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Russia after the Euromaidan: Foreign Policy Limitations amid Clashing Geostrategies of Territorial Expansion and Eurasian Integration

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Abstract. Following the Euromaidan, Russia responded with military intervention in Ukrainian territory. This revision of the status quo took a more brutal turn in February 2022. The reasons for Russia's revisionism fit into the debate on the increasing estrangement between the Russian Federation and the West, along with a renewal of the classical characterization of Russia as an "imperialist" state bent on restoring the Moscow-centered power of the former Soviet Union (FSU). Although the broad characterization of Russia as "imperialist" adeptly captures its brutal denial of Ukraine's sovereignty, it still conflates different geographic vectors and historical periods. This article contributes to the ongoing debates by employing William Walters's concepts of "geostrategic perspectives" (i.e., march, colonial frontier, and limes) and the Westphalian and Imperial geopolitical models of Christopher S. Browning and Pertti Joenniemi. This framework encapsulates, on the one hand, the complex compatibility of the processes of territorial revisionism and, on the other hand, Russia-centric regional integration of the FSU. Ultimately, the goal is to analyze Russia's post-Euromaidan border politics, addressing both the revision of Ukraine's borders and regional integration through the Eurasian Economic Union during the status quo that lasted until 2022. The resulting picture shows that the Russian Federation's Westphalian geopolitical model of limes expansion contradicts the imperial geopolitical model based on the creation of colonial frontiers. The incremental reinforcement of the Westphalian model since February 2022 raises the interesting question of how this will affect imperial geopolitics regarding other FSU countries.
Keywords: Russia; Ukraine; Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU); Geopolitics.

[es] Rusia después del Euromaidán: limitaciones de la política exterior en medio de geoestrategias enfrentadas de expansión territorial e integración euroasiática

Resumen. Tras el Euromaidán, Rusia respondió con una intervención militar en territorio ucraniano. Esta revisión del status dio un giro más brutal en febrero de 2022. Las razones del revisionismo de Rusia encajan en el debate sobre el creciente distanciamiento entre la Federación Rusa y Occidente, junto con una renovación de la caracterización clásica de Rusia como un Estado "imperialista" empeñado en restaurar el poder de la ex Unión Soviética centrado en Moscú. Aunque la caracterización amplia de Rusia como "imperialista" capta hábilmente su brutal negación de la soberanía de Ucrania,

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todavía combina diferentes vectores geográficos y períodos históricos. Este artículo contribuye a los debates en curso empleando los conceptos de "perspectivas geoestratégicas" de William Walters (es decir, marcha, frontera colonial y *limes*) y los modelos geopolíticos westfalianos e imperiales de Christopher S. Browning y Pertti Joenniemi. Este marco resume, por un lado, la compleja compatibilidad de los procesos de revisionismo territorial y, por el otro, la integración regional de la ex Unión Soviética centrada en Rusia. En última instancia, el objetivo es analizar la política fronteriza de Rusia posterior al Euromaidán, abordando tanto la revisión de las fronteras de Ucrania como la integración regional a través de la Unión Económica Euroasiática durante el *statu quo* que duró hasta 2022. El panorama resultante muestra que el modelo geopolítico westfaliano de la Federación Rusa de expansión del limes contradice el modelo geopolítico imperial basado en la creación de fronteras coloniales. El refuerzo incremental del modelo westfaliano desde febrero de 2022 plantea la interesante pregunta de cómo afectará esto a la geopolítica imperial con respecto a otros países de la ex Unión Soviética.
Palabras clave: Rusia; Ucrania; Unión Económica Euroasiática (UEEA); geopolítica.

[pt] Rússia após o Euromaidan: limitações da política externa em meio a geoestratégias confrontantes de expansão territorial e integração eurasiática

Resumo. Após o Euromaidan, a Rússia respondeu com uma intervenção militar em território ucraniano. Esta revisão do status quo tomou um rumo mais brutal em Fevereiro de 2022. As razões para o revisionismo da Rússia enquadram-se no debate sobre o crescente distanciamento entre a Federação Russa e o Ocidente, juntamente com uma renovação da caracterização clássica da Rússia como um Estado "imperialista" empenhado em restaurar o poder da antiga União Soviética centrado em Moscou. Embora a ampla caracterização da Rússia como "imperialista" capte habilmente a sua negação brutal da soberania da Ucrânia, ainda confunde diferentes vetores geográficos e períodos históricos. Este artigo contribui para os debates em curso ao empregar os conceitos de "perspectivas geoestratégicas" de William Walters (ou seja, marcha, fronteira colonial e limes) e os modelos geopolíticos vestfalianos e imperiais de Christopher S. Browning e Pertti Joenniemi. Esta estrutura resume, por um lado, a compatibilidade complexa dos processos de revisionismo territorial e, por outro lado, a integração regional da URSS centrada na Rússia. Por fim, o objetivo é analisar a política fronteiriça da Rússia pós-Euromaidan, abordando tanto a revisão das fronteiras da Ucrânia como a integração regional através da União Econômica Eurasiática durante o status quo que durou até 2022. O quadro resultante mostra que o modelo geopolítico vestefaliano da Federação Russa de expansão contradiz o modelo geopolítico imperial baseado na criação de fronteiras coloniais. O reforço incremental do modelo vestefaliano desde fevereiro de 2022 levanta a interessante questão de como isto afetará a geopolítica imperial em relação a outros países da antiga URSS.
Palavras-chave: Rússia; Ucrânia; União Económica Eurasiática (EAEU); geopolítica.

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Introduction

Among brewing tensions since 2021, the Russian military buildup on the border with Ukraine, and Moscow's increasingly aggressive demands for status quo revision, on February 24, 2022, Russia initiated a non-declared war of aggression against Ukraine. The ongoing fateful war resulted from tensions accumulating since the first instance of the Russian military intervention back in 2014, which was a result of Euromaidan. What Hiski Haukkala characterized at the time as the "perfect storm" (Haukkala, 2016) originated with the European Union (EU) including Ukraine in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative, created in 2009. Torn between the benefits of signing the EaP Association Agreement (AA) and the risks of ignoring the Russian pressure to join its Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) project, Ukraine's Viktor Yanukovich decided to postpone signing the EU's AA, triggering the events known as Euromaidan.[2] Yanukovich's subsequent ousting in February 2014 and a pro-European change of course in Ukraine motivated an aggressive response from the Russian Federation, which annexed the Crimean Peninsula and supported the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Lugansk People's Republic (LPR). The ultimate consequence of the Euromaidan was that Ukraine deepened its integration within the EaP (Haukkala, 2016), while the Russian Federation had to continue the process of building the EAEU without a vital part. In parallel, from February 2015 to February 2022, the two self-proclaimed republics maintained a precarious existence with the help of Russian support in what became a protracted low-intensity conflict.

The events of 2014 inspired a lively academic debate regarding the reasons for the unexpected and shocking outcome of war (Forsberg and Pursiainen, 2017; Götz, 2015, 2017; Mankoff, 2014; McFaul, 2014; Mearsheimer, 2014; Treisman, 2016; Tsygankov, 2015). This debate was a continuation of an older discussion regarding the growing distance between the EU and NATO on the one side and the Russian Federation on the other, increasingly compounded by the formers' expansion closer to Russia's borders (see Lane, 2016). Understandably, Russia has been accused of practicing an imperialist policy. However, the definitions of the terms "empire" and "imperialism" have been insufficiently problematized. Therefore, grasping the exact nature and possible future scope of Moscow's expansionist moves, along with the contradictions that Russia's different strategies for ordering its near abroad have

[2] It must be highlighted that while talking of benefits and risks, we are referring to the subjective perception from the side of the Ukrainian administration at the time, rather than to the eventual outcome. In the aftermath of deeper integration with the EU through the Deep and Free Comprehensive Trade Agreement (DFCTA) that entered force in January 2016, and concomitantly lesser economic integration with the Russian Federation, the economic balance of Ukraine´s imports and exports changed, with the EU moving from a share of 32.4% in 2012 to 41% in 2020 and the Russian Federation falling from 31% to below 15%. The reorientation of Ukraine's natural gas imports, moving away from Russia and with the EU coming as a substitute played a large role in this reversal. However, in parallel, the nature of Ukraine's exports changed: if within the period 2012-18, 1) iron and steel; 2) cereals and 3) (animal and vegetable) fats and oils remained the top three items, the share of the first item steeply fell from 15,328 US$mns to 9,937 US$mns while the fourth item, railway and tramway locomotives fell in the ranking to the 23rd position. The fifth item, nuclear reactors, boilers and machinery lost around 50% of its trade value (Zachmann, Dabrowski and Domínguez-Jiménez, 2020). These data go in line with data from the World Bank showing that high-technology exports have gone from nearly of US$1.99 billion in 2014 to US$1.28 billion in 2021(World Bank data), a change that is most likely caused because Ukraine´s high-technology could not readapt after the loss of the Russian market and find sufficient alternative markets in the EU. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out the economic consequences of the DCFTA.

entailed, forces us to shed the classical understanding of imperialism that points to unlimited expansion.

This article offers a clearer perspective by considering the Russian border revisions in Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 in parallel with the development of The Russian Federation's regional integration projects since 2014. Adopting the concept of "geostrategies" and the geopolitical models that William Walters (2004) and Christopher S. Browning and Pertti Joenniemi (2008) have applied to the EU – and which Jarosław Jańczak (2020) recently applied to the post-Soviet space –, the article identifies the limitations that Moscow has faced, making evident the mutually exclusive nature of Russia´s two distinct policies that affect its borders. Although this fact readily emerges from a sound reading of the evolution of the EAEU after the invasion of Crimea and has been highlighted in some cases in the extant secondary literature, it gains due analytical clarity when Russian aggression in Ukraine and regional integration are seen as mutually exclusive geostrategies.

The article begins with a first bloc dealing with the conceptual discussion of Russia's geopolitical imagining of Europe and Eurasia and by Walters's and Browning and Joenniemi's theoretical frameworks. A second bloc later deals with Russia´s policy through a conceptual analysis of Russia's integration policies and military actions against Ukraine since 2014, combining Walters's conceptual categories of the *march*, *colonial frontier*, and *limes* geostrategies with Browning and Joenniemi's Westphalian and Imperial geopolitics. This analysis, which offers a critical description of the existing academic literature, as well as a brief review of some non-academic statements related to Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine, is preceded by a contextual explanation of the integration of the Former Soviet Union (FSU) up to 2014. Our conclusions reflect the results of the critical analysis and consider the associated lessons that may apply to the new status quo emerging from the current events, thus engaging with the (in)adequacy of imperial metaphors. Although these metaphors obviously capture the nature of Russia's policy toward Ukraine, they may obscure the delicate balancing in Moscow given its mutually exclusive aspirations and the resulting clash of geopolitical strategies. In addition, such metaphors tend to assume that Russia's ambitions are unlimited, which is arguably not warranted, and which existing contradictions may challenge.

1. Russia´s troubled identity: Eurasianism as an alternative to the West and Russian imperialism

1.1. The Russian Federation's changing attitudes toward Europe

The relationship between Russia and Europe has been historically fraught (Neumann, 1996; Stent, 2010) and remains so after the collapse of the USSR and Russia´s traumatic transition to democracy and capitalism (Tsygankov, 2019). In Europe, Russia has been forced to deal with the EU,[3] an actor with whom its relationship has radically changed following the collapse of the USSR. Whether vacillating between emulation and rejection of the West (the "True/False Europe" dichotomy of Neumann [1996]) or employing a more complex set of categories to deal with it (i.e.,

[3] The EU, founded in 1993 (Maastricht Treaty), superseded the former European Economic Community.

True, Civilized, and Sinful), as proposed by Vsevolod Samokhvalov (2018), Russia has seen its relations with the West deteriorate. This deterioration in relations has included the EU, especially since the "perfect storm" identified by Hiski Haukkala (2016), as highlighted at the beginning of this article. We may follow Freire (2020) in seeing the evolution of both the EU´s and Russia´s mutual relations, both before and since the geopolitical clash in Ukraine, as an increasing divergence of their ontological securities.

The Russian Federation's vision shift regarding the EU concerns the thorny debate within Russia about the country's status in relation to the West and Europe. Following Andrei P. Tsygankov (2007), it may be argued that, although the project by Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs Andrei Kozyrev identified Russia as a part of Europe, his successor Yevgenii Primakov charted a new course, labeled by Tsygankov as "Eurasianist," which strongly opposed what Europe and the West represented. Then, a new course was charted under Vladimir Putin that may be labeled "Euro-Eastern," which attempted to strike a balance between Russia's integration in Europe and the preservation of Russia's unique identity. However, Russia has tended to continually (re)construct its identity in opposition to Europe (Foxall, 2019). The concept of Eurasianism, in its diverse manifestations, has been central to this construction of Russian identity.

Eurasianism, a concept born in the 1920s and 1930s within the intellectual community of Russian migrants fleeing the Bolshevik Revolution, espoused a vision of a particular Russian identity resulting from both European and Asian influences (Bassin, 2008; Glebov, 2008; Mileski, 2015; Pryce, 2013; Schmidt, 2005). After being forgotten for a long time, this concept was revived upon the collapse of the Soviet Union and has been promoted by radical forces, such as the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (led by Gennadi Zyuganov) and the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (led by the late Vladimir Zhirinovsky) (Clover, 1999). The most notable feature of "Neo-Eurasianism" (Kolossov and Turovsky, 2001) or "New Eurasianism" (Kerr, 1995; Smith, G., 1999) is the fact that its revival was closely related to the resurgence of the infamous intellectual tradition of classical geopolitics (Kolossov and Turovsky, 2001, pp. 143-146; Smith, G., 1999).

Efforts to categorize the novel political phenomenon made it the object of extensive academic discussion. Defining this phenomenon has not proved an easy task because, as Mark Bassin (2008, p.279) aptly asserted, "popularity does not […] necessarily enhance consistency." While Tsygankov (2003) classified diverse strands of Eurasianism as *geoeconomism*, *stabilizationism*, *civilizationism*, and *expansionism*, depending on the weight or significance given to Eurasia, Natalia Morozova (2009) looked for the influence of Eurasianism in what she classified as "traditionalist geopolitics," "modernist geopolitics," and "civilizational geopolitics." The latter category reflects Tsygankov's classification of particular strands of civilizationism and expansionism that are based on the maximalist theory of Alexandr Dugin (Ingram, 2001; Shekhovtsov, 2008, 2009; Tsygankov, 1998), who was identified as an example of "revolutionary expansionism" (Tsygankov, 1997). The perception of Eurasianism's demise and Russia's pragmatist prioritization of relations with the West upon the arrival of Vladimir Putin (Lo, 2002; Tsygankov, 2019), as described by Morozova (2009), is likely related to the understanding of Eurasianism's nature. The restriction of Eurasianism to the maximalist visions of Dugin and Zyuganov or the definition of Eurasianism as capable of embracing the multi-vectorial policies of

Yevgenii Primakov and, eventually, Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev, which include the imperatives of post-Soviet integration, greatly influences our perception of the success or demise of a general Eurasianist mindset. In this respect, when David Kerr (1995) referred to the "New Eurasianism" that was taking shape in the early 1990s, he highlighted the strong geo-economic imperatives behind the general idea of economic and regional integration within Europe and Asia.

Therefore, far from being irrelevant, Eurasianism has become increasingly central to Russia's foreign policy and its identity. The term Eurasia may seem geographically imprecise or redundant, as it easily overlaps with other, equivalent terms, such as the "post-Soviet space" (Gleason, 2010). In addition, there is insufficient civilizational continuity in a region that is strongly influenced by other regions, such as Europe, China, and the Middle East (Gleason, 2010).[4] With the EAEU, however, Russia has demonstrated Eurasia's great conceptual power as a foundation for policymaking (see Smith, J., and Richardson, 2017). The Eurasian imperative most likely stems from Russia's need to orient itself in a context in which, according to Korosteleva and Paikin's (2020) interpretation, the country once again felt stranded between the West and the East.[5] While the West represented an expanding EU area of influence and US regime-change policies, Russia witnessed China's rise in the East. Thus, along with the changing vision of Europe, the development of the concept of Eurasia resulted in a productive geopolitical imagination. A restrained version of Eurasianism – or as Luca Anceschi put it, a pragmatic form of Neo-Eurasianism (Anceschi, 2017, p.285; p.289) – centered on ordering the post-Soviet space thus, inspired some of the early attempts at regionalization as well as the creation of the EAEU, as will be explained later in further detail).

1.2. Eurasianism and the real dimension of Russian Imperialism

As stated in the introduction, the terms of "empire" and "imperialism" have not been the object of a satisfactory conceptualization[6] and still, it is not surprising that the term may associate itself with Russia´s attempts to re-integrate the post-Soviet Space after the fall of the USSR, given the disproportionate weight Russia has compared to the rest of ex-Soviet republics. In fact, one may remember the words of Anatoly Chubais, back in the early 2000s, when he was proposing the establishment of a "liberal empire" in the post-Soviet space (Prozorov, 2007, p.320).[7] Thus whatever discussion of the importance for Russia's identity of such a concept as Eurasianism is, which either in limited or more expanded versions implies Russia´s projection

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4 As Andrei Tsygankov (2012) skillfully shows, Eurasia faces instability that neither the intrinsic weakness of post-Soviet Russia nor the incapacity of external powers alone can solve.

5 Rather than based on the fear of secessionism in Russia, as has been argued by Paul Pryce (2013).

6 The Cambridge Dictionary provides the following two definitions for imperialism: (1) "A system in which a country rules other countries, sometimes having used force to get power over them"; (2) "A situation in which one country has a lot of power or influence over others, especially in political and economic matters."

7 One interesting conjunction of Russia's tortured relationship with Europe and the regionalisation of the post-Soviet space can be observed in the discourse of the Russians who have advocated for the country's need to build its own regional bloc to establish more egalitarian relations with the EU (Prozorov, 2007, p.319). This is not the place to determine the degree to which a thriving EU pushed Russia to use the EU as a benchmark of success and thus to mimic it as an identity imperative in the post-Soviet space, but it is an interesting and plausible hypothesis. For example, Jaroslaw Janczak (2020, p.95) stated that "the very origins of the Eurasian Economic Union […] included an element of both the EAEU and the EU to cooperate and integrate."

into other countries, necessarily has to tackle the dimension of Russia´s imperialism. In this respect, it is helpful to consider one of the arguably most recent contributions concerning the matter, by Ruslan Zaporozhchenko (2023), who defined an empire "as a form of political order in which the center of the empire, with the help of various networks of power, constitutes the mechanisms of governance of the periphery" (p.2). Following this, the relationship that Russia has maintained with the space known as the Near Abroad (i.e., most of the post-Soviet space) could qualify, to a certain degree, as imperialism, in agreement with Ruth Deyermond (2016, p.967, p.971), who holds that Russia maintains a conception of limited sovereignty of third countries in the near abroad. In addition, if an empire is also a "*geopolitical project*" (italics in the original) in which "the use of hard power (violence and coercion) is a way of expanding the empire" (Zaporozhchenko, 2023, pp.2–3) and which is now in full display through the blatant annexation of Ukrainian territories, it is even easier to label Russia as imperialist. For, as can be observed since the end of the Soviet Union, Russia´s projection into its Near Abroad does not only concern integration projects inspired in a lesser or higher degree by its Eurasian identity. Its most conspicuous projection in its neighbourhood has come through the role played in peripheral conflicts, when not direct aggression. Thus, Russia was a vital supporter of Armenia against Azerbaijan in their first war from 1990 to 1994, the necessary protector of Transnistria´s de facto independence from Moldova achieved in 1992, as well as Abkhazia and South Ossetia´s ally when they broke away from Georgia amidst its post-independence civil war, culminating in their official recognition after the August War of 2008 launched by Moscow against Tbilisi.

The complexity of the Russian Federation's foreign policy imperatives is exemplified by the fact that the fall of the Soviet Union did not only yield a dislocation of former economic links and avenues for penetration into the post-Soviet Space by foreign powers perceived as hostile from the side of Moscow. It also left Russian ethnic populations stranded in henceforth independent countries, such as, among others, Estonia, Latvia or of course Ukraine, mainly in the Peninsula of Crimea. That is why, while the debate on Russia's Eurasian identity was unfolding, the polysemic term of Russky Mir made its appearance in the decade of the 90s, when coined by Petr Shchedrovitsky and Gleb Pavlovsky (Laruelle, 2015). A very imprecise term in its very inception, or as Laruelle herself referred to, "a fuzzy mental atlas on which different regions of the world and their different links to Russia can be articulated in a fluid way" (Laruelle, 2015, p.1), it could serve as an umbrella for both Eurasianist projects of integration, the defence of a cultural continuity based on Russia as a matrix nation in the former post-Soviet Space, and of course, the defence of Russia´s diasporas. It is under Putin when, according to Mikhail Suslov, the term acquired what he considers to be a clearer "geopolitical meaning" (2018, p.338), with a particular focus on regional integration and the protection of Russian diasporas (Laruelle, 2015, p.17). Hence, again, we would be facing a fully geopolitical concept as for its potential for the reordering of space, both in the ideational and the policy realms, with a strong "imperialist" signature.

However, at closer sight, either applied when considering Russia´s Eurasian identity or the significance of the concept of Russky Mir, the term of imperialism proves analytically imprecise. Zaporozhchenko provides a hint of the popular uses of the concept of imperialism when he refers to Herfried Münkler to explain that "empires are fragile regional hegemons that sooner or later are limited in expansion by a

stronger and more powerful empire." (Zaporozhchenko, 2023, p.2). This definition by Münkler readily invokes a classical idea of empire, that is, of unlimited expansion, for this expansion would only be thwarted by the clash with an alternative empire; external constraints, rather than internal limitations would be here considered. Thus, if applied to Russia, the term imperialism can convey a distorted image of both its capabilities and intentions presenting us a country whose expansion into its neighbourhood is intended to be limitless and can only be stopped in the face of deterrence by more powerful actors. Opposite to this vision, so often portrayed in political statements (as will be shown below), we consider that Russia presents us with a more nuanced picture for which a more precise analytical framework is needed.

1.3. The Russian Federation's borders and clashing geostrategic imperatives

Russia's perception of being stranded between the West and the East and the potential of Eurasianism as an ordering concept prompts consideration of how the country (re)defined space in response to the challenges of Euromaidan, which posed a new challenge to Russia's agonizing need for definition and geographic ordering. The concepts of "geostrategy" (as re-elaborated by Walters) and "geopolitical models" (as developed by Browning and Joenniemi, 2008) are instrumental to an accurate analysis.

William Walters (2004, p.677) drew on contributions to political geography, in particular those of Michel Foucher, to consider how the EU draws its borders. He devised the following four categories of geostrategies: the "networked (non)border, the march, the colonial frontier and limes." As Walters notes, Michel Foucher coined the term *geostrategy* to "describe the application of geographical reasoning to the conduct of war and/or to the setting up of a (national) defense scheme" (p.678). However, Foucher intended to apply the category in a broader sense, noting that "the question of [a state's] frontiers is more immediately connected with a series of highly charged socio-political issues, with so-called 'new' security concerns such as drugs smuggling, terrorism, people trafficking, arms dealing, and asylum seeking" (p.678). Thus, Walters proposed the *networked (non)border* (pp. 679–683) on the basis of the philosophy of deterritorialization and the loosening of borders, which resonate with the general neoliberal philosophy of free movement. The *march*, by contrast, is understood as "something like an interzone between powers" (p.684), which implies that the march represents a buffer space between powers. This stands in contrast to the third model, the *colonial frontier* (pp.686-690), according to which a state (in this case, the EU) exports its own model to other regions through a process of expansion. Finally, the fourth model, *limes* (pp.690-692), represents a strict separation from chaos or threat and is arguably the closest to a classical Westphalian border.

In "Geostrategies of the European Neighborhood Policy," Browning and Joenniemi (2008) applied Walters's theoretical framework to the analysis of the European Neighbourhood Policy. The authors analyzed the EU and identified three distinct "geopolitics," closely related to the four geostrategies of Walters: "Westphalian," "Imperial," and "Neomedieval." The first model is straightforward and is exemplified by the classical state (pp.522-526), which the theory of realism often draws on. Browning and Joenniemi perceived a Westphalian aspiration in the EU's rhetoric and "oft-stated desire that the EU should develop into a unitary actor, that it should have its own currency and border regime (Schengen), and not least its own foreign

and security policy including a foreign service and a 'European army'" (p.522). However, the reality of the EU conforms to the second geopolitical mode, that of the empire. The authors understand this as "governance in terms of a series of concentric circles" (p.522, p.524), in which the EU's influence is stronger or weaker, depending on a circle's proximity to the center (Brussels) and reflecting the sui generis confederal nature of a federation in the making. Thus, member states retain a strong degree of independence in outer circles.

Although Walter's geostrategies and Browning and Joenniemi's geopolitical models make sense of the novel bordering practices of an arguably post-Westphalian international entity and thus perfectly explain the EU's unique nature, their application to the post-Soviet space, centered on the Russian Federation's projects of regional integration and border revisionism, may be equally enlightening. In the fraught debate regarding Russia's recent revisionism and whether it heralds a return of empire, the application of geostrategic and geopolitical models, as seen above, helps reveal the true aspirations and limitations of the Russian Federation in the wake of Euromaidan, thus bringing analytical order to an often non-rigorous debate.

2. Russia's foreign policy between regional integration and border expansion

2.1. The long and uncertain march toward integration in the post-Soviet space

The traumatic collapse of the Soviet Union prompted an imperfect and confusing process of regional integration of the FSU, which was plagued by competing, overlapping, and ambitious (though hardly fulfilled) projects. Although the creation of the EAEU in 2015 represented a step forward, it shared many of the problems encountered since the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

The CIS emerged on December 21, 1991, due to pressure from states (mainly Kazakhstan) that wanted to be part of a larger organization that would successfully reintegrate the FSU and that were initially excluded from the trilateral Belovezh Accords, which acknowledged the end of the USSR and was signed on December 8, 1991, between Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. As Flemming S. Hansen (2013) showed, disagreements regarding the CIS would tear at the organization from the beginning: either a confederal regional organization inspired by the EU or a default mechanism to address the systems of interdependence inherited from the USSR (p.143). The CIS emerged during the catastrophic transition to capitalism, against the backdrop of the devastating consequences on interrepublican trade at the time of the USSR's dissolution (Metcalf, 1997, pp.531-534). However, the case for cooperation was not straightforward, especially during Russia's initial period of Westernist infatuation (Tsygankov, 2019), which prompted it to ignore the CIS during the first two years of its independence (Nygren, 2008, p.24). Moscow's initial focus on security cooperation with FSU countries conflicted with their economic concerns (Nygren, 2008, pp.24-25). The product of the initial dynamic of regionalism was the Collective Security Treaty (also known as the Tashkent Treaty), signed on May 15, 1992, which developed, under Putin's administration, into the Collective Security Treaty Organization, created on May 14, 2002. However, Russia also started focusing on economic integration. Until 1993, Russia dedicated its economic interests mostly to the failed project of establishing a "Ruble Zone" (Libman, 2011, p.1334),

but in 1994, it agreed to the establishment of a CIS-wide Free Trade Area. In 1998, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Ukraine signed an agreement to establish unified customs duties (Nygren, 2008, p.37).

The truth is that both Russia and the other FSU republics had rational incentives to reject former interrepublican links in favor of integration within international markets (Metcalf, 1997, pp.534-535). The incentive was more significant in the case of the Russian Federation, which chose to avoid patterns of subsidization (Metcalf, 1997, p.534) under the paradigm of Russia as an "'internal colony' of the Soviet Union" (Tsygankov, 2019, p.79). In addition, the economic collapse that shattered the post-Soviet manufacturing sectors weakened the economic rationale for reintegration. As Zhukov and Reznikova (2008) argued, "manufacturing sectors with branched networks of back-and-forth links within and between sectors are the real locomotive of cross-border integration" (p.82). After the trauma of the transition subsided, the economic picture from the end of the 1990s until 2008 reveals a decline in economic integration within the CIS, as the economic growth of CIS member states increased their trade with countries out of the FSU (Vinokurov and Libman, 2011, p.45). While Russia's trade with the CIS represented 22.5% of all its trade in 1995, the percentage dropped to 16.6% by 2013 (Podadera and Garashchuk, 2016, p.94). As Julian Cooper (2012, p.170) observed, the greater a country's GDP is, the lesser its integration with the CIS countries.

In parallel, the manifest asymmetry between Russia's size and that of the other CIS members further impaired integration. The pattern of weak asymmetry in the CIS, as recognized by Alexander Libman (2011, p.1341), explains why Russia was powerful enough to dissuade other members from any substantial efforts of integration while being too weak to enforce it on its reluctant neighbours. This weak asymmetry could also explain why both the CIS and key countries within the organization pursued useless frameworks of cooperation that represented "integration rituals" and did not constitute anything beyond "pseudo-integration," as portrayed by Libman (2011, p. 1348). Russia, which was not influential enough to enforce significant programs for integration, was nevertheless sufficiently threatening that the other countries would appease it by indulging in such "integration rituals" (Libman, 2011, p.1348).

Thus, understandably, institutional progress has been substandard. The March 1992 agreement on a customs union was not signed by all CIS countries; even worse, it was ratified only by Belarus. The more ambitious Treaty for an Economic Union of September 1994, which aimed to create a monetary union through the successive establishment of a free trade area, a customs union, and a common market, was more successful but nevertheless suffered from not being ratified by a key member, Ukraine (Cooper, 2013, p.16). The agreement to create a free trade area was signed in 1995 and was not ratified by Russia, while the other countries introduced exemptions that deprived it of any real substance (Cooper, 2012, pp.172-173). In 2000, a new failed attempt to forge a free trade area by creating the Eurasian Economic Community (EAEC) (Cooper, 2013, pp.18-19) was endorsed by the Russian Federation, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. The Eurasian Customs Union (ECU) was then signed in 2010, and the Single Economic Space (SES) followed two years later (Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2017, p.4). The ECU, formed by the Russian Federation, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, successfully managed to eliminate customs between the three members (Cooper, 2013, pp.22-23). The SES was intended to

support the next step, the creation of a common market. In the wake of this success, the Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC) was formed to coordinate both the ECU and the SES. It was in this commission that the idea of the EAEU was born.

The EAEU was officially inaugurated in 2015 at the initiative of the Russian Federation.[8] Russia's geopolitical objective appeared to be the creation of a solid economic partnership to mitigate the consequences of the USSR's collapse and avoid marginalization at the time of the expansion of the EU and the rise of China (Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2017, p.6). However, given that the EAEU would have represented only approximately 5% of Russia´s trade, it seems reasonable to assume that Moscow's interests were not only economic but also political. In fact, Russia initially had the very ambitious goal of not only establishing a monetary union but also promoting political and security integration. As we will show, if the project ended up being limited to the economic sector, this would be the result of Kazakhstan's insistence (Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2017, p.7), precisely the country whose leader, Nursultan Nazarbayev, had already, in his famous speech from 1994, put forward the idea of a Eurasian Union (see Anceschi, 2017).

2.2. Critical analysis and discussion

The reasons for the Russian Federation's decision, surprising to many, to annex Crimea have been amply analyzed since the event (see Forsberg and Pursiainen, 2017; Götz, 2017; Tsygankov, 2015). One popular line of argument was initiated by Mearsheimer's (2014) thesis of the "West's fault," according to which Russia was reacting to the West's expansion into what Moscow considered its zone of influence. The author, along with Stephen Walt, has maintained the same line regarding Russia's motivations for the latest invasion of Ukraine (Munk Debate, 2022). Several other authors have endorsed this "geopolitical" thesis. Some have favored the interpretation of Russia's actions as anti-NATO reactions (Götz, 2015; Tsygankov, 2015), while others have focused mostly on Russia's need to secure naval assets in Crimea (Treisman, 2016). Both readings can be framed in the broader narrative of a reactive Russia that has seen its breathing space restricted by both NATO and the EU since the fall of the USSR (see Lane, 2016; Waltz, 2000). Arguments for a domestic motivation have also been advanced in light of the high approval rates elicited by Putin's actions in Ukraine. Treisman (2016) opined that the windfall of Crimea's annexation in the form of soaring domestic approval encouraged Putin to intervene further in the Donbass. Other authors have considered the intervention in Crimea to be related to internal issues, either defensively, out of fear of the emulation of color revolutions in Russia (McFaul, 2014) or to bolster internal support.

While Fiona Hill (2014) claimed that "with the move into Crimea, Putin is trying to regain Russian leverage over Kyiv, before a new government can assert and consolidate itself and get back to business with the EU," the truth is that this brutal Westphalian move has affected Russia's plans for regional integration. As Freire (2019, p.802) pointed out, Russia's actions against Ukraine came at a high cost to its ambitions for the EAEU. Russia secured the geostrategically vital Crimean Peninsula, which vastly increased domestic support and blocked NATO's potential access

[8] See Pozo (2017) for an informative discussion on the Russian political and economic interests in the creation of a Eurasian Union.

to Crimea by imposing a simmering conflict in the Donbass region on Kiev. However, this tactic also revoked Ukraine's prospects of becoming a member of the EAEU. According to Browning and Joenniemi's geopolitical model, while Russia clearly expanded in Westphalian terms, its actions reduced its imperial dimension. This fact, evident to any observer, was highlighted in 2014 by authors unsympathetic to Russia's actions in Crimea (see Mankoff, 2014; McFaul, 2014). However, although Mankoff saw a miscalculation on Putin's part, one could easily see a dilemma that forced Moscow to prioritize a Westphalian approach based on Russian ethnic nationalism (Becker, Cohen, Kushi and McManus, 2016, p.124; Marten, 2015, p.190)[9] rather than a Eurasia-inspired imperial approach promoting a multiethnic geographical reimagination of the FSU.[10]

Reading Russia's management of its neighboring space through the lens of Walters's geostrategies suggests that Moscow intended to annex Crimea through the aggressive expansion of its limes, while fostering insurgency in the Donbass, ensuring thus the transformation of Ukraine into a march that would secure a buffer against the eventual expansion of NATO.[11] Thus, the project of integrating Ukraine as the key colonial frontier of the EAEU was forsaken in favor of a rump EAEU,[12] as Ukraine clearly excluded itself from the organization and followed a firm pro-European course, becoming instead a colonial frontier of the EU.[13] This strategy was in line with the fact that Putin was forced to lower his ambition for Russia's soft Eurasianism as represented by the EAEU. Consequently, the annexation of Crimea did not inaugurate a strategy of hard Eurasianism in Dugin's terms, promoting an aggressive colonial frontier through coercive integration under the seal of imperial geopolitics that would come close to a Westphalian annexation.[14] Instead, the annexation inaugurated a period of Westphalian geopolitics through expansionist limes

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9 For a further discussion on the dilemmas between the imperatives of empire-based or (Russian) ethnic nationalism, see: Torbakov (2017) and Bassin (2017).

10 This analysis is in line with Marlène Laruelle's (2015, p.18) reflection that "Russia's use of Russian minorities in the Near Abroad as a coercive tool against unfriendly regimes suggests that the Russian World concept is deployed against all those who do not want to be part of a Russia-backed Eurasia."

11 Once Ukraine self-excluded itself from EAEU based imperial geopolitics and turned into a EU colonial frontier through the Eastern Partnership, Russia´s intervention not only expanded its limes in a Westphalian way, but arguably turned the whole of Ukraine into a march too, in what respects NATO. Technically, NATO demands any prospective member to exert full control of its territory, something impossible given Crimea´s annexation and the support of the DPR and LPR.

12 The reader may consider that the EAEU as the creation of a new entity, should not be considered as an imperial project of a particular member of the integration project, in this case, Russia, and that it could hardly be understood as a colonial expansion of this country. In addition, there is no specific governance model inherent to Russia that was being exported into the member countries. Rather, a similar authoritarian or semi-authoritarian model of governance among most of the members was a preexisting condition that arguably eased agreement. However, Russia´s weight as compared to the other members´ and its motivations at projecting its influence into its neighborhood seem to warrant the use of this metaphor.

13 The support of the breakaway secessionist republics of DPR and LPR follows the pattern of frozen conflicts and may be understood as colonial frontier(ing) to buttress the march(ification) of Ukraine, similar to South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia, as already mentioned above.

14 Contrary to many of the comments that surfaced at the time of Crimea's annexation, Dugin was far from being "Putin's brain" (Barbashin and Thoburn, 2014). A reexamination with the benefit of hindsight shows that, indeed, these events did not inaugurate a new era of rigid Eurasianism. As Kirill Kalinin (2019, p.467) showed, key ideas linked to Dugin's theories, such as expansionist rhetoric, were not popular among Russian elites in the post-Crimean scenario, and have become marginal among the larger public after an understandable spike in 2014. In parallel, although it is true that a positive correlation did occur among the elites in the military and security apparatus between perception of threats from geopolitical rivals and expansionist rhetoric, this correlation did not increase as expected from 2012 to 2016 (p.468).

aiming to reintegrate what Moscow considered Russia's ethnic population in Ukraine. While the period after the Minsk II agreement, signed in February 2015, ushered a protracted period of low-intensity conflict, during which Russia was apparently satisfied in the short term with Crimea's annexation and support for pro-Russian insurgents in the Donbass, Westphalian geopolitics came back with a vengeance in 2022. At the time of writing, Russia has officially annexed the Ukrainian regions of Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhya and Kherson, replicating the 2014 Crimea campaign. The latest events coincide with Alexey Bogdanov's (2020, p.6) statement that "the "Russian world" concept, therefore, has been pivotal to the extent that it has framed the process of institutionalisation of the "post-Soviet" regional hierarchy. Within this hierarchy, Russia would enjoy supranational authority due to the privileged position it has occupied and the role of "hegemon" it has tried to perform." However, despite the potential of a new discourse on Russianness centered on the concept of the "Russian world" (see Laruelle, 2015) to mobilize an aggressive foreign policy in defense of Russians abroad, as is happening now with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Russian Federation has not opted to impose a new hegemony discourse on the whole FSU space. In fact, Ruth Deyermond's (2016, p.967, p.971) assertion that the Russian Federation has adopted a conception of limited sovereignty for post-Soviet states inherited from the constitutional model of the USSR, as exemplified by the ongoing military onslaught in Ukraine, seems correct. Still, Russia's annexation of Crimea and its support of the DPR and LPR did not lead to an FSU-wide integration process centered on the EAEU. Even if we assume that Russia believed that it faced an existential challenge when the EU offered Ukraine to sign the AA within the EaP (Akchurina and Della Sala, 2018, p.1645; Freire, 2020, p.11), its reaction paradoxically brought its integration agenda to an end. Kevork Oskanian (2018, p.39) stated that "Moscow has forcefully asserted its exclusive claim over the former Soviet space, through direct military interventions (in Georgia and Ukraine), and an alternative, top-down integration project—the Eurasian Union." While a "top-down integration project" such as the Eurasian Union was at the heart of the crisis leading to the 2014 intervention in Ukraine, this military intervention proved to be mutually exclusive with the EAEU.

As EAEU's emergence shows, the price of success for Russia's pet project proved to be the opposite of what might have been expected after its aggression against Ukraine; in fact, the leverage of minor members, such as Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia, increased. The EAEU was established on January 1, 2015, comprising Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia as the original signatories; Armenia and Kyrgyzstan joined soon afterwards (Roberts and Moshes, 2016, pp.542-543). As several authors have noted, Russia's need to re-establish, through the EAEU, its strongly damaged prestige after Ukraine's withdrawal prompted it to yield to its partners, who extracted economic concessions, and to downplay the political ambitions of the Russian Federation (Busygina and Filippov, 2020; Smith, H., 2016, p.180; Vieira, 2017; Vieira Guedes, 2016). In its inception, the EAEU revealed the limits that both international factors (i.e., the political crisis in Ukraine and the mostly sanctions-driven economic crisis in Russia) and the identity-based preservation of sovereignty by smaller EAEU members imposed on Russia´s ambition to deepen integration (Roberts and Moshes, 2016, p.547, p.560). Political resistance to the formation of a Eurasian Parliament, favored by the Russian Federation, persisted (Kazakhstan had opposed it since 2012), so it is no coincidence that 2015 saw the emergence not

of a Eurasian Union but of the EAEU (Roberts and Moshes, 2016, p.551). Kazakhstan was also vocal in opposing the Russian plan to establish a common monetary market and common currency for all members (Boguslavska, 2015, p.12). Thus, since the EAEU's foundation, economic integration, though limited, has prevailed over political integration (Troitskiy, 2020). A good example of how this dynamic has endured can be found in Kazakhstan's rebuttal of the 2021 Russian suggestion that the EAEU act in a coordinated manner when facing Western sanctions (Putz, 2021). It should be noted that such rebuttal of Russia's ambitions in 2015 represented a key factor in the divergence within the EAEU (Boguslavska, 2015, p.11). The Westphalian move of 2014 in no way served as a prelude to Russia's ambitious imperial geopolitics. In fact, in the precise case of Kazakhstan, the degree of autonomy the country shows in several instances, as it is the case with the state policy of moving from the Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet (Satubaldina, 2021), would surprise any observer expecting the Russian Federation to force into submission every member of the post-Soviet Space. This measure, while irritating for Moscow, has not led to any interference. On the contrary, Moscow would later intervene in favor of the current leadership through a CSTO mission in January 2022 to quell unrest (Kucera, 2022). And still, Russia tolerates at this stage that Kazakhstan may even announce a package of export restrictions to comply with sanction measures from the EU (See: Panfilova, 2023).[15]

A discussion of counterfactuals shows what other pathways were available to Moscow and how the contradictions could have been managed. The integration of Ukraine into the Eurasian Union could have been realized if Russia had chosen a radical Eurasianist path and invaded as much of Ukraine as possible to make it a satellite state. Clearly, Belarussian and Kazakh resistance in the face of even more blatant aggression would have compelled Moscow into a spiral of aggression to carry out a brutal colonial geostrategy and an imperial geopolitical project to fulfill a hard Eurasianist stance. Alternatively, Russia could have replicated the annexation of Crimea with the annexation of Kazakhstan's Russian-speaking regions, pursuing a Westphalian expansion of its limes and abandoning imperial geopolitics. The closest to such an alternative is Russia's 2022 campaign in Ukraine, which still mostly concentrates on Ukraine, as in 2014, while showing no signs of a future systematic policy of reunification of all lands populated by Russians. A combination of both expansionist projects was another option. Otherwise, Russia could have chosen a softer approach, conceding defeat in Ukraine and trying to persuade Ukraine to participate in a soft version of the EAEU. Alternatively, it could have accepted Ukraine's absence as an opportunity to work patiently on a genuine Eurasian Union, as initially intended. Indeed, these latter options would have had to rely on Ukraine´s eventually withdrawing from the AA with the EU, for the establishment of a DCFTA with the EU excluded integration into the EAEU, as the latter is a customs union. Still, Russia could have relied on an eventual change of government, as had happened before, after the Orange Revolution.[16]

[15] I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting to me instances where countries other than Ukraine showed assertiveness, and that unrelated to the issue of integration, where Russia was liable to accept trade-offs.

[16] Viktor Yushchenko won the fraught presidential elections of December 2004. However, his rival Viktor Yanukovich would later, in August 2006 become prime minister until December 2007. Then, he became the new president after the 2010 presidential elections.

A short discussion of how imperialistic metaphors (in)accurately capture the nature of Russia's foreign policy constitutes an appropriate complement to this critical analysis. As Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which began on February 24, 2022 tragically unfolds, the appearance of such narratives is unavoidable. In fact, as the scale of Russia's invasion of Ukraine shows, a characterization of Russia's policy of the attempted neutralization and subordination of Ukraine, as evidenced by the annexation of the four provinces of Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhya, and Kherson as imperialist could not be more accurate. However, a cursory look at some characterizations of Russia as imperialistic may show how such portrayal can easily become a poor instrument for characterizing Russia in general terms. Before the invasion of February 2022, an earlier instance in which the events of 2014 were used to (mis)read Russia's intentions with interpretations slipping into hyperbole was the brutal crackdown on protesters in Belarus. Thus, the possibility of a political union between Russia and Belarus in the context of the 1999 agreement between the two states was widely interpreted through the lens of the annexation of Crimea. For example, Lithuania's president stated that "there are efforts of the Russian government to swallow Belarus as an independent state" (Tadeo and Seputyte, 2021). In the same vein, NATO's Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg warned in an interview with *El País* that "Russia must respect Belarus's territorial integrity as well as its sovereignty" (De Miguel, 2021).[17]

Regarding 2014, depictions of the Russian Federation as a "threat to the world" and a challenge to the "vision of a Europe whole, free and at peace," as well as the comparisons of Russia's actions in Ukraine with Germany's aggressive revisionism during WWII were, in the wake of the annexation of Crimea, common currency in the US, the EU, and the UK (Averre, 2016). That such readings of Russia as an overtly expansionist power are common and can easily slip into hyperbole was demonstrated when the outgoing president of the EU Commission, José Manuel Barroso, stated the following: "For a minute, imagine that those countries [the new EU members since 2004] had not joined the EU. In that case, we would not probably be discussing only about Ukraine. We would probably be discussing now about Bulgaria, or about the Baltic states" (Gotev, 2014).

Of course, the ongoing war against Ukraine, as we have already discussed above, is of a radically different nature, which arguably represents a real paradigm change, and the brutal violation of Ukraine's sovereignty more closely matches the popular understanding of the term imperialism. However, neither the eventual subjugation of Ukraine nor the forced neutralization of the country would necessarily warrant the

[17] In the case of Belarus, an internal crackdown against the opposition and the scandalous diversion of a Vilnius-bound flight to Belarus to arrest dissident Roman Protasevich provoked EU sanctions and contributed to a rapprochement between Minsk and Moscow. That Russia may take advantage of this situation is a result of the EU decision to isolate Belarus and of the 1999 state agreement mentioned above. This treaty was the culmination of a process of integration that started with the Agreement on the Customs Union (1995) and led to the Union State Treaty four years later, which foresaw the fusion of the Russian Federation and Belarus into a new political entity. Beyond the rhetoric of these agreements, the countries' real interests thwarted their fulfillment, especially in the face of deteriorating mutual relations during the decade of the 2000s (Vieira, 2017, p.43, p.47). The Lukashenko regime's insecurity in the face of protests and EU sanctions has pushed Minsk into Moscow's arms and revived talk of integration within the Russian Federation. If imperial geopolitics eventually emerge with further integration between Belarus and Russia on the basis of the 1999 state agreement, the situation can hardly be equated with the 2014 scenario. Whereas Ukraine suffered an aggression in 2014 and again in 2022, Minsk seems to be entering Russia´s orbit willingly.

uncritical evocation of certain metaphors, images, and references. This article cannot carry out an extensive analysis of these because Russia´s latest invasion of Ukraine is too recent to draw in-depth conclusions. Nevertheless, a few examples already suggest that a dynamic similar to that of the post-2014 period is unfolding. Paul Krugman's (2022) claim in the *New York Times* that "Putin['s] […] aims go beyond recreating the Soviet Union—he apparently wants to recreate the czarist empire" and Jonathan Littell's (2022) statement that "the western democracies—finally!—seem to have understood the existential threat that Putin poses to the postwar world order, to Europe" point in the same direction as the explicit warning from Ukraine's President Zelensky that "we will come first. You will come second. Because the more this beast will eat, he wants more, more, and more" (ABC News, 2022). We must not lose sight of how Russia's aggression against Ukraine is framed at the political level, as exemplified by Joseph Borrell (2022): "The target is not only Ukraine, but the security of Europe and the whole international rules-based order, based on the UN system and international law." Without denying the Russian Federation's flagrant violation of international law and peace in Europe, the phrase "security of Europe" paves the way for viewing Russia as a threat to the EU, while its actions remain limited and circumscribed to the post-Soviet space despite the fears evoked by the misplaced rhetoric. Close to three months into the Russian aggression against Ukraine, Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz declared that "No-one can assume that the Russian president and government will not on other occasions break international law with violence (Marsh, Murray, Chambers, Lehto, Johnson and Maclean, 2022)". Without further inquiry, this may be a wise warning, given Russia's record after its attack on Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. However, the rhetoric proves close to the examples discussed above, when Scholz clarifies that "Russian President Vladimir Putin's policy was imperialistic and he regarded neighboring countries as its Russia's backyard" (Marsh *et al*., 2022). Given that these declarations were made in the presence of Sweden's and Finland's prime ministers, both aspiring at the moment to join NATO, we can surmise that "Russia's backyard" includes the two Scandinavian nations, conflating, thus, Russia's behavior in its Near Abroad with that in other geographical spaces.

Conclusions

As already discussed, a partial restoration of the Soviet Union did not follow from Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014 or from the even more brutal aggression against Ukraine that started in February 2022. Using this article's conceptual perspective, we may remember that the Westphalian move of the annexation of Crimea contributed to decreasing Russian imperial geopolitics rather than cowing EAEU partners into submission.

In line with Andrei Tsygankov (2015, p.294), who stated that "the problem with the imperialist argument is that it overstates Putin's ideological commitment and willingness to go as far as Russian nationalists would want him to go," this article showed the limits of such discourse. By comparing the Russian Federation's border modifications, both in its aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and in its promotion of the integration of the FSU through the EAEU, we argued that Russian "imperialism" is more complex than the images of military onslaught would suggest. Furthermore,

Westphalian aggression, the brutal redefinition of Russia's limes in Crimea, and the *marchification* of Ukraine paved the way for a limited colonial geostrategy through the soft Eurasian project of the EAEU. In fact, Eurasian imperial geopolitics was further softened by the unavoidable nonparticipation of Ukraine and by the insistence of other key members that the Russian Federation curtail its political ambitions.

Indeed, Putin did not "go as far as Russian nationalists would want him to go" (Tsygankov, 2015, p.294) or as far as many Western commentators imagined that it would. That the Russian Federation had unabashedly violated international law in Ukraine obscured the fact that it still, in Hannah Smith's (2016, p.173) words, "seeks to reassert its previous imperial status in former dominions without, for the most part, directly assaulting their state sovereignty." This paradigm may be radically changing in light of the war against Ukraine, which brings us closer to the possible counterfactuals described in our critical discussion. Before Euromaidan, Moscow did not shy away from using coercive trade tools to force Ukraine's hand in its strategy to obtain Kiev's acceptance of the Eurasian Union. Moreover, Russia showed the extent of its capacity for revisionism through the direct and indirect invasions of Ukrainian territory in 2014. However, imperialistic metaphors describing Russia as an overtly revisionist and expansionist power do not appropriately depict Russia's relative restraint. Such images obscure the costs that Russia eventually paid for its actions. Russia's limitations forced the country to accept reduced ambitions in its imperial geopolitics as a result of its Westphalian move. These reduced ambitions happened directly because a limes-based geostrategy automatically limited the expansion of its colonial frontier due to Ukraine's nonparticipation in the EAEU and indirectly because Russia accepted a watered-down version of its Eurasian Union. The new colonial frontier inaugurated in 2015 with the EAEU arguably resulted from Russia's haste to reap political gains even at the cost of yielding to demands by its fellow member countries. The clashing geostrategies and mutually exclusive imperatives that arose in the aftermath of the 2014 turmoil in Ukraine and lasted until 2022, as this article explains, did not equip Russia with a coherent set of practices for a sustained expansionist agenda, as Moscow did not choose to apply similarly aggressive approaches to other members of the nascent EAEU.

It may be too early at this stage to know whether the aftermath of the war that began against Ukraine in February 2022 will lead to new geostrategies. However, it seems fair to state beyond doubt that Russia is pursuing the same limes geostrategy as in 2014 but in a more violent way, as the recent annexations from September 2022 of the oblasts of Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson show. Based on a mix of a limes geostrategy (annexation of Crimea and Sebastopol) and a march geostrategy (the independence of the LPR and the DPR), Ukraine now seems to be the target of a more sweeping Westphalian geopolitics. In addition, the initial projects of the "denazification" and "demilitarization" of a prospective rump Ukrainian state point to a reinforced *marchification* of the remaining territory of Ukraine. Still, is this truly the prelude of a new colonial geostrategy to reinforce Russia's imperial geopolitics? Far from uncritically assuming the restoration of a late imperial entity, we must be aware of further costs that Russia, at some point, may be unwilling to pay, either in its relations with the West or with other members of the post-Soviet space. Russia's threshold for assuming sacrifices seems to have fallen drastically in the face of both the economic sanctions it has had to endure since February 2022 and worse, the immense burden of military expenses. However, sober analysis must

prevail over hasty conclusions. If the events of 2014 decreased its imperial geopolitical ambitions, something similar may be happening at the moment: Russia's low profile in the Caucasus, as well as the assertiveness that Putin faced when meeting his counterparts in Central Asia, may be a sign of a clear weakening of the imperial geopolitical vector. Therefore, the study of Russia's geographical practices in the aftermath of 2014 provides an example of the complexity of Russia's foreign policy and the need to eschew reductionism. This study´s value for the student of Russia must be retained, even when Russia's own actions provide justification for the most negative metaphors.

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