Russia is of great importance for strengthening the state and forming national identity” and expressed regret that the Russian Empire is a thing of the past (TASS, 2021).

In sum, the institutional foundations of modern Russian imperialism were laid well before the full development of its discursive counterpart. By the early 2010s, the structure of imperial governance was firmly in place. The consolidation of imperial discourse coincided with a shift toward extra-systemic behavior—namely, the annexation of Crimea and the onset of hybrid war in the Donbas. The civilizational rhetoric of the “Russian world” not only legitimized Putin's authoritarian consolidation but also enabled a transition to overt imperial expansion.

War Period

After the beginning of the Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, regional governors have had little choice but to support the war. Indeed, regional authorities have uniformly endorsed it. Thus far, the ongoing war has not prompted either side to seek to change this model of center-regional relations. Without showing the slightest dissatisfaction, the governors took on additional obligations—to ensure that the figures for conscription of contractors and the volume of arms production sent down from Moscow were met. However, the system has not become more centralized; on the contrary, Moscow has delegated additional areas of responsibility to the regions. Moscow needed certain numbers of mobilized and called up under contract as well as certain volumes of arms production. Moscow was ready to pay for that, but it was up to the governors to decide how they achieved this. Generally, the imperial-like model of relations between the center and the regions, built before the war, has proved its resilience during the war against Ukraine.

Unlike the model between relations between Moscow and the regions, which did not change much since the beginning of the war, in the post-Soviet space, the war has triggered the revisions of the rationales of the smaller post-Soviet nations regarding their participation in Russia-driven projects and required them to review the risks, costs, and benefits of their geographical proximity to Russia (Busygina, 2024).

The war has also affected the EAEU in several aspects. First, unprecedented sanctions imposed on Russia

challenged the Eurasian project, as, according to Davtyan, the EAEU's task is now not only to consolidate its integration efforts but also to offset or at least to mitigate the blow of the economic war (Davtyan, 2022, p.7). The imposition of sanctions sharply increased legal and reputational risks that may discourage financial and trading companies actively cooperating with Western firms from interacting with Moscow. On March 30, 2024, Armenian banks completely stopped working with the Russian payment system. In early April, a similar decision was made in Kyrgyzstan (Korolev, 2024). Second, there were pronounced country-specific effects of the war. In the case of Armenia, this is the ultimate erosion of trust in Russia: the country's leadership believed that Russia failed to fulfill its obligations within the CSTO during Armenia's conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. In response, Armenia froze its membership in the CSTO. Armenia's foreign minister refused to participate in a meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Commonwealth of Independent States (*Armeniya otkazalas' ot uchastija v zasedanii Soveta glav MID stran SNG*, 2024). Kazakh president Tokayev has repeatedly criticized the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and appeared to caution against political integration between its members (*Kazakh President Warns Against Further Integration of Russia-Led Economic Bloc*, 2023). Importantly, since the war effects were country-specific, Moscow was not able to develop a common approach to solving problems with individual EAEU member-states. Russia must turn to ad hoc approach.

In broader terms, the war and associated sanctions have destabilized Russia's position vis-à-vis the smaller EAEU member states. While a complete collapse of Russia-centric regional projects remains unlikely in the short term, their further advancement—particularly with respect to political integration—now appears highly implausible.

Discursively, the war against Ukraine constituted the imperial project of the “Russian world” as the official project of Russian nation-building (Kuzio, 2023). This project in its wartime version focused exclusively on civilizational interpretation of the Russian nation. Domestically, this project was focused on the representation of the war as a common deal of all numerous ethnic groups consolidated under the umbrella of Russian imperial nation while externally it is manifested in attempts of imperial restoration. Russia's adherence to the project was explicitly confirmed by Vladimir Putin in March 2022, when he stated during his trip to Buryatia that Russia's actions against Ukraine were dictated by the imperative of “protecting the Russian world.” Though the relevancy of the officially declared level of mass support for Russia's actions against Ukraine can be disputed,² the mass support of the project has really expanded that can be verified through the analysis of the loyalist pro-war civic activity. The efforts of a significant part of civil society (“volunteers,” “war correspondents,” Telegram channels, crowdfunders) accelerated institutionalization and

legitimization of the imperial project in the country. In January 2023, the audience of only 14 popular pro-war TG-channels counted about 13 million followers. After the onset of Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, regional governors had little discretion and uniformly expressed support for the war. To date, the conflict has not provoked any substantial revisions to the existing model of center–regional relations. Without any sign of dissent, regional leaders assumed additional responsibilities—including meeting the quotas for conscription of contract soldiers and fulfilling Moscow’s directives on arms production. Nevertheless, this did not result in heightened centralization; on the contrary, the federal center delegated additional functional responsibilities to the regions. While Moscow dictated numerical targets for mobilization and military output, it granted governors latitude in determining how to achieve them. This continuity illustrates the durability of the pre-war imperial-style model of center–regional relations amidst wartime conditions.

The imperial content of this emergent discourse—popularly dubbed the “Z-society”—is expressed through various digital platforms, particularly Telegram and YouTube. For example, the influential “Rybar” channel created an art series titled “Strength in Unity,” highlighting ethnic minority volunteer units serving in the Russian army (Rybar, 2023). These illustrations were later featured in the “Patriot Park” state exhibition (Park Patriot, 2023). In Z-community discourse, the notion of empire—especially the Russian Empire—is presented in unequivocally positive terms. One channel contributor proclaimed: “What could be more beautiful for all of humanity than the good old Russian imperialism, which, unlike the British variant, will lead mankind into space, cultivate a sense of beauty, and build a purer, more humane world” (Starshe Eddy, 2023). Some Z-channels even adopt explicitly imperial titles (e.g., “Empire is Very Angry”).

This imperial discourse is characterized by stable lexical constructions. In line with pre-Soviet traditions, Z-channels refer to the military as the “Russian army” (Russkaya armiya) (Mest’ Dobroj Voli, 2024; Readovka, 2024), and occasionally as the “Imperial army” (Kotsnews, 2022). Simultaneously, phrases like “the so-called Ukraine” (Rybar, 2024a; 2024b) and “primordially Russian lands” (Arkhangel, 2023; Dva Majora, 2022; Fedorov, 2024; Gontar, 2022; Rybar, 2022) form the ideological core of this narrative. The messianic dimension of this imperial rhetoric is also reflected in Russia’s claim to global anti-imperialist leadership. Both President Putin (2022) and high-ranking officials—such as former Security Council Secretary Patrushev (2023) and Communist Party leader Zyuganov (2023)—have framed Russia’s mission in explicitly anti-colonial and anti-Western terms. These themes are also enshrined in the 2023 Foreign Policy Concept (Kuznetsov, 2023).

Importantly, since the war began, the Kremlin has increasingly attempted to project imperial discourse into the EAEU space, undermining the bloc’s originally apolitical, economic character (Busygina, 2024). At the May 2023 EAEU summit in Moscow, President Putin called for the union to resist “Western globalism” and advocated expanding integration beyond economics to encompass ideology, historical memory, and culture (Litvinov, 2023).

Modern Russian imperial discourse is thus shaped by both elite narratives and grassroots activism that reinforce each other. The interaction between these spheres is marked by ambivalence. While the state benefits from loyalist civic mobilization, it remains wary of autonomous political activism. In its third year, this civic engagement appears to have evolved into a bottom-up nation-building initiative. As one observer noted: “We have become aware of ourselves as a society, a nation... these hundreds of volunteer groups working to solve problems neglected by the Ministry of Defense are the tip of a larger iceberg. They are the embryo of our future. We have returned history to mankind by sending Fukuyama and his ideas to the trash” (Igra v Civilizaciju, 2024).

At the same time, friction between the state and the Z-community persists. Periodic state repression has targeted members of the “turbo-patriotic” camp. In 2023, Igor Strelkov—a prominent imperial nationalist and former separatist leader—was arrested and sentenced to prison. Criminal cases were launched against other activists (e.g., Vladimir Kvachkov, Yuri Evich, Yegor Guzenko, and Pavel Gubarev), and several Telegram channels were shut down (e.g., “Zastavny”).

There is no indication that the Russian leadership intends to cultivate a civic conception of national identity. On the contrary, the state articulates an aggressive, prescriptive nationalism, rooted in a vision of top-down loyalty rather than inclusive civic participation. Within this framework, ethnic and religious pluralism is construed not as a product of democratic coexistence but as a legacy of imperial governance. This aligns with the theoretical concept of an “imperial nation” (Pain, 2016; Tevdoy-Burmuli, 2023; Volkov & Kolesnikov, 2023).

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine has therefore triggered divergent trends in Russia’s imperial trajectory. Institutionally, the domestic model of empire—based on stable center–regional relations—remains intact. Externally, however, the war has halted the further institutionalization of Russian-led imperial projects across the post-Soviet region. Simultaneously, imperial discourse has deepened and expanded, not only through state rhetoric but also via widespread societal endorsement.

This asymmetry may be interpreted in multiple ways. First, it highlights the inherent tensions of implementing an imperial strategy in a postmodern international system shaped by economic interdependence, legal norms, and demographic constraints. The classic dilemma of “imperial

overstretch” has emerged early in Russia’s neo-imperial trajectory. Second, the disjunction between popular enthusiasm and institutional fragility suggests the potential for internal political instability, as rising grassroots support for imperial revival coincides with a weakening of the institutional means to pursue it.

Discussion and Conclusion

The main conclusion of our study is not merely a reiteration of the existence of institutional and discursive attributes in the modern Russian political project that sustain and develop its imperial character. Rather, the study aims to trace and analyze the functional interdependence of these attributes, with particular attention to their asynchronous development. Imperial discourse exists in two distinct forms—grassroots and official—with the former exhibiting a greater degree of asynchrony with institutional elements than the latter. At certain stages in post-Soviet Russian history, a latent grassroots imperial discourse retained a mass base of support for subsequent institutionalization. In other periods, however, institution-building outpaced the development of grassroots imperial narratives.

Up until the dissolution of the Soviet Union, universalist imperial discourse underpinned an expansionist foreign policy reflex, while imperial-type relations between the capital and the periphery were formalized through durable institutions. Although the collapse of the Russian Empire and the creation of the Soviet Union brought about a formal transformation of these institutions, their underlying logic remained unchanged.

Following the Soviet collapse, the first decade of sovereign Russia witnessed the only attempt—albeit partial—to abandon the imperial project. As Moscow’s authority weakened, centrifugal processes intensified domestically. In the post-Soviet region, although Russia’s leadership formally espoused ambitions to restore dominance, it lacked the requisite resources. Concurrently, post-imperial resentment gained traction in popular discourse. Overall, during this period, institutional and discursive trajectories diverged and failed to reinforce one another. Yet, the attempt to maintain state capacity while renouncing imperial ambition ultimately proved unsuccessful.

The period from 2000 to 2022 witnessed substantial developments in the institutional and discursive dimensions of the Russian imperial project. Domestically, a combination of sustained political centralization and selective non-centralization resulted in an imperial-like model of center–regional relations, which, despite formal constitutional federalism, was fully institutionalized by the mid-2010s. In the post-Soviet space, Russia’s regional integration initiatives served as a veneer for fundamentally imperial bilateral relations between Moscow and smaller neighboring states. These external relationships were more diffuse than internal ones but followed similar hierarchical logics. Ukraine

represented a notable exception, refusing to conform to this model—an outcome that directly contributed to the 2014 annexation of Crimea. Thus, institutionally, the imperial project progressed both internally and externally, albeit at different rates and intensities.

The consolidation of official imperial discourse followed, rather than preceded, the institutional entrenchment of imperial structures. In the early 2000s, socio-economic stabilization temporarily muted grassroots imperial sentiment. Nevertheless, official rhetoric increasingly adopted imperial narratives centered on Russia’s civilizational uniqueness and its right to influence global multipolarity—trends reflected in successive Foreign Policy Concepts. The annexation of Crimea marked a pivotal moment in the evolution of Russian imperial discourse, inaugurating a state–society consensus known as the “Crimean consensus.” Simultaneously, the notion of the “Russian world” gained traction as a central component of official ideology. By the early 2020s, both institutional and discursive attributes had become mutually reinforcing pillars of the Russian imperial project, consolidating elite and popular support.

The war against Ukraine has altered the dynamic interplay between institutional and discursive elements of Russian imperialism. Domestically, imperial institutions have demonstrated notable resilience, while outside Russia, institutional expansion has stalled. Meanwhile, the war has intensified imperial discourse at both the official and grassroots levels.

Regardless of the war’s outcome, the imperial project is likely to be maintained and supported by Russia’s current leadership. In a personalist regime, such a project is virtually without alternatives. 3 years of war have revealed the durability of Russia’s center–regional governance model, which thus far shows no signs of erosion. Nonetheless, political transition remains possible, and the inherent instability of personalist regimes may, especially amid ongoing resource depletion, activate mechanisms of forced decentralization and institutional decline. In the post-Soviet space, multilateral imperial projects—such as regional integration—are unlikely to advance. Still, nominal loyalty from most EAEU members (with the exception of Armenia) can be expected.

The future of imperial discourse, however, appears more complex. As a component of political culture, discourse inherently exhibits greater inertia than institutional structures, a trend evident during the 1990s. Moreover, as previously noted, the war has elevated imperial discourse to a core mobilizing narrative for significant segments of Russian society. Depending on the war’s resolution, this discourse will likely persist—either as a triumphant articulation of the “Russian world” or as a grievance-driven narrative reminiscent of post-imperial deprivation in the 1990s.

The potential for asynchronous development between institutional and discursive components—and the relative

autonomy of grassroots versus official discourse—merits further analysis. A grassroots imperial discourse can serve as a catalyst for renewed official imperialism. Conversely, state-sponsored propaganda can stimulate the resurgence of grassroots imperial sentiment.

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Notes

1. Like “Liberal Empire” of Anatoly Chubais, or “State without Shame” by Gleb Pavlovsky.
2. It fluctuated from the beginning of the war until September 2024 in the range of 68–80%—<https://www.levada.ru/2024/10/09/konflikt-s-ukrainoj-vnimanie-podderzhka-otnoshenie-k-razlichnym-usloviyam-mimogo-soglasheniya-v-sentyabre-2024-goda/>.

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