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The Tale of Two Empires: Ukraine Between the West and Russia

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Abstract: Ukraine has been, since its independence in 1991, located between two qualitatively different types of geopolitical environments – modern to its east and post-modern to its west. Given the tendencies of both to growth, nonetheless, using different means and seeking divergent goals, Ukraine turned into a geopolitical battlefield that due to the internal developments in Russia stepped into a hot phase in 2014 with further escalation in 2022. The article presents an interpretation of the events through neomedieval and imperial lenses, explaining the behaviours of both the West and Russia and the consequences their foreign policies had for the current situation in the country. It concludes that the mutual misunderstanding about the nature of the respective projects – mainly of the voluntary enlargement of the EU and NATO – led to unnecessary clashes and escalation of the contest by the Russian modern empire.

Keywords: Ukraine, EU, Russia, imperialism, neomedievalism

Introduction

The post-Cold War global order significantly diverges from the Westphalian ideal of political organisation of space. Be it the pooling of sovereignty inside of the European Union (EU) or the shattering of centralised control inside Somalia's internationally recognised borders, the practices of statehood and sovereignty are unequal and variable, establishing different types of geopolitical environments. Post-Cold War geopolitics was to be understood through different theoretical systemic explanations. Be it Fukuyama's liberal post-historic vision (Fukuyama 2006), Kaplan's dystopic predictions of political disintegration (Kaplan 2001) or Huntington's relatively equal cultural differentiation (Huntington 1996), many authors have attempted to make sense of the contradicting developments of the post-Cold War geopolitics. Terms like globalisation just prove the point. The unevenness became the norm, and universal explanations of the geopolitical systems became increasingly unfit to evaluate many seeming irregularities in the predicted international behaviour. However, a historically informed analysis focusing on the various paths towards the

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development of political organisation of spaces is able to make use of the seemingly contradictory developments and present explanations for the appearance of divergent types of conflicts in the zones of contact between different types of geopolitical environments such as Ukraine.

The following article conceptualises the Russian aggressions against Ukraine that have continued since 2014 through a systemic perspective, highlighting the main geopolitical factors affecting the escalation. This is not to say that there are no other perspectives crucial for our understanding of the situation, like personal traits or economic dependencies. However, the systemic forces present one of the key variables affecting the development. What began as a limited territorial expansion entered a qualitatively new phase in February 2022. The article uses the prism of neomedievalism, making use of theoretical differentiation among the behaviour of political actors in modern, post-modern and pre-modern settings. The three geopolitical settings are differentiated along their internal political organisation, along anarchy (pre-modern), hierarchy (modern) and networking (post-modern) that reflects in the external behaviour of the actors located in these. This global outlook is then combined with the different types of imperialism that appear in the modern and post-modern parts of the world. It theorises the geopolitical tragedy of the 21st century Ukraine located between two qualitatively different imperial powers – the West and Russia. The mutual exclusion of the liberal and voluntary imperialism of the EU and NATO and the centralised, coercive Russian imperialism of Vladimir Putin turned the country into a geopolitical battlefield with destructive consequences. The following article aims to make systemic explanations of the aggression through the neomedieval and imperial framework. It firstly develops the theoretical framework that is consequently applied to the Russian aggression in Ukraine starting in 2014 and further escalating in 2022, including the perception of the developments by the involved actors. Consequently, the interpretation of the violence is being produced, aiming to enhance our understanding of contemporary geopolitical processes.

Neomedievalism and Imperialism

The histories of the development of political communities around the world are extremely varied, making the standard political maps of the world focusing only on the geographic location of the internationally recognised borders of very limited use for our understanding of the political organisation of divergent regions. In Europe, Tilly's dictum on the connection between war-making and state-building applies quite well (Tilly 1975, 1990). On the other hand, the non-European experiences can decrease the importance of territory and present alternative modes of population control, as evident, for example, in some African states (Herbst 1989, 1990, 2000). The neomedieval framework aims to explore and explain differences in outcomes of the political processes following the crumbling of the bipolar global competition by the early 1990s that loosened the focus on the Westphalian sovereignty previously forcefully executed by the two superpowers. The term neomedievalism was, in the political science context, firstly coined by Wolfers (1962) and later

developed by Bull (2002) as an alternative global geopolitical setting explaining a rise of non-state alternatives and territorial overlaps of authorities. Yet, it was only in the 1990s that it became relevant as an explanatory tool for the divergent forces of geopolitics, in the end, arguing against the universalistic theories of the international system.

The analogy is not presenting any normative claim over the supposed backwardness of developments in post-Cold War international politics but is deemed useful to highlight the unevenness of the internal organisation of the political communities in various regions as compared to a seemingly unified, centralised and territorially well-defined Westphalian map of the world. It thus overcomes some of the aspects of the territorial trap as developed by Agnew (2009). One of the key building stones of neomedieval thought is the non-exclusiveness of a modern state as a territorial political unit and the territorial overlapping of competing authorities in many regions of the world. Such a situation can lead to divergent outcomes either in integrative tendencies in Europe or the establishment of violent alternatives in many parts of Sub-Saharan Africa. Sharing the same territories among some narco-cartels and the state in Mexico is another case in point (Friedrichs 2001; Cerny 1998; Doboš 2020; Williams 2008; Cerny and Prichard 2017; Buzan and Little 2000; van Creveld 2000). These different types of internal organisation, consequently, affect the behaviour of political actors on the outside.

Analysing divergent historical experiences and current trends in territorial control and political organisation of space, we can roughly identify three types of geopolitical environments worldwide. These ideal-types include pre-modern,¹ modern, and post-modern types of environments that all differ in internal working that further affect the external behaviour of its political actors. The modern geopolitical environment is defined by an intensive focus on state sovereignty, centralisation and prominence of state structures in all aspects of life. It tends towards authoritarianism and cuts itself from non-economic networks in order to protect the highly hierarchical and centralised means of projecting power over its territory. The post-modern geopolitical environment is defined by networking, pooling of sovereignty and opening of the borders to other willing participants in the project. It is composed of overlapping and mutually inclusive political and economic institutions that do not necessarily share the same territorial delimitation and might have complementary but also overlapping functional scope. At the same time, it closes the environment to outside pressures, attempting to prevent negative spillovers. The pre-modern geopolitical environment is then defined by a lack of central authority, the lower importance of internationally recognised borders through their irrelevance and the appearance of violent challengers to the central authorities (Doboš 2020).

Such divisions create cleavages in international politics, placing some territories in challenged positions, facing threats from the interaction between actors located in different types of geopolitical environments. These might include contests between the modern

¹ Alternatively named post-colonial. The term “pre-modern” highlights the dominance of the non-state structures and does not develop any normative claims.

and post-modern conduct and perception of international politics, including different means of integrative processes. The foreign policy toolboxes utilised to ensure the promotion of the interests of the actors composing the two environments and their specific enlargement strategies are contradictory, placing the two in a position of mutual hostility.

Valuable input to the theoretical debate over such a contest was made by Zielonka in his differentiation between a “Westphalian superstate” and a “Neo-medieval empire”. Less importantly for the argument, the neomedieval alternative is less centralised, defined by divided sovereignties and overlapping authorities, while the Westphalian political structure is centralised, concerned with the development of a single authority and absolute border protection. What is, however, of an important explanatory value is the difference between “Neo-Westphalian” and “Neo-medieval” imperialism. The “Neo-Westphalian” (modern) imperialism is defined by traditional imperial characteristics like violent subjugation of foreign lands, conquest as a form of expansion and corruption as a form of interaction with potential targets of expansion. On the other hand, the “Neo-medieval” (post-modern) imperialism is characterised by expansion through invitation, polycentric internal organisation and sharing of resources (Zielonka 2007). The EU foreign policy thus might be explained through the imperial interpretation – a development of universally accepted norms by the centre that are followed by peripheries and newly subjugated political communities. In the case of the EU, however, such an order is based on normative power and formal rules rather than physical force (Pänke 2019), that is being utilised as a mean of enlargement by modern imperial powers. Understanding the working of the EU and other Western organisations like NATO through the post-modern imperial framework thus allows us to overcome the limitations of explanations of its behaviour posed by the Westphalian reading of international politics (Zielonka 2014).

Both types of imperial projects are invested in expansion yet utilising different tools. The modern imperial projects are invested in a corrupt and militarised approach towards a territorial spread. On the contrary, the spread of the post-modern, in Zielonka’s words Neo-medieval, imperial entities is voluntary, based on the pull factors related to the economic benefits and respect to individual rights tied to the internal working of the post-modern geopolitical environment. Such a dichotomy creates ripple effects for the regional balance of power in the parts of the world defined by a meaningful history of state-building, a geographic location on the border between the two geopolitical environments and an attempt to develop ties to the “imperium” perceived as threatening by the other side of the relationship. A conflict will then arise once the modern imperial actor feels threatened by the choice of a state to follow the soft power allure of the post-modern project. While the growth of the post-modern empire is not forced, and peripheral countries might opt-out of the enlargement without physical consequences, this is not necessarily the case in relation to the modern imperial projects. Nonetheless, the conflict does not necessarily need to escalate to a military clash and might be more economically oriented. For the militarisation of the conflict to take place, a specific foreign policy approach of a leadership of the modern empire must be in place and militarised strategic culture developed. Also, an internal challenge to the leadership, as visible in Russia since 2012, aids the choice of

militarised reaction. Such a “perfect storm” was encountered by Ukraine since the beginning of the Euromaidan revolution that started in November 2013, further strengthened by the Russian historical narratives connected to the loss of Crimea in the dissolution of the Soviet Union (D’Anieri 2019, 10–11).

Russia, under the autocratic rule of Vladimir Putin, exhibits signs of an imperial modern state. Clearly focused on state sovereignty and regime centralisation, the administration continues to develop imaginations of spheres of influence as a legitimate concept for 21st-century politics. The Russian regime aims at the return to the great power politics of the early 20th century, mimicking the modern imperial practices in the perceived Near Abroad (Toal 2019). It is further supported by the internal debates on imperial and civilisational nationalism (Aksiumov and Avksentev 2022), that affect the construction of the national identity. On the western side of the country lies a soft-power beast, the European Union. While also expansionist and geographically restricted to the European continent (European Commission undated), its *modus operandi* significantly differs from the violent and centralised Russian approach. The necessarily non-exclusive, voluntary inclusion on different levels of cooperation stretching from trade cooperation to full incorporation is conceptually incompatible with the modern forceful and territorially exclusive “spheres of influence thinking”. This puts the Eastern European countries in an unenviable geopolitical situation.

While the post-communist countries of central Europe, the Baltics and the majority of the Balkans effectively managed to hear the call of the soft-power allure, Ukraine was, since its independence, located in an extremely unfavourable geopolitical location. Winning independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the country was torn between institutionalisation and pro-Western orientation and pro-Russian clientelism. As the dichotomy between the “soft-power beast” and conservative and increasingly authoritarian Russia increased, the unsettled region turned into a geopolitical battlefield. And while Belarus, under the contested leadership of the authoritarian president Lukashenko, politically aligned itself with Russia despite the massive protests of its population, Ukraine took a different path contesting the Russian hegemony and aligning itself with the soft-power appeal of the European post-modern empire.

If the presented model is correct, we should observe opposing reactions to the steady shift in a state’s orientation between the two qualitatively different types of geopolitical environments. As post-modern imperialism is based on the force of attraction and the ability to motivate political units to join and remain a part of the common project, it is likely to be sceptical to the speedy incorporation of entities not deemed ready to become a part of the joint project. On the one hand, as an imperial project, the post-modern empire is encouraged to grow. It, nonetheless, realises the economic risks and challenges to internal stability connected to the uncontrolled inclusion of units not meeting the basic criteria of membership. For the modern empire, a loss of dominance over any territory is turned into a security issue as it cannot perceive territorially overlapping authorities and interests as potentially mutually beneficial. The perception of the growth of any type of political

entity in the vicinity of the imperial borders might be understood as a direct threat that will consequently lead to the intensification of the placement of obstacles to such a process. Given its zero-sum reading of politics, these tools might include coercive military or economic means. These are, nonetheless, not likely to be visible in case of the spread of the post-modern empire that does not perceive an inability to fully enlarge (as in the case of Norway), establishment of a lower level of cooperation (as in the case of Switzerland), sharing of responsibilities (as in case of NATO), or even voluntary exit (as in the case of the United Kingdom) as a mortal threat.

Evidently, the military outcome of such an interaction is not a necessity. Nonetheless, given the increase in tensions, an autocratic ruler might turn to the utilisation of coercion. Forceful destabilisation of the parts of the post-Soviet space was a tool utilised by the Russian foreign policy since the collapse of the Soviet Union (Riegl and Doboš 2018). Such a development, combined with a possible enlargement of the post-modern empire, can lead to further militarisation of the situation by an autocratic power that values the military over economic foreign policy tools. We will now turn to the case of Ukraine and focus on the main events that define the relationship of the country with the neighbouring empires to explore whether we can observe such a development. Doing so, the article follows the main events tied to the geopolitical position of the country between the two types of empires and analyses their conformity with the predicted behaviour of the modern and post-modern imperial powers.

Ukraine's Shift Westwards

Following its independence, Ukraine was not a part of the original set of postcommunist countries that managed to swiftly join the Western political and security structures and become part of the networked post-modern imperial entity. It followed the trajectory of other post-Soviet countries except for the three Baltic states. This position was, for example, highlighted by presenting the reinstated independent Ukrainian state with the status of "Newly Independent State" by the EU, placing it in a different category from the other central and eastern European postcommunist countries with closer ties to the Union (Solonenko 2009), thus highlighting the unwillingness of the post-modern empire to swiftly accept the territory. Ukraine, nevertheless, did not unquestionably accept its position in the orbit of Russia either, thus forming a set of borderline cases together with countries like Georgia and Moldova, geopolitically located at the boundary between the two empires. Compared to the two, however, its geographic location brought it the closest to the interaction with the EU, NATO and other western structures. The country, furthermore, became internally divided along many divergent lines, one being the foreign-policy orientation of the state.

The first major systemic attempt to break away from the intermediate position and move closer toward the pro-Western orientation in the 21st-century history of Ukraine took place in 2004 in the so-called Orange Revolution. Following the rigged electoral victory of

Viktor Yanukovych, massive protests enforced a revote of the second round of the presidential elections, leading to the victory of the pro-Western candidate Viktor Yushchenko. Nonetheless, the outcomes of the Orange Revolution failed to bring major comprehensive reforms (Solonenko 2009), and Ukraine maintained the pre-existing internal divisions among both its population and inside the political elites (Proedrou 2010; D'Anieri 2019, 141–6). Ukraine thus remained in an undecided position, “muddling through” the transition from post-communist to a Western political and economic system (Riabchuk 2012), maintaining its geopolitical position. Ukraine remained infrastructurally and economically tied to Russia, mainly due to its dependence on Russian natural gas imports (Proedrou 2010). The EU failed to respond to the call for increased cooperation in a swift manner and did not develop close ties with Ukraine. The existing ties to Russia thus remained strong, and the status of Ukraine in the EU's eyes did not significantly change (Solonenko 2009). The internal divisions remained in place (Riabchuk 2012), and the location of the state between the two projects did not significantly change. While the Yushchenko administration was perceived as a sign of a new direction in Ukrainian politics by the West, its practical impacts remained limited even though some steps towards closer cooperation mainly with the EU were done (D'Anieri 2019, 150–5). This is consistent with the predicted reaction. The post-modern empire did not see a consistent change in the internal organisation of Ukraine that would bring it benefits through a more rapid enlargement process. On the other hand, the modern empire used economic coercion mainly tied to the utilisation of natural resources provision to maintain its privileged position.

However, the internal divisions came to the fore with a much larger force and with a more significant external impact nine years later, following the failed attempt of former president Yanukovych to maintain an ambiguous position between the two neighbours. While attempting to maintain the win-win strategy of simultaneously aligning with both Russia and the EU as a part of a “multivector foreign policy” (D'Anieri 2019, 175), progressing in the development of the Association Agreement with the EU while simultaneously signing a renewal on the lease of the Crimean naval bases for the Russian Black Sea Fleet, Yanukovych managed to frustrate both sides of the divide. This again led to an expected outcome, the post-modern entity simply did not deepen its integration, while the modern empire utilised means of coercion to enforce a change in behaviour. The frustration, however, appeared not only among the external players but, more importantly, among the domestic population. A final step of this flip-flopping, a failure to sign the Association Agreement with the EU by November 2013 that came out as a consequence of the Russian pressure on the Kyiv government, led to the initiation of another revolution, this time bringing down Yanukovych's government for good (Ross Smith 2020; Svoboda 2019; Tsygankov 2015).

Euromaidan signified a major shift in the development of Ukrainian politics, mainly due to the enhanced external reactions. Following the rapid escape of Yanukovych into Russia, Moscow stepped in, breaching its international obligations specified in the Budapest memorandum in the process (Yost 2015). The follow-up of the revolution was met by initially publicly denied intervention of the Russian military into eastern Ukraine and

Crimea, leading to the setting up of the widely unrecognised independence referenda in these territories throughout March and May 2014, ending in the occupation of Crimea directly and *de facto* separation of parts of Donbas (Riegl and Doboš 2018). Despite some initial indications of further progress of the Russian army and Russian-backed militias, the military situation settled in quite stable borders, including continuous skirmishes in eastern Ukraine. This is a reaction that is expected by a modern imperial project headed by a government perceiving the enlargement of the post-modern empire as a threat. It is not a necessary reaction, but given increasingly autocratic governance and, at least, a perceived challenge to its position, the militarised response took place. While for the EU, partial integration through the Association Agreement would present a viable way forward, Russia was not able to accept the territorial overlapping of the economic and political authorities in Ukraine, not willing to participate in or capable of understanding the potentiality of overlapping interests.

This reaction, however, also disallowed further maintenance of a middle ground by the Ukrainian elites and started a process of political and economic approximation of Ukraine to the West. The EU was, in this respect, in 2013, already a larger trading partner of Ukraine compared to Russia (Svoboda 2019). Finally, despite the worsened security situation, the Association Agreement was signed on June 27, 2014 (Pridham 2014). We can thus see that the military incursion was a clear miscalculation from the side of the Russian leadership. Other concrete steps towards a higher connection with the post-modern empire included, for example, an agreement on visa-free travel for Ukrainian citizens into the EU finalised by June 2017. Furthermore, we can identify numerous activities and actors invested in reform acting from inside the European space, however, with a lack of central coordination. These initiatives acted parallel to the direct EU involvement (Bátora and Rieker 2018) that was held mainly through developmental aid instruments and other incentives and support for reforms (Rabinovych 2019). Nonetheless, the full integration remained elusive as the country was not deemed ready to be included in the imperial project.

On the other hand, the post-2014 development led to numerous challenges beyond the inability of the Ukrainian state to control parts of its territory effectively occupied by Russia. First, we must mention economic issues as in the short-term, economic gains of the revolution were not visible, mainly due to the combination of the disconnection from Russia (chiefly tied to the policy utilisation of natural gas and oil exports (Svoboda 2019)) and limited opening of the European market (Molchanov 2016) worried about speedy connection to a volatile territory. The different disruptions in the economy of Ukraine and other losses, including a shift in public spending due to the necessity to deal with the changed security situation, led to an estimated decrease in per capita GDP between 2013–17 of about 15%. In Donbas, this decrease was about 50% (Bluszcz and Valente 2022).

Second, there were still prevalent identity issues. The identities inside Ukraine overlap and do not establish clear-cut categories, especially as the language identity and practical

use of such, itself originating in the Soviet Russification policies (Kulyk 2011), might differ. The modern imperial project instrumentalised these divisions to justify its aggressive policies while the post-modern project focuses on overcoming any differences through inclusive policies. At the same time, the aggression further stopped any meaningful debate on decentralisation of the country (Palermo 2020). Nonetheless, the identity groups defined along hardly definable borders are, in the end, establishing interest groups that presented a picture of an internally divided country (Onuch and Hale 2018). While both pro-western and pro-eastern parts of the population largely self-identified with their Ukrainian citizenship, the division was further polarised, especially in the Donbas region, as a consequence of the military activities in the territory (Sasse and Lackner 2018). The pro-secessionist sentiments and existence of pro-Russian networks on the part of the territory, nonetheless, actually allowed for the denied incursion of the Russian military onto the parts of Ukrainian territory (Dzutsati 2021).

Last but not least, there was the issue of taking practical steps towards a more meaningful integration in the post-modern imperial project. The EU, following 2013, acted as a power in Ukraine, including throughout the Euromaidan, via its “market power” even despite the lack of unification of the foreign policies of its member states (Gehring, Urbanski, and Oberthür 2017). This disunity was evident even in crucial support to the reform of the security sector in Ukraine (Shea and Jaroszewicz 2021). It thus clearly highlighted the force of attraction of the common project as theorised. This, nonetheless, also means that it was up to the Ukrainian state to make the necessary steps forward as the post-modern empire does not operate foreign policy tools to enforce enlargement and does not shy away from shallower means of connection. However, the Ukrainian political elites lacked a unified and systematic push toward necessary reforms that would allow the country to meet the EU membership criteria and genuinely embrace European values beyond an instrumental adherence that was necessary for the maintenance of economic and political support from the West. The shift was thus often more about challenging the Russian military encroachment on the Ukrainian territory, deescalating the fighting and targeting the Russian influence, and participating in the diplomatic initiatives like the Minsk agreements, rather than a genuine acceptance of the European values and system of administration (Kakachia, Lebanidze, and Dubovyk 2019).

The Russian response was, as already evident, clearly modern imperial. Russia directly occupied parts of the country as the government feared that an indirect approach would lead the country further away from the influence of Moscow. This way, it sought to prevent potential membership of Ukraine in NATO and EU and maintain control over Ukrainian politics (Pridham 2014; Dzutsati 2021). The intervention can also be understood as an attempt to prevent the spillover of the European values into the Russian vicinity that might lead to pro-democratic revolutions in Russia, challenging the ruling elite and the whole model of internal political organisation. Nonetheless, it must be simultaneously pointed out that the military and other tools utilised still had a non-traditional element in them as Russia, at this point, made use of means including “soldiers on vacation” or dis-

information campaigns rather than a direct and undenied military invasion (Auer 2015), allowing for some limited deniability.

The invasion came as a consequence of the clashes between the different ways foreign policies are conducted by the EU and Russia (Nitoiu 2016). The threat was perceived as being so high that Putin identified the shift in Ukraine as a disturbance to the international order, thus, himself pursuing extra-systemic steps involving carving out parts of the territory of a sovereign state. The continuous securitisation of the EU enlargement by the Russian leadership ended in a direct intervention in the country. The invasion, however, still remained on a limited basis aiming at limited plausible deniability (Allison 2014). We can thus observe that even if the leadership of the modern imperial power perceives a direct threat to its territorial interests, it may scale its response, and there is nothing determining a massive utilisation of military power. As evident, however, even the limited occupation put Ukraine directly on the path of more meaningful development of the national capacities that are making it more alluring to the expansion of the post-modern empire.

The next step was, however, taken another eight years later. The perceived threat of the continuous “westernisation” of Ukraine and potential *de jure* enlargement of the post-modern empire through networking of Ukraine into its activities led to another over-reaction from the Russian administration that escalated on February 24, 2022, into a full-fledged military invasion of Ukraine not only in the east and from Crimea but also aiming at the capital of Kyiv that came under a brief siege. This development manifested the pursuit of the most extreme form of the modern imperial behaviour, attempting to forcefully change the regime in Ukraine in order to place it back in the Russian orbit. However, the Ukrainian population, military and government managed to put up a sustained defence, preventing the regime change. The EU and NATO as a security guarantor of the post-modern environment, did not directly intervene into the conflict itself. It, nonetheless, utilised its economic and political strengths to provide material support to Ukraine and isolate Russia in order to dissuade it from the continuation of the aggression through post-modern means. The Ukrainian political elites, additionally, strongly signalled their pro-European sentiments, which further led the post-modern empire to put forward more impactful foreign policy tools itself. On April 8, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen visited Kyiv, handing to president Volodymyr Zelensky a questionnaire based on which Ukraine will be assessed as a potential member of the union. This signifies a nearing the final stage of the enlargement of the post-modern empire to the east. Ironically, a militarised attempt of the modern empire to prevent this hastened the process.

Clashing Perceptions

The usefulness of the imperial analogy is further supported by the challenging perceptions of the transformation of the Ukrainian policies and the narratives used to describe these

as utilised by the (supporters of the) two competing imperial projects. To begin with, the Russian geopolitical narratives of Europe have undergone some crucial shifts throughout more than thirty years of its post-Soviet existence. The first phase that involved the 1990s and approximately the first six years of Putin's presidency, presented Europe and, widely, the West as a strategic partner. Nonetheless, the growing change in that perception was clearly evident in 2005 when Putin arrived with the infamous comment on the dissolution of the Soviet Union being the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century (Toal 2019, 55) or at the 2007 Putin's Munich Security Conference speech where he highlighted the perceived changes to the international system. This feeling was further supported by the 2008 events in Kosovo and Georgia. An even more striking turn towards identifying the EU and Europe in general with anti-Russian sentiments followed the return of Putin to the presidency in 2012. Russian government since then self-identified as the only centre of any legitimate integration of the post-Soviet states and as a civilisation-state with a special status, standing in opposition to the disintegrating and decadent West (Foxall 2019). This highlights the growing threat perception of the modern imperial regime regarding the spread of the post-modern geopolitical environment that further supports military reaction to such development.

This increasing hostility and reservation towards the "West" is evident, among others, in the long-lasting signalling of the Kremlin against the potential NATO membership for Ukraine (Hunter 2022; Toal 2019, 199). Russia presented many historical narratives, including the historical role of the Kyivan Rus, the role of Cossacks, the history of *Holodomor*, or the Second World War, contesting the Ukrainian identity and pro-Western orientation of the state (Kappeler 2014) to portray the sheer existence of the Ukrainian state as something unnatural and ahistorical (Marples 2016). This clearly places Ukrainian territory into the perceived imperial territory of the modern actor. This portrayal was further combined with the geopolitical concepts rooted in the seeming clear-cut geopolitical dichotomy of the land and sea powers, highlighted, for example, by Alexander Dugin (Auer 2015), and the conceptualisation of the Ukrainian territory as a vital borderland territory preventing the "aggressive" expansion of NATO to the Russian borders (Lazarenko 2018; Tsygankov 2015) – this all inside the perception of the existence of the Slavic or "Russian" world dominated by Moscow (Tsygankov 2015; Shelest 2015). As such, Ukraine was understood as a necessary geographic extension of the Russian state, itself a civilisation entity threatened by the expansion from the West. This conceptualisation further strengthens the opposition of the modern imperium to the post-modern expansion and securitises the foreign policy choices of Ukraine.

These geopolitical narratives were further strengthened following the 2014 revolution and are evident in justifications for the occupation of parts of Donbas and Crimea. The two main narratives framing the Euromaidan from the Russian side involved both the historical and anti-western position of the Russian government. The first included the alleged illegality of the coup led by neo-Nazis against the legitimate government, while the second highlighted the seeming EU and US involvement in instigating and puppeteering the events (Marples 2016) thus directly challenging the spread of the post-modern struc-

tures and networks. The same was obvious, for example, in the short campaign predating the internationally unrecognised referendum over the status of Crimea that was framed as a choice between Nazism or a welcoming embrace of Russia (Toal 2019, 223–226). Nazism as a metaphor for the spread of the post-modern networks is then clearly used to domestically justify the interventionism based on historical memories of the Second World War rather than necessarily attempting to describe any empirical reality. The claim of conducting an anti-terrorist operation against the Nazis was repeated as an explanation of the Russian involvement in eastern Ukraine as well – a claim that complemented the general narrative of protection of the Russian population (Marples 2016) and thus the modern imperial structures. Furthermore, the weakening or destruction of Ukraine was to become a crucial part of the Russian attempts to return to global grandeur (Kiryukhin 2016) and a way to prevent its inclusion into the EU and NATO (Marples 2016), thus fulfilling the foreign policy goals of the Moscow government.

On the other hand, the pro-Western framing of the developments highlighted the power of attraction of the EU and the West in general, even despite a clear lack of control of the EU over the developments on Euromaidan and later (Auer 2015). This can be highlighted in the rather slow and shallow reaction of the EU to the consequences of the Russian intervention in the country (Kuzio 2017). While the narrative of the freedom of choice of the population of Ukraine, in the end, dominated (Lazarenko 2018), the EU still underestimated the lengths to which the Russian state was willing to intervene in the country directly. While perceiving itself as the only realistic alternative for the orientation of the future Ukrainian foreign policy, it, to a degree, counted on Russian restraint in case Ukraine is not offered full membership in the western institutions (Kuzio 2017). The encroachment of the post-modern empire into new territory was thus clearly not forceful, and on the contrary, the policy was often countering a possible full-fledged expansion eastward. It also misread the possible escalation of the modern imperial project, thus also misreading the political nature of the opposing project.

So while Ukraine, similarly to other post-Soviet countries, held historical and infrastructural ties to Russia (Toal 2019, 39) that were utilised as a part of the justifications of the coercive involvement in the country, the pro-western stream and the power of attraction of the EU presented its own set of popular narratives. Moreover, even in this sense, the Russian aggression from 2014 held a major consequence. While the EU, the economic and legal pillar of the post-modern imperial structure, was long perceived as a viable option by at least large portion of the Ukrainian population, the approach to NATO, the military pillar of the same, changed after the occupation of the eastern parts of the country and Crimea. While Putin was afraid of losing Ukraine to the West, the popular support for NATO membership reportedly increased to relevant levels only after the 2014 aggression (Shelest 2015). Even though there are at least three major streams of explanations for the Russian behaviour following Euromaidan – Russia acting as a revisionist imperial power; Russia being a victim of Western behaviour; or Russian elites creating chaos abroad to strengthen their own position in Russia (Götz 2016) – this does not change the fact that the 2014 “nationalist reaction” (Tsygankov 2015) led to a significant shift in nation-

building in Ukraine (Kiryukhin 2016) as a reaction to the foreign threat. This highlights another failure of the militarised overreaction of the modern imperial project that could have been avoided if the territorial integrity of Ukraine had been sustained. What is interesting to highlight, nonetheless, is that despite the major shifts, the events did not affect the electoral motivations of the Ukrainian voters in the October 2014 elections across the Ukrainian regions despite a massive victory for former opposition parties (Chaisty and Whitefield 2018). This once again points to the miscalculations of the Russian imperial policy, overstating the level of influence of the post-modern empire in Ukraine prior to 2022.

The repetition of similar narratives followed in the post-2014 period, with the Russian government highlighting the alleged domination of Ukraine by Nazi elements led by its president Volodymyr Zelensky, himself of Jewish ancestry, and unproven claims of genocide against the Russian population of eastern Ukraine. On the other hand, without offering membership, both the EU and NATO retained the rhetoric of freedom of choice and maintained their power of attraction while taking very few concrete steps towards incorporating Ukraine into its networks, including providing it with the safety of the common security umbrella. This division highlights the mutual misperceptions regarding the larger willingness of the incorporation of Ukraine into the post-modern project by the modern empire and the unwillingness to further militarily escalate the situation in reverse. Nonetheless, given the aid to strengthen the internal working of the state provided by actors inside the post-modern “West” including in the military domain, Ukraine became much better prepared for territorial protection and potential incorporation into the post-modern networks compared to the pre-2014 situation. The grand narratives of the Russian government, furthermore, according to the polls, did not perfectly resonate even in its occupied territories in eastern Ukraine. According to data from months prior to the 2022 military incursion and a year earlier, the hoped-for end goal of the conflict was largely disputed by the remaining local population, missing clear support to the goals of the Russian government (O’Loughlin, Sasse, et al. 2021; O’Loughlin, Toal, and Sasse 2022). Following the 2022 invasion, the narratives on the non-existence of the Ukrainian state, alleged control over the state by Nazis, and the necessity to “pacify” the country even arose to the point of justifying genocidal behaviour (see, for example, Sergeytsev 2022). While from the Russian point of view, Ukraine was leaving its imperial reach due to the Western plot – following popular revolts in Belarus and Kazakhstan that shook the countries in very similar positions since 2020 – for the West, the situation was always framed as a Ukrainian choice of future development.

Interpretation

The cataclysmic events that unfolded following the next round of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in late February 2022 can be interpreted and explained through numerous theoretical perspectives that highlight different motivations behind the decision of the Russian government to attack its neighbour. This article highlights a systemic explanation

utilising the previously developed neomedieval imperialist analogy as extremely useful to conceptualise the eastern European geographic space and, specifically, the situation in Ukraine after 2013. The region is torn between the normative soft power of the post-modern empire requiring harmonisation of regulations and policies as a way to enter, compared to an autocratic, centralised and hierarchic modern empire largely based on personal relations rather than institutions and rules and utilising coercive tools to maintain itself. The internal pressures on the Ukrainian elites to join the Western structures were then reflected through the classical geopolitical lenses and understood as a challenge to the geographic interests of Russia. The modern imperialism is geographically exclusive and highly territorial (Doboš 2020, 129–134). Ukraine has appeared on the tectonic plate of geopolitics, and its situation was further escalated by the utilisation of the historical and identity narratives by the Russian state, portraying the political entity as artificial and extremely radical, further justifying aggressive behaviour inside its territory.

While both empires repurposed their tools of expansion for the contemporary era, the logic behind their application was vastly different. Russian modern imperialism understood the policy shifts in exclusive geographic and identarian terms, presenting Ukraine as an artificial state that is a necessary part of the Russian world and a buffer against the Western encroachment into the “Near Abroad”. Any meaningful connection to another political and economic bloc became necessarily a threat to the exclusive Russian interests. It did not shy away from utilising hard-power tools and breaching the norms of international politics in order to meet what it perceived as its vital goals. The tools were, until February 2022, suited to the post-Cold War nature of international politics, consisting mainly of deniable strategies and attempts to justify its steps, including through illegitimate referenda. The classical geopolitical reading of eastern European politics is, nonetheless, clearly present. Following the full-scale invasion, we can see a return of traditional means of power politics as well.

On the contrary, the West, as represented mainly by the EU and NATO, substituted its inability to swiftly react to the developments on the ground with its power of attraction. While presenting numerous obstacles to its enlargement to Ukraine, it still held its doors rhetorically open. While the EU membership, or at least more meaningful incorporation into some of its structures and networks, was sought after by a significant part of the Ukrainian population for a long time, as evident from the events of the Orange Revolution and Euromaidan, the NATO membership became widely popular only following a direct military violation of the Ukrainian territorial integrity and disembowelment of the Budapest Memorandum in 2014. Ukrainians have, on numerous occasions, highlighted the willingness to join the Western structures even over clear and obvious repercussions by Russia, first in economic and later in security dimensions. The fact that the most strongly pro-Russian and anti-Western portion of the population that might have decisively affected this decision-making was physically disconnected from the mainstream political debates and decision-making by the very same Russian intervention remains an irony.

The fact that the modern empire acted on its fears and not rational calculations aided not only the nation-building process of the Ukrainian state but also the soft-power allure of the post-modern alternative. The more devastating the Russian response was, the more the Ukrainian public sought the pro-European orientation. Additionally, the more devastating the Russian steps turned out to be, the more decisive the otherwise slowly moving European Union became. It opened the possibility of Ukrainian membership only after a full-fledged invasion aiming, among others, at the capital of Kyiv. This highlights the ability of the post-modern actors to amend their prevailing *modus operandi* in the face of a crisis. The misunderstanding of the nature of the expansion of the post-modern empire most likely cost Russia its prime position in influencing Ukrainian internal politics – in the pre-2014 Ukrainian context, it would be highly unlikely that the country would be incorporated into the post-modern structures due to the combination of internal issues and external unwillingness. As it turns out, once a modern empire cannot produce a fast, decisive victory in a conflict, its aggressive behaviour only enhances the allure of the post-modern alternative. On the one hand, the qualitative difference favours the swift decision-making of the modern model but only to the point when the situation becomes protracted and allows for the common decisions to make their impact. The modern imperial model thus turns out to be inferior. This is especially the case in the comparison of the enlargement policies of the two types of empires. As it turns out, the less radical approach might be more beneficial even for the modern actors as the economic tools utilised previously by Russia or still by China do not lead to such a massive backlash and promise more sustainable growth of the influence of such actors.

Conclusion

The dynamic nature of the post-Cold War geopolitical order is leading to an emergence of a very diverse global political environment. The appearance of qualitatively different types of political organisation of space complicates our reading of the events compared to the simplified yet largely inaccurate, Westphalian model. Conceptual division of the political space into divergent types of geopolitical environments allows us not only to more accurately identify the various means of projecting power over the territory but also of an interplay of the different territorial political units on the map of the world. Such an analysis is also helpful in identifying regions with a higher probability of conflict due to their position between two competing types of geopolitical environments. This is the case in the 21st century Ukraine.

The evolutionary reading of the international system allows us to spot significant differences between the foreign policies and logic of enlargement of the two actors determining the external dimension of the conflict in Ukraine – Russia as a modern actor and the EU and NATO as post-modern entities. Both of these entities are, at their core, imperial. However, the extremely different approach to enlargement is crucial for enlightening the external and systemic logic behind the escalation leading to the Russian invasions of its neighbour. The soft-power allure of the post-modern empire that was perceived as attrac-

tive by a significant segment of the Ukrainian population was not met by a rapid promotion of enlargement policies from the EU, thus not making use of either the 2004 or 2013 revolutions in full. Such an approach clearly highlights the hesitancy with which the post-modern empire enlarges.

On the contrary, the Russian modern empire perceived the developments as threatening, operating in a zero-sum logic of international politics, focusing on more traditional economic and military means inside clearly territorially defined borders incapable of accepting overlapping of networks and authorities. While the Orange Revolution did not end in a massive foreign response, the Euromaidan was met with a direct occupation of parts of Ukraine by the Russian troops. It was, actually, this response that mainly sped up the implementation of policies tying Ukraine to the post-modern empire rather than a willingness of the EU to speedily embrace Ukraine, which was evidently something feared by Moscow. This miscalculation helps us to explain the more significant change in the Ukrainian policies post-2014. The 2022 full-scale invasion only enhanced this process, and Ukraine is nearing some more meaningful incorporation into the post-modern structures and networks. Misreading the policies and tools utilised by the EU, Russia actually worsened its position in mainstream Ukrainian politics, in which it played a significant role prior to 2014. The article thus highlighted that in order to tune the policy responses correctly, geopolitical actors must be aware of the varying logic of policy-making in the divergent geopolitical environments rather than perceive the situations through their own lenses only. This is the case, no matter whether it is an overly aggressive perception of international politics by Russia or economic and de-militarised as in the case of the EU.

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