



GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR  
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**RUSSIA'S IMPERIAL IDEOLOGIES: FUEL FOR  
AUTHORITARIANISM AND EXPANSION?**

**GIORGI BADRIDZE**

**127**

**EXPERT OPINION**





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი  
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Over the course of its history, the Russian political system has experienced several revolutionary changes. These changes were so deep and all-encompassing that every time they took place, the state would see not only its governing system and state ideology altered, but also its borders and even its name. Today's Russian Federation is the successor of the Soviet Union with the USSR being the successor of the Russian Empire which was, in its own turn, a descendent of the Grand Duchy of Moscow. That said, every new political formation established in Russia was connected by several unchanging characteristics. The most vivid of these are overly authoritarian domestic governance and aggressive foreign policy. This paper attempts to reveal the underlying reasons for this phenomenon.

### **Political Culture, Ideology and the Political System**

In political science, there is a strong connection established between the culture, traditions, values and the system of governance of the nation.<sup>1</sup> Over the centuries, this connection was upheld by various ideologies. In the past it was mostly done through religious ideologies, while in the modern times – through political ones.<sup>2</sup> As a result, we can talk about different political cultures existing within different nations that largely determine the nature of the governance systems or, more broadly, the political systems that they create.

Political science describes political culture as a set of shared views of the society/population regarding core values and the political process which determines the legitimacy of the political system.<sup>3</sup> Hence, the political system is almost always a product of the nation's shared experience that expresses its values and aspirations.

However, over time the governance system might stray or be left behind from the development of the society and become unacceptable to its own people. There are countless examples of this in history and, as a rule, such a disconnect causes revolutionary processes. As a result of the American Revolutionary War for Independence at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the British colonial rule was substituted with an entirely new type of political system which better reflected the values and interests of the populations of the 13 founding states. The French Revolution gave rise to an even more cardinal process of changes when absolutism was replaced by a republic. Even though the birth of the republic turned out to be connected to a rather difficult and bloody process and it experienced five incarnations

within two centuries, ultimately the political system that was established in France came in conjunction with the French society's shared values that owed their origins to the enlightenment era.

In rare cases, fundamental changes of the political system take place in less devastating ways and the best example of this is the evolution of the political system of England and later Great Britain. The main factor uniting the aforementioned as well as other examples is that following the development of the society, its ideas, values and ideologies expressing those two, the political system also changes and comes in more accordance with these values and ideas. As a rule, such changes bring progress for the society with more freedom and well-being provided to each individual. However, there are exceptions. Russia is one of those exceptions where despite fundamental changes in the governing system and ideology, power constantly remains monopolized by the Kremlin (temporarily in St. Petersburg in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries) with society devoid of any rights, yet aggressively obedient and the foreign policy – radically aggressive and expansionist.

## **Russia's Metamorphoses**

### **1. Moscow – The Third Rome: Religious Idea in Service of a Political Agenda**

The first state ideology of Russia (more accurately – Moscow) was based on the concept of the “Third Rome.” According to the stories, in the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, a monk from Pskov, Philotheus, informed Vasili III about his new religious mission – leading the Eastern Christendom: “two Romes have already fallen, the third remains on its feet and there will be no fourth one.” The first referred to Rome itself, with the second meaning Constantinople and, of course, Moscow was to become the third one.<sup>4</sup>

Naturally, Vasili and his heirs found this idea very appealing. Firstly, this concerned the status of the rulers of Moscow – from now on Vasili was not just the Grand Duke, but Caesar (Russian Царь comes from the word - Цезарь – Caesar). Apart from the title, he also made the Byzantine coat of arms – the double-headed eagle – a central symbol of his heraldry. Hence, the Duchy of Moscow stepped on the path of becoming at first a kingdom and later an Empire, selecting an even more ambitious goal – uniting the Eastern Christendom. From then on, the conquest of any new lands by Moscow was justified by “God's will.”

Ivan IV spread Moscow's rulership far and wide and most importantly, established Russian autocracy – a full monopolization of power. He not only destroyed all those who would compete with him for power, but using mass terror practically turned the populations of Moscow and all the lands subject to it into slaves. In fairness, it must be noted that serfdom existed before that as well and technically its final form was established in Boris Godunov's time; however, Ivan the Terrible can be considered to be the principal creator of Russian "Tsarism."

If Vasili III took up the proposed idea of the "Third Rome" with glee, to increase his power and legitimize his bolstered status, his successor, dubbed "the terrible," considered making his power absolute and ensuring Imperial status for Moscow to be his sacred duty.

In 1589, Moscow, which was now truly on the way to its Imperial status, took a new important step when it managed to secure the recognition of its church's autocephaly from the weakened World Patriarchate, pronouncing Metropolitan Job a Patriarch. This only added more power to Moscow's geopolitical ambitions.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the clerical and state authorities attempted cooperation through a Byzantine principle – "symphony" which meant sharing governance. However, first the reforms of Patriarch Nikon and then the full transformation of state governance by Peter I turned the church into a mere subdivision of the government of a newly created Russian Empire, overseen by the "*Oberprokurator*."

It was Peter who finalized the transformation of the Grand Duchy of Moscow into the Russian Empire; however, in all probability, the concept of the Third Rome meant much less to him than to a deeply religious Ivan the Terrible. Peter transformed the governance system energetically, yet did it in a way that the political system remained tyrannical and the majority of the population – the serfs – remained in actual slavery. During his rule Russian territory kept expanding with mind-bending speed. The only thing that changed was that the mix of Asian and Byzantine customs, previously predominant in Russia, was replaced with the Western European style.

In the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century they actually started creating the official state ideology which would tailor the concept of the Third Rome for new necessities. It was coined by the Minister of Education of Nicholas I, Sergey Uvarov,<sup>5</sup> in 1833 in just three words: "Православие, Самодержавие, Народность" (Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality). According to the opinion of historian, Georgi Manaev, just like the slogan of the Russian army of

that time “За Веру, Царя и Отечество,” this formula coined by Uvarov was also a response to the slogan of the French Revolution – “Liberté, égalité, fraternité” (Liberty, equality, fraternity).<sup>6</sup>

Uvarov is also notable due to the fact that his corruptness reached such legendary heights that Pushkin even mentioned him in his poem.<sup>7</sup> Yet, it would seem that corruption, together with authoritarianism and expansionism, is characteristic to every formation of the Russian state. In this, I will call upon as a witness British researcher, Thomas De Waal, who brilliantly explains Russian corruption with the use of Uvarov’s contemporary writer, Nikolai Gogol’s “The Government Inspector” in his article “How Gogol Explains the Post-Soviet World.”<sup>8</sup> I have to point out that his view of Georgia, also expressed in the very same article, I consider to be incorrect as it shows the Russian view about Georgia and its history which I point out in my response letter.<sup>9</sup>

During the First World War, the idea of the “Third Rome” almost became a reality when through the Sykes-Picot-Sazonov secret agreement, the Triple Entente agreed to Russia occupying Constantinople and the straits. However, for Russia everything happened in an opposite scenario – instead of invading the heart of the old Byzantine Empire and acquiring the desired access to the Mediterranean Sea, its Empire crumbled, losing many territories (some for good, some temporarily).

## **2. Communism, Bolshevism, Stalinism, Marxism-Leninism. From Political Ideology to a New Religion**

The Bolsheviks who came to power with the Communist slogans of internationalism soon successfully substituted the Third Rome Doctrine with an even more ambitious and expansionist ideology. The core of it was the universal dissemination of Communism through a world revolution. The slogan “Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality” was replaced by “Proletarians of all countries, unite.” The center of world Communism was, of course, supposed to be Moscow. Even though even Stalin himself had to set the ideas of world revolution aside, Communism remained the sole ideology of the Soviet Union for decades, turning it in an entirely totalitarian state and also largely determining its foreign policy, one of the main aims of which was to maximally expand and support Communist rule around the world.

It must be pointed out that the stated internationalism slogans did not prevent Soviet Russia from exercising habitual imperialist foreign policy.

As soon as the Bolsheviks won the bloody civil war, the Red Army started taking care of the issue of returning the “lost” territories of the Russian Empire. It was precisely this policy that the freedom of the young Georgian Republic fell prey to in 1921 while in 1939, the Soviet Union, together with Nazi Germany, divided the whole of Eastern Europe among themselves which was followed by a new World War and an even larger-scale Soviet expansion as the Russian army set up camp in the heart of Europe for almost 50 years.

Despite the change of decorations, as the church and religion were replaced by the Communist Party and its ideology, the Kremlin’s total monopoly on power was still maintained in the Soviet period as well as the lack of rights for the population (even for ethnic Russians) which in the period of collectivization was very much similar to serfdom; and aggressive expansionism which was now justified by a new ideology. In the 1940s, the Soviet government established a Communist rule subject to the Soviet Union in Central and Eastern Europe as well, gradually starting to encourage Communist movements in other countries too. Later, it was suppressing popular protests against these regimes through military force (in Hungary and Czechoslovakia). In 1979, Soviet propaganda called the occupation of Afghanistan “serving the internationalist duty.”

Ultimately, the Soviet Empire fell prey to the fact that apart from the structure of power and foreign policy, the economy was also totally regulated through its ideology. As a result, the Soviet Empire – a powerful super-state – simply went bankrupt, sharing the fate of the Russian Empire.

### **3. Russian World and Eurasianism – A Cocktail of Religion and Political Ideology**

With the collapse of the Soviet Union which was, apart from the economy, also a result of its ideological bankruptcy, Russia was given a chance to take steps towards modernization and building a progressive political system. It had certain attempts to do so; however, the experiment of the 1990s ended very badly, when a supposedly democratic President Yeltsin left as his inheritance not only a corruption-ridden economy and shaky statehood but also left as the new ruler – Soviet KGB officer Vladimir Putin.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, as though out of the blue, we now had at one glance a faceless “apparatchik” in the office of the ruler of the Kremlin. In reality, though, Putin and his team had been preparing for this moment for the entirety of the 1990s. They used their old skills and connections to their maximum



to create a unique syndicate of politicians, law enforcement structures and representatives of organized crime. What they lacked the most was precisely an ideology which would justify their monopolization of power this time around.

Orthodox Christianity had already been rehabilitated after the collapse of the Soviet Union, yet Putin and his team understood that it could not replace the Communist Party and conquer the minds of the masses that had been brought up atheistically: the KGB knew the church and its representatives very well and could have no illusions about them. Parallel to putting the church into their service, it was necessary to create a combat totalitarian ideology which would become the source of the new government and its legitimacy. Putin and his close circles easily disregarded the Soviet values of pseudo-internationalism and found the simplest and cheapest recipe for the consolidation of Russian people – the revival of nationalism.

Numerous Russian or foreign researchers connect the formation of the new Russian state ideology to the annexation of Crimea by Putin as well as the war launched in Eastern Ukraine.<sup>11</sup> However, in my opinion it is impossible to overlook that both Crimea, as well as later even more pronounced domestic or foreign policy actions taken by the Kremlin, are based on the system of ideas that was quite clearly formed prior to these events. These ideas were cobbled together for Putin by a previously entirely unknown philosopher, Aleksandr Dugin, calling it, conditionally, Eurasianism or the Russian World Doctrine (it must be pointed out that the popular opinion of Dugin being the “brain of the Kremlin” is entirely exaggerated).

Historians will know at a single glance that this doctrine represents the ideas of Russian authors of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Of them, I would distinguish two – Nikolai Trubetzkoy and Ivan Ilyin. Trubetzkoy’s works define Russia as an anti-European phenomenon and categorically claim that the real roots and exceptionalism of Russia come from the Golden Horde heritage and not Kievan Rus’ which he considers to have been overly European.

If you read his “On Caucasian Peoples” published in 1925, you will not miss the surprising similarity of methods that the current Russian government uses against Georgia. Trubetzkoy leaves as a sort of a will to his successors that in order to maintain control over Georgians (and hence the Caucasus), it is necessary to suppress with all means possible “recently sprung up Europeanness in their nationalism” and facilitate an ethnic “sort of Eurasian nationalism.”<sup>12</sup> It is the materialization of Trubetzkoy’s ideas that

Dugin's Chokha-wearing apprentices have become so active in Georgia.

That said, the lion's share of Eurasianist ideology was borrowed by Dugin and his colleagues from Ivan Ilyin. What is so exceptional in the personality and ideas of the main prophet of Eurasianism and how do we know that it is him that the rulers of the Kremlin worship? There are undoubted facts for this: in 2005, Putin's government brought Ivan Ilyin's remains from Switzerland to Moscow and buried them with great honor at the Don Monastery cemetery (this is a sort of a pantheon of Russian public figures), published 25 volumes of his works, bought back and brought Ilyin's archives from the US to Russia and Putin, all members of his Cabinet without exception, the Patriarch of Moscow and other officials regularly quote him.

At this point, the reader might ask what connection fascism has with all this, seeing that it is so deafeningly featured in the title of this paper? The answer – the connection is direct. Philosopher Ivan Ilyin was expelled from Russia in 1922 as an undesirable element for the Bolsheviks. He settled in Germany and soon discovered a hero that he adored – Benito Mussolini. He then proclaimed that Mussolini's Fascistic governance was the best political system for Europe.

Hitler's appearance on the stage and the arrival of Nazis in power further encouraged him. He openly called himself a fascist. His enthusiasm for fascism was soon rewarded – the Russian Institute where he worked was transferred to become the subsidiary of the Propaganda Ministry and at the time when practically all immigrants were expelled, they kept Ilyin as a trusted person. This is how Ilyin become an employee of Joseph Goebbels.

However, with the Great War coming closer, the good will of the Nazis also ran out; however, unlike millions of others, Ilyin did not become a victim of repressions – he moved to Switzerland in 1938. As amazing as it is, even the catastrophic failure of Nazi Germany could not change Ilyin's ideas and he explained Germany's unsuccessfulness with Hitler's mistakes.

The most notable works on the Ilyin phenomenon and its influence on Putin's new ideology are done by a famous American historian, Timothy Snyder.<sup>13</sup>

So, this is the kind of father that today's Russian state ideology has. The paradox is that for a mostly fascistic regime both in its roots as well as its contents, the word "fascism" is the favorite tool of insults. When someone does not like the Russian government, they are unavoidably

“fascists.” Lately, they have been using this word most frequently against Ukraine. So what, if a “fascist” and even “Nazi” Ukraine recently elected a Jewish President (and for some time had a Jewish President and Prime Minister<sup>14</sup>) – creating a parallel reality is, after all, a habit of totalitarian regimes, especially fascism! Today, Putin’s propagandists have Western-created latest technologies at their disposal – from Russian TV channels broadcasting to the entire world to social media.

Independent from how seriously Putin takes his new proposed ideology, it is beyond doubt that today we can already speak of the model of Putin’s Russia which has assumed a new formation after the Empire and the Soviet era. The new Russia offers a sort of a social contract to its society:

1. In return for the voluntary refusal of civil rights, Russians will get a feeling of pride with the revival of Russian power (this does not mean well-being).
2. Russia is a fortress surrounded by enemies and despite the fact that the corruptness of Putin and his team is apparent to everyone, no one but them can protect Russia.
3. As increasing the well-being of the population is much more difficult than acquiring glory through small wars, Putin’s foreign policy is consistently aggressive and expansionist.

\* \* \*

There is one proverb, probably from the Cold War era – “Whatever a Russian does, they end up making the Kalashnikov gun.” This does not only sound like a lack political correctness but it is also false in many ways – the Russian people have created a lot of valuable things, contributing to world culture and science, while as for the Kalashnikov itself, the contribution of Mikhail Kalashnikov in creating the legendary rifle is not beyond doubt.<sup>15</sup>

And yet, the proverb has a right to existence, especially when it comes to Russian ideologies and the political systems founded on them. Despite the changes in eras and political forms, Imperial, Soviet and today’s Russia have several common characteristics – the Russian state excludes human liberty and the rule of law, it is deeply corrupt, its governance, in all formations, characterized by authoritarianism leaning towards totalitarianism and the foreign policy – is aggressive and expansionist.

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14. President Zelensky replaced PM Grossman in August.
15. About 340 interned German engineers, supervised by a world-renowned constructor, Hugo Schmeisser, worked on creating the AK-47 rifle in the Izhevsk factories and it could be that the role of a young tank driver, Mikhail Kalashnikov, was quite small in creating this weapon.