

CHALLENGES AND GOALS OF POST-IMPERIAL RUSSIA

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Russia as a Power

Zarys treści: Rosja, przy odczuwalnym spadku głównych zasobów potęgi, wywiera krytycznie zwiększony wpływ na rzeczywistość międzynarodową. Moskwa nie okazała się „kolosem na glinianych nogach”, ale groźnym rywalem, który potrafi dostosować się do zmiennych warunków. Tak zresztą było w historii. W niniejszym artykule przybliżono kilka czynników, które sprawiły, że Rosja potrafiła adaptować się do nowych uwarunkowań i sprawić, że jej potęga miała swój specyficzny rys.

Outline of content: Russia, with its primary sources of power in decline, is exerting a critically increased influence on the international landscape. Moscow did not prove to be a “colossus with feet of clay”, but a dangerous rival that is able to adapt to changing conditions, which was demonstrated throughout history. This article outlines several factors that allowed Russia to adapt to new conditions and gave the power its specific character.

Słowa kluczowe: Rosja, potęga, mocarstwo

Keywords: Russia, power, superpower

Russia's position in the historical balance of power is part of a broader problem that combines the actual attributes of power with the cultural and civilisational identity and psycho-political perceptions of Russians, which influence the range of opinions, assessments, ideological stereotypes, and emotions. Consequently, a striking contrast arises in the discourse surrounding Russia's international position, particularly following the Russian aggression against Ukraine. On the one hand, in the scientific and journalistic discourse, there are well-known arguments regarding Russia's weaknesses (a relatively small and stagnant economy, technological

backwardness, deteriorating demographics, corruption, institutional inefficiency, etc.). On the other hand, it is attributed with fundamental ‘agency’ – it is accused of ‘global revisionism’, attempts to transform and undermine the liberal world order and Western democracy itself.¹ There is an interesting paradox here: Russia, despite a noticeable decline in its primary power resources, is exerting a dramatically increased influence on international reality.² Moscow has not proven to be a ‘colossus with feet of clay’ but a dangerous rival capable of adapting to changing conditions. Furthermore, it probably does so more quickly and efficiently than the West. Neither from a military, economic, nor political perspective have Ukraine and the West managed to break Russia. It turned out to be effectively rebuilding its industrial base. “Defence factories are increasing their production, and old factories from the Soviet era are performing better than Western ones when it comes to products that are so needed in war, such as artillery shells”.³

The main research problem of this article is to explain the essence of the concept of ‘power’ and the related term ‘great power’, and to indicate the factors determining this status in the context of Russia. The author, however, ignores the universal set of power factors and focuses on answering two questions: Is Russia’s power specific or similar to that of other powers in history, and what makes Russia’s power unique?

This article consists of two parts. The first part discusses the concept and phenomenon of ‘power’ in scientific discourse. The second part presents an analysis of the subtle elements of Russia’s ‘power’ that shape its specificity.

Determinants of power

Much attention has been paid to defining ‘power’ and its elements in international relations (e.g., Hans Morgenthau,⁴ Robert Gilpin,⁵ John J. Mearsheimer,⁶ Raymond Aron,⁷ Nicolas J. Spykman,⁸ or in a slightly different context, Joseph S. Nye Jr.⁹). It can be argued that this is one of the most analysed concepts in scientific discourse.

¹ A. Kokoshin, ‘What is Russia: a Superpower, a Great Power or a Regional Power’, *International Affairs: A Russian Journal*, no. 6 (2002).

² A. Melville, A. Akhremenko, M. Mironyuk, ‘What Russia Can Teach Us about Power and Influence in World Politics’, *Russian Politics*, 4, no. 2 (2019), pp. 137–167.

³ See “В три смены”. Как Россия строит военные заводы по всей стране’, *Радио свобода* (27 Oct. 2023), <https://www.svoboda.org/a/v-tri-smeny-kak-rossiya-stroit-voennye-zavody-po-vsey-strane/32656819.html> (accessed: 20 Apr. 2024).

⁴ H. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York, 1948).

⁵ R. Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge, 1981).

⁶ J.J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York, 2001).

⁷ R. Aron, *Pokój i wojna między narodami (teoria)* (Warszawa, 1995).

⁸ N. Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace* (New York, 1944).

⁹ J.S. Nye Jr., *Soft power. Jak osiągnąć sukces w polityce światowej?*, transl. J. Zaborowski, introd. R. Kuźniar (Warszawa, 2007).

Much of the scholarly effort has focused on identifying the components of power, often in search of measurable and unmeasurable parameters that would allow for its precise estimation or calculation.¹⁰ This endeavour, however, appears to be a formidable challenge. Charles Doran aptly pointed out that “if the essence of international politics is power, the essence of power is relativity”.¹¹ The attempt to quantify power using numerical comparisons ultimately proves inconclusive and explains little. If such quantification were definitive, wars would not have had a *raison d'être*, as their outcomes would already have been known before hostilities even began.¹² Conversely, no prudent leader would undertake actions against another political entity without thoroughly assessing its strength.¹³ When analysing state power, it is crucial to recognise its complexity and multi-layered nature. Raymond Aron defined power as “the ability of a political entity to impose its will on other political entities in the international arena”.¹⁴ J.G. Stoessinger viewed power in international relations as “a state’s ability to use its material and immaterial resources in a way that influences the behaviour of other states”.¹⁵ Alan J.P. Taylor described power as a state’s resilience in the face of war.¹⁶ Joseph S. Nye Jr. conceptualised power as “the ability to influence others to achieve desired outcomes”.¹⁷ Ryszard Skarżyński defined power as “a set of forces in action, capable of creating or transforming a specific segment of reality”.¹⁸ This “set of forces” is concentrated and directed by a specific (political) centre of authority.

To understand power, one must grasp its limits (relative growth constraints), its challenges (legitimacy and adaptation to its role within the system), and its susceptibility to surprises (disruptions and unexpected shifts), which in turn make it vulnerable to shocks and uncertainty.¹⁹ Power is neither fixed nor unlimited. Without the consistent (historical) accumulation of resources by elites, whether as a function of continuous threat or a quasi-religious belief in their predestination to

¹⁰ See D. Kondrakiewicz, ‘Metody pomiaru siły państwa w stosunkach międzynarodowych’, in *Poziomy analizy stosunków międzynarodowych*, vol. 2, ed. E. Haliżak, M. Pietraś (Warszawa, 2013), pp. 13–22.

¹¹ Aron, *Pokój i wojna*, p. 76.

¹² Cited after: M. Sulek, ‘Paradygmat cyklu siły Charlesa F. Dorana a pozimnowojenny ład międzynarodowy’, in *Porządek międzynarodowy u progu XXI wieku*, ed. R. Kuźniar (Warszawa, 2005), p. 573.

¹³ At this point, it is worth recalling *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu: Sun Zi, *Sztuka wojenna* (Kraków, 2003), pp. 17–28.

¹⁴ Aron, *Pokój i wojna*, p. 69.

¹⁵ Cited in M. Sulek, ‘Modelowanie i pomiar potęgi państw w stosunkach międzynarodowych’, *Sprawy Międzynarodowe*, no. 3–4 (2003), p. 70.

¹⁶ A. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe: 1848–1918* (Oxford, 1954), p. XXIV.

¹⁷ Nye, *Soft power*, pp. 34–45.

¹⁸ R. Skarżyński, *Anarchia i policentryzm. Elementy teorii stosunków międzynarodowych* (Białystok, 2006), p. 340.

¹⁹ Ch.F. Doran, ‘Economics, Philosophy of History, and the “Single Dynamic” of Power Cycle Theory: Expectations, Competition, and Statecraft’, *International Political Science Review*, 24, no. 1 (2003), pp. 13–49.

uphold a particular faith, ideology, or social order, a state risks becoming nothing more than an ephemeral (short-lived) power.

There are no precisely established and unquestionably defined characteristics of what constitutes a 'power'. These characteristics were typically regarded as evident by experts.²⁰ However, such an approach carries a considerable degree of subjectivity. As a result, attempts have been made to establish some common criteria for determining the status of a 'great power'.²¹ Power is often confused with its indicators or the intentions guiding its development. Each long-term power relies on a complex and evolving configuration of factors that favour the accumulation of resources and the mobilisation of means across time and space.²² While attempts can be made to assess these factors, it is worth noting that even a comparison of seemingly measurable values does not always provide an accurate assessment of the actual potential of the actors involved. A good exemplification can be found in the size of the army, which, being a measurable value, does not answer the basic questions of its training, armament, organisation, morale, discipline, etc. and, therefore, of its effective strength. The challenge of establishing universal components of power lies in their evolution over time and space, changes in their nature, and their varying utility to a state's potential. Many of these factors may simultaneously strengthen and weaken power (for instance, the benefits of possessing vast territory can be offset by the challenges of defending extended borders and the dispersion of forces). Despite these limitations, a categorisation of the most universal components of power can be proposed. This approach allows for the identification of six basic elements:

1. Geography – the size of the territory, access to natural resources, climate and geostrategic position;
2. Demography – population size, social structure, education, degree of integration and national consciousness;
3. Economy – industrialisation, the technological development of the industrial sector, economic flexibility, the state's financial condition, the scale of foreign trade, and GDP levels and growth;
4. Technology;
5. Military strength – technological and military preparation of the army, efficiency of the command staff, organisation, morale, readiness to participate in armed conflicts and make sacrifices; allied capabilities of the state – credibility and perception of a given state in the international arena, flexibility, readiness to enter alliances, cultural and ideological attractiveness;

²⁰ K.N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York, 1979), p. 131.

²¹ Lists of factors determining the power of a state were compiled by, i.a.: Morgenthau, *Politics*; J.G. Stoessinger, *The Might of Nations: World Politics in Our Time* (New York, 1962); N. Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power* (New York, 1942); Aron, *Pokój i wojna*; Waltz, *Theory*.

²² Skarżyński, *Anarchia i policentryzm*, p. 346.

6. Political leadership – the real role of each state on the world stage is primarily determined by the personality of its leader and their team, as well as by the institutions of state power and administration in that country, which the state or political leader can adapt to specific tasks undertaken in the interests of the state.

All the above elements should be understood as relative rather than absolute factors, as their actual value materialises only in comparison with the analogous strengths (or weaknesses) of an opponent. It should also be noted that none of these elements – either individually or even collectively – guarantees immediate success in international politics, due to both their relative nature and the influence of random factors (e.g., the military genius of an enemy commander). However, in the long run, these factors almost inevitably lead to domination over other political entities. Conversely, the absence or weakness of even one of these elements significantly reduces a state's historical chances of securing a lasting position among the great powers. The power of individual great powers depends on the total sum of their resources, but only under the condition of their effective and coordinated deployment in a historical perspective. Frequently, one strength is derived from another. A large population is meaningless without an efficient state organisation; vast territory without a strong military can become an easy target for neighbours; and even the largest army, if lacking competent leadership, organisation and morale, will be nothing more than an amorphous mass of soldiers. The analysis of political powers across time and space reveals distinct patterns that enable their classification into three primary groups. Thus, we can distinguish enduring (long-term) powers – endowed with a threshold level of great power potential (favourable geostrategic location, territory, population size) and capable of expanding it in a historical perspective (China, Russia, England, USA, Germany, France); opportunistic powers, whose potential is not a function of accumulated strength but rather results from periodically emerging circumstances such as trade, resources, military organisation, or effective leadership (United Provinces, Portugal, Spain, Turkey, Japan); and ephemeral (short-lived) powers, which, due to the military genius of their leaders, were granted fleeting moments of glory by fate (Denmark, Sweden, Mongols). History also reveals hampered powers, which, despite possessing great power potential, were unable to effectively utilise it for various reasons (Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth).

The specificity of Russia's power

The place of each country in the global hierarchy is determined by many parameters, some quite precise and measurable, others approximate and estimated. The most general determinants of each state's power are GDP, population, territory size, and the size of its armed forces. Russia's power, viewed from a historical

perspective, was also underpinned by specific factors. The following section outlines and briefly characterises these elements.

1. Consistent power-building. An element influencing the concentration of Russia's power was the extraordinary consistency with which the elites expanded the state's territorial base. This incrementalism became, in a sense, the very reason for the state's existence on the political and mental level. "For other nations, annexation is only an extravagance or at least something to which only a surplus of strength can be devoted; for Russia, conversely, it is a constant aspiration to which all strength has always been and will be devoted".²³ The central problem of Russia's foreign policy has been whether it can exist and develop in any form other than an empire. This is not an easy task. Spatial issues have played a significant role not only in Russian politics but also in Russian culture. Often, the actual reality here is intertwined with the parallel reality of perception. Historically, Russia has been the archetypal continental empire.²⁴ In the Russian tradition, there has always been a strong emphasis on territory and borders. According to the philosopher Ivan Ilyin, "Russia [was] an organism of nature and the soul".²⁵ Lev Gumilev, in his work *From Rus to Russia*, identifies three determinants of historical events: space, time, and the ethnoses that function within the first two.²⁶ Georgy Gatchev stated that for Russia, "distance and breadth were more privileged than height or depth, the horizon of the world was more important than the vertical".²⁷ Another philosopher, Konstantin Leontiev, wrote that Russia was doomed by history to grow, even against its will; hence, its territory was perceived as "the earthly environment of the national spirit".²⁸ Political scientist Stanislav Belkovsky wrote in *Komsomolskaya Pravda*: "There is one destiny for our nation – empire".²⁹ In 2025, one of the architects of the Russian political system, Vladislav Surkov, said in an interview for *L'Express*: "For Russia, permanent expansion is not just another idea, it is the existential condition of our historical existence [...]. The Russian world has no borders. The Russian world is everywhere where there is Russian influence, in one form or another: cultural, informational, military, economic, ideological or humanitarian... In other words, it is everywhere".³⁰

²³ H. Kamiński, *Rosja i Europa. Polska. Wstęp do badań nad Rosją i Moskalmi* (Warszawa, 1999), p. 269.

²⁴ D. Trenin, *End of Eurasia: Russia on the Border Between Geopolitics and Globalization* (Moscow, 2001), p. 40.

²⁵ I. Ilin, *Сущность и своеобразие русской культуры* (Москва, 1996), p. 171.

²⁶ L. Gumilow, *Od Rusi do Rosji* (Warszawa, 1996), pp. 8–9.

²⁷ Г. Гачев, *Национальные образы мира: Америка в сравнении с Россией и Славянством* (Москва, 1997), p. 622.

²⁸ К. Леонтьев, *Восток, Россия и Славянство* (Москва, 1996), p. 158.

²⁹ С. Белковский, 'России пора распрощаться с Внешним управляющим', *Комсомольская правда* (19 Apr. 2004).

³⁰ V. Sourkov, 'Poutine pense que l'Europe aurait intérêt à être proche de la Russie', 21 March 2025, <https://www.lexpress.fr/monde/europe/vladislav-sourkov-et-le-nord-global-poutine-pense-que-leurope-aurait-interet-a-etre-proche-de-la-EMHRQZZWKZGUBESGB3BXXEAW3M/> (accessed: 3 May 2025).

Since the time of Ivan Kalita (1328–1340), the process of the so-called “gathering of the Russian lands” became a fundamental credo of Moscow’s policy for the next centuries. In the West, it primarily occurred at the expense of the Polish Commonwealth, Lithuania, Sweden and Turkey. In the east, following the elimination of Kazan in the sixteenth century, the territorial development of the state was constrained solely by communication possibilities. Such imperial ‘incrementalism’ is, of course, nothing exceptional in history; however, others, when faced with determined resistance, usually stopped – Russia did not. Henry Kissinger wrote that “Russia rarely recognised any limitations in its march; restrained in its intentions, it closed in on itself, harbouring a sullen resentment”.³¹ After the Second World War, it was time for greater expansion. In the case of the Baltic Republics and the eastern territories of the Second Polish Republic, straightforward annexation was implemented, whereas in Central and Eastern Europe, the strategy involved establishing a system of vassalised satellite states and buffer zones within the emerging post-Yalta bipolar order. The Warsaw Pact countries became satellites, and the buffers were neutral countries on the East-West border, including Finland, Austria, Yugoslavia, and the allied GDR (in a slightly different geopolitical constellation, Afghanistan as well).

The Stalinist System aimed to extend its reach much further. The expansion of the socialist community was to include the Middle and Far East, Africa, Latin America and Central Asia. The more powerful the Soviet Union was, the more threatened it felt.³² It was one of those great paradoxes in Russian history that often made it difficult to comprehend.³³ The more Russia became a multilingual empire, as Kissinger wrote, the more it felt open to blows.³⁴ A further consequence of this situation was the constant fear that the empire would collapse if it did not expand.³⁵ In the 1970s, the infamous Brezhnev Doctrine was coined regarding the nature of the so-called ‘external empire’. It meant that none of the countries known as ‘people’s democracies’ had the right to leave the Warsaw Pact or to make any internal political and economic changes that would violate the prevailing model of political, social and economic order in the ‘eastern camp’. The effects of the doctrine included armed interventions in Berlin in 1953, Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968.³⁶ In the late 1980s, the ‘external empire’ ceased to exist, but this did not mean the end of the ‘Brezhnev Doctrine’. It only changed

³¹ H. Kissinger, *Dyplomacja* (Warszawa, 2003), p. 25.

³² P. Grudziński, ‘Powolne przewyciężanie Jałty’, *Rzeczpospolita* (27 Nov. 1995); Kissinger, *Dyplomacja*, pp. 148–149.

³³ To a large extent, this assumption was correct. The imperial expansion of the USSR and, previously, Russia, inevitably generated new international problems by encroaching upon the areas of interest of other world powers. It also created internal problems, as the multinational empire became less and less nationally cohesive.

³⁴ Kissinger, *Dyplomacja*, p. 148.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

³⁶ Grudziński, ‘Powolne przewyciężanie Jałty’.

the addressee, which became the republics of the USSR itself. Gorbachev used it twice in Georgia and Lithuania. The consequences were dire. It turned out that Moscow was no longer feared, which, in turn, led to further erosion of the Union.³⁷

The establishment of the CIS was an attempt to hastily save the international role of the 'great power' because, as Dmitri Trenin wrote, every power needs a political 'entourage' and 'clientele'.³⁸ The very existence of the Community, to some extent, reflected Russia's 'great-power' status. Although this union could not equal the strength and importance of the former Warsaw Pact or the Comecon, it could create illusions of power that the political authorities tried to utilise both in their contacts with the external environment and within their own society. With the advent of the new Russia, it might seem that dreams of rebuilding the empire were devalued. Nothing could be further from the truth! The so-called 'Karaganov Doctrine' points to the necessity of seizing part of Ukraine and establishing a vassal state from its remnants, as well as the vision of Russia creating an anti-hegemonistic coalition aimed at overthrowing the power of the USA, also through controlled nuclear escalation.³⁹

2. Perception of Russia. Russia's unquestionable strength was often based on a set of mental factors more tied to how the country was perceived by rivals and competitors than to objective realities. One of the fundamental elements building Russia's historical power was, therefore... the fear of Russia. Balance in the anarchic world of international relations occurs not as an actual relationship of power, but as an intellectual, political creation of faith, belief and intention. Simply regarding my opponent as potentially strong enough that attacking them would be risky or even uncertain to succeed is enough for me to abandon this intention. Especially if I perceive the opponent to be wild, unpredictable, and cruel. Oswald Spengler once wrote that "the Russian soul, hidden beneath filth, music, vodka, humility and peculiar sadness, is unfathomable to us".⁴⁰ People feel a subconscious fear of the unknown and unfamiliar. Not understanding the world around them, they often talk about savagery and primitivism. Hence, the countless accounts, such as those by Antonio Possevino and Astolphe-Louis-Léonor de Custine, portrayed Russia as a country of terror and primitivism. Fear of the 'Hordes from the East', of Russian cavalry that would 'water their horses in the Seine', effectively paralysed common-sense calculations of strength, but also distorted the actual image of the empire. Even if it did not deter aggression from other countries, it effectively paralysed their will. In this context, it can be assumed that the belief in Russia's imperial superpower was essentially the creation of Western countries' imaginations, fears and obsessions, which, lacking knowledge or understanding of Moscow, simply exaggerated its power and importance. Over the last few centuries,

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Д. Тренин, 'Россия и конец Евразии', *Pro et Contra*, 9, no. 1 (2005), p. 16.

³⁹ С.А. Караганов, 'Век войн? Статья первая', *Россия в глобальной политике*, 22, no. 1 (2024), pp. 52–64.

⁴⁰ O. Spengler, *Historia, kultura, polityka* (Warszawa, 1990), p. 229.

Russia has undoubtedly been a superpower, at least in terms of its vast territory and considerable military potential. Whether Russia became a superpower often depended on the consent of its partners and competitors.

3. Great ability to restore its potential. After wars, Russia typically recovered quite quickly, whereas other powers often took decades to regain their might, if they were able to do so at all. It is difficult to understand because the key conflicts took place on its territory (1700–1709, 1812, 1853–1856, 1904–1905, 1914–1917, 1941–1945) and resulted in enormous losses. The swift reconstruction of potential can only be explained by the assumption that Russia possessed significantly greater resources than it could mobilise through its standard policy. The wars seemed to revive Russia's spirit and strength. They typically facilitated a rapid advance in technology, organisation and military capabilities for the state, thereby promptly bridging the gap between the country and the more developed Western powers in these areas. A rhetorical question arises here: why was Russia so weak in 1853 and yet so strong in 1945, despite the fact that, in the former case, it had come after a long period of peace, while in the latter, it followed a dramatic war and an earlier revolution? To some extent, a similar situation occurred after Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022.

4. Specific use of the economic base. Paul Kennedy, in his work *World Powers*, argued that the strength of the economy was the key to generating state power and also the key to victory in the arms race. The situation was not much different in Russia. Russia has never perceived economic power (industry, but also finance, credit) as an independent force that could significantly determine the overall power of the state. It treated the economy as a handmaiden of the army. Thus, military power almost never (except perhaps during the reigns of Peter I and Stalin, although even then only to a limited extent) resulted directly from economic power. Russia used periodic, cyclical, small 'industrial revolutions' to relatively modernise its army, and subsequent generations lived off what had been reformed (revolutionised) during periods of economic prosperity. They were usually carried out in response to military failures.

After victorious wars, Moscow often became complacent. Convinced of the power and invincibility of its armies, it naturally dropped out of the arms race, thus losing its advantage. Stalin tried not to make this mistake, but both he and, above all, his successors were overwhelmed by a lack of understanding that the modern economy is a complex system of interconnected vessels that complement and develop each other. The relative strength of the Russian economy did not result from the strength of its aggregate production but rather from the relative weakness of the economies of its immediate neighbours (apart from Germany, from the time of Bismarck until 1945). The USSR's economy was not as strong as it was, since it was solely focused on the arms industry. The Soviet leaders understood the economy too narrowly, focusing on sectors that essentially reduced it to the technical park of the armed forces. This established a solid foundation for the army, creating the military power of the state, but led to the paralysis of other

elements, resulting in an erosion of power on a global scale. The events of 1986–1991 show that this neglect may have been crucial. Contemporary Russia makes similar mistakes. The flow of money is primarily directed towards strategic sectors of the economy, including the arms industry and energy, while investments in industrial and mining infrastructure are selectively neglected.

5. High morale of Russian society and the Russian army. Morale is a very relative and very fleeting factor. In the Russian armies, where organisation and efficiency were based on discipline, fear and violence, it is difficult to even consider such categories. Morale in this case referred more to the leaders and chiefs than to the soldiers they led. It is also challenging to conduct a more in-depth analysis in the case of Russia, given the lack of reliable data in this regard. However, the analysis of the political discourse that took place in Russia between the conscious and unconscious perception of international reality and the role that Russia played in it leads to the conclusion that society generally accepted losses and sacrifices. It demonstrated a much greater (and sometimes surprising) willingness to sacrifice than the societies of other powers.

It should also be noted that Russia's key wars were mostly defensive, fought on its own territory. It undoubtedly increased patriotism, national bond, readiness for sacrifice, focus on the leader, and thus everything that can be called high morale. It was said that a Russian has "Mother Russia and Batiushka Tsar".⁴¹ For a Soviet citizen, power was the ultimate measure, the central threat, the innovative idea and the source of orientation.⁴² Russian society has never undertaken an introspection of tsarist colonialism or Soviet crimes against humanity because the post-Soviet Russian Federation did not transform into a truly post-imperial nation-state. Instead, during Vladimir Putin's nearly quarter-century in power, a new generation of Russians has actively cultivated the country's imperial identity. This unreconstructed imperialism led directly to the current invasion of Ukraine and will remain a major threat to international security until it is addressed.⁴³

6. Monism of political power. The entire course of Russia's historical development is the reverse of the processes taking place to the west of the empire. Unlike the rest of Europe, where liberal individualism gradually prevailed, in Russia, there was a trend "from freedom to slavery", from relative political and economic freedoms to 'autocracy'. The time of Peter the Great brought a final end to any remaining freedoms. The Tsar built an empire in which the state had absolute primacy over the individual. Regardless of their social status, people became mere instruments of government policy. The growth of despotism, and consequently the cult of the ruler, began to hinder the natural evolution of monarchy in Europe.

⁴¹ E. Lewandowski, *Rosyjski sfinks. Rosjanie wśród innych narodów* (Warszawa, 1999), p. 173.

⁴² See R. Legvold, 'On Power: The Nature of Soviet Power', *Foreign Affairs*, 56, no. 1 (1977), p. 49.

⁴³ T. Kuzio, 'Putin's Invasion Shatters the Myth of Russian-Ukrainian Brotherhood', 16 Feb. 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putins-invasion-shatters-the-myth-of-russian-ukrainian-brotherhood/> (accessed: 10 March 2025).

At a time when the first democratic states were emerging in the West, the tsars and their entourage jealously guarded their prerogatives. The communists' coming to power could indicate that Russia was returning to the path of freedom.

Unfortunately, it was much easier to change the system than the mentality of the people living in it. The times of communism brought enslavement of the nation and consolidation of power to a degree unattainable even in periods of the deepest 'autocracy'. This problem, although on a smaller scale, returned in the 1990s. The wave of freedom at the beginning of the decade gradually gave way to oppressive authoritarianism. Aleksandr Lukin even wondered whether contemporary Russia was not further from liberal democracy than the USSR was in its last years of existence.⁴⁴ The absolute power of the tsars and first secretaries of the party enabled the rulers of Russia to conduct policy in an arbitrary manner, without taking public opinion into account.

This resulted in a significant opportunity to focus the state's potential on issues related to the development of the armed forces and, as a consequence of military potential, foreign policy. Stalin was able to perform skilful manipulation, which seems to mesmerise even contemporary politicians. It was the creation of a false image of the relationship between the leader and his entourage as an equal arrangement, in which the 'liberal' head of state remains hostage to his 'hard-line' entourage. Now the pendulum has swung to the other side. It is generally believed that the situation in Russia is completely monopolised and controlled by the president (prime minister) and a group of his most loyal associates. It appears that both assumptions are flawed. Misunderstanding this fact implies diplomatic failures on the part of the West.

7. Public support for building Russian power (often even at the cost of everyday sacrifices) and expansion. Russia's foreign policy was (and is) deeply conditioned by historical, mental and internal political issues. The first two aspects are a function of a specific discourse between the past and the present (remembering the imperial past or superpower status and confronting it with the current situation) and between the authorities and society, where there is a link between the social demand to build Russia's international power and the regime's demand to submit to the will of the authorities and the state in order to fulfil the goal formulated by society. It can be assumed that there is an informal agreement in which political power receives social legitimacy in exchange for fulfilling the role of creator and bearer of Russian superpower status. Failure in this area automatically raises questions about the competence and purposefulness of a given regime.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ А.В. Лукин, 'Переходный период в России: демократизация и либеральные реформы', *Polis*, no. 2, 1999, p. 18, <http://www.politstudies.ru/fulltext/1999/2/13.htm> (accessed: 7 March 2017).

⁴⁵ Defeats in this regard triggered small or large revolutions – the so-called 'post-Sevastopol thaw' after the defeat in the Crimean War, the 1905 revolution after the defeat by Japan, the 1917 revolutions after the defeats of the First World War, and the collapse of the USSR as a consequence of the defeat in Afghanistan.

Taking advantage of social sentiment, the authorities are also exploiting this problem for opportunistic purposes, creating a sense of international threat and conspiracy, which consolidates public opinion around the regime. The social dimension of Russia's international policy also had a mental aspect. Russians actually expected (and expect) success, perceiving Russia's superpower position not only as natural but also, in an axiological sense, as a certain historical justice and as Russia's specific identity. In Russia, there was a very pronounced selective definition of one's own identity, self-awareness of connection with 'one's own' and separateness from 'the foreign', a conviction that 'we' are different from everyone else. Here, one can observe a striking dichotomy between conscious and subconscious perceptions of international reality – fascination and hidden envy. For the average Russian, the world has always been fundamentally divided into 'us' and 'them'.

If Russia does not have enough forces to cope with 'them' today, then in the public consciousness, it is still necessary to oppose 'them' as much as possible, even if only passively.⁴⁶ Political life in Russia unfolded against a backdrop of a social premonition that the country was facing some kind of global catastrophe – war, aggression, conspiracy. This premonition was intensified by the Kremlin's genuinely aggressive activity, which constantly sought an opponent in both the domestic and international spheres. Lev Gudkov, director of the Yuri Levada Analytical Centre in Moscow, claims that the concept of the enemy was extremely important in Russian policy; it set a 'horizon' that allowed for navigating reality.⁴⁷ Yuri Afanasyev wrote that for Russia, "enemies are as necessary as air. If there are none, they will be invented".⁴⁸ This type of societal self-awareness was easily manipulated in an 'us' versus 'them' optic, providing the authorities with a powerful moral justification for external aggression and expansion.

Conclusion

After the period of 'the gloomy 1990s', Russia clearly entered a process of rebuilding its power, which was intended to serve as a starting point for reactivating its leading role in the new balance of power after the collapse of Pax Americana. Both the public and the political regime seemed to believe in the success of this mission. This ultimately led to Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022.

Does Russian self-confidence have a strong foundation? Can Russia be a superpower? The specific nature of Russia's power is currently undergoing some changes. Civilisational changes, taking place in the global world to a much greater extent than

⁴⁶ See Б. Дубин, "“Противовес”: символика Запада в России последних лет", *Pro et Contra*, 8, no. 3 (2004), pp. 23ff.

⁴⁷ 'Историческое сознание россиян', <http://www.svobodanews.ru/Transcript/2008/11/02/> (accessed: 26 Dec. 2008).

⁴⁸ J. Afanasjew, *Groźna Rosja*, transl. M. Kotowska (Warszawa, 2005), p. 245.

in the past, are standardising economies and military resources, and also (or perhaps above all) homogenising societies. This does not mean, however, that the power of today's Russia is devoid of its individual character. Currently, the key resources of Russian power, as well as of the new Russian imperialism, remain space, raw materials and resurgent military power (to a large extent, limited to the realm of propaganda), alongside lies and disinformation. Historically and mentally, Moscow was incapable of pursuing a policy of compromise, mutual concessions and cooperation. These elements, obvious in the world of diplomacy, have traditionally been, and continue to be, perceived in the Kremlin as signs of weakness rather than strength. The guiding formula of Russian (and Soviet) foreign policy was based on a simple notion: no room for compromise. A natural element of Russian diplomacy was aggression, threats, blackmail, violence and disinformation. Russia was very keen to present itself as the victim of aggression and imagined threats from states whose only intention was to confirm or expand their sovereignty. Our own version of history provided ideological and moral justification for these 'fears'. In Moscow's version of the past, Russia was also the victim of aggression, conspiracy and humiliation at the hands of belligerent powers. In this respect, contemporary Russia does not differ much from its historical creations. It is difficult to understand how Finland, Estonia, Georgia or Poland could threaten the eastern empire. However, Western public opinion, as well as a significant part of the Western elites, showed an uncritical understanding of Russian 'problems'. As a result of the war, it became apparent that Russia was not as strong as it had been perceived to be. It is difficult to imagine how Russia will find its place in the new architecture of the multipolar equilibrium system, i.e. one in which there is no explicitly defined enemy. Another thing is that the current balance of power is not so much about the balance of potentials as about their cancellation. Here, however, Russia's resources remain considerable. Russia will undoubtedly be a superpower in the coming years, if only because of its vast territory, strategic nuclear capabilities, and access to energy resources. In contrast, the rapid technological development currently being observed may deprive it of its last attributes of military power, and new energy sources may undermine the foundation of Russia's income. This raises another fundamental consideration: any attempt to speculate on Russia's future power development is characterised by such a large margin of error that it borders on mere journalism.

In fact, all kinds of transformations are possible today, and they depend not only on Russia itself, but also, as in the past, on the potential, will and determination of its main competitors in the complex world of international relations.

Abstract

Russia's position in the historical balance of power is part of a broader problem that combines the actual attributes of power with the cultural and civilisational identity and psycho-political perceptions of Russians, which influence the range of opinions, assessments, ideological

stereotypes, and emotions. As a result, a significant contrast emerges in the discourse on Russia's international position. On the one hand, in the scientific and journalistic discourse, there are arguments about Russia's weakness, while on the other hand, it is attributed with fundamental 'agency' – it is accused of 'global revisionism', attempts to transform and undermine the liberal world order and Western democracy itself. That contrast constitutes an interesting paradox: Russia, with its primary sources of power in decline, is exerting a critically increased influence on the international landscape. Moscow did not prove to be a "colossus with feet of clay", but a dangerous rival that is able to adapt to changing conditions, which was proven throughout history. This article outlines several factors that allowed Russia to adapt to new conditions and gave the power its specific character.

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