

State Without Borders (and Identity): What Russia Loses by Losing Ukraine

The absence of Ukraine in the Russian state's fold challenges its very identity as an empire, as once [suggested](#) by the late Zbigniew Brzezinski. This notion unsettles many Russians who are uninterested in foreign policy. The Russian state's identity is closely tied to its imperial past, making the prospect of Russia without an empire deeply perplexing for its ruling elites and the general public.

Anticipating the eventual reclamation of currently occupied Ukrainian territories by Kyiv and the timing of such a recovery remains an uncertain prospect. Irrespec-

tive of the war's outcome, the abyss between Ukraine and Russia in the political, economic, and security spheres is unmistakable. This divide extends to history, culture, and faith, deeply impacting the national identities of both nations. Russia's loss of an empire due to the ongoing war with Ukraine signifies a significant transformation with many unknown consequences.

For Ukrainians, the aspiration to align with Europe has always been clear, with integration into European institutions being a declared priority for Kyiv. In contrast,



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Russians have grappled with the duality of their identity. Russian Empire's founder, Peter the Great, achieved his "greatness" by embracing Westernization. Conversely, another great ruler, Ivan the Terrible, the architect of the Muscovite Kingdom, earned his nickname through ruthless actions, characteristic of oriental rulers.

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During the debates between Russian Slavophiles and Westernizers about Ukrainian identity, the idea of Ukrainian independence was a distant possibility. Today, the

notion of "Little Russians," as assigned by Slavophiles to Ukrainian identity, is no longer acceptable for Ukrainians. Russia's loss of Ukraine not only entails territorial and imperial consequences but also deals a blow to its self-identity.

Quest for Identity

The formation of Russian national identity coincided with imperial expansion, blurring the lines between national and imperial interests. Russian identity became intertwined with imperial conquests, leaving little room for developing a distinct national identity, unlike other European nations.

Russian national identity absorbed the ethos of newly conquered territories, shaping the narratives of Russian and Ukrainian ethnic unity and the historical connection of Kyivan Rus to Russian history. Incorporating influences from the Mongols further complicated this narrative. The example of Alexander Nevsky, a key figure in Russian history who obeyed Golden Horde directives against European powers, illustrates this complexity.

The Russian Empire was not unique in lacking a clearly defined titular nation; the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires shared similar traits. The collapse of the imperial system post-World War I led to the disappearance of the Habsburg Empire and the establishment of a modern and secular Turkey by Kemal Ataturk. The Soviet Union, in contrast, evolved into a larger Soviet Empire, further blurring Russian identity. The Soviet Empire further reinforced the belief among Russian “patriots” in Russia’s divine mission on the European continent.

The Soviet Union’s collapse necessitated a redefinition of Russian identity, leading to constructs like the Commonwealth of Independent States, initially launched by three Slavic nations - Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus. However, the newly invented concepts failed to rally former Soviet republics around Russia. New ideas such as “Rising from the Knees,” “Sovereign Democracy,” “Liberal Empire,” “Novoros-

sia,” “Russian World,” or “Spiritual Bonds” sought to redefine Russian identity and provide a new state ideology. The problem, however, is that most of the Russian neighbors, including Ukraine, profoundly disagree with any of the aforementioned common denominators, hence refusing to be “Russian.”

De-Europeanizing Political Culture

Although the Russian Empire was considered mainly a European Empire due to its projection of power in Europe, a European royal family, and a European facade, its governing style differed significantly from European traditions.

Often and unfairly, Russian governing models are called “horde-ish,” referring to the Mongol Golden Horde, which ruled on territories where today’s Russia and Ukraine are located. Andrei Illarionov, a prominent Russian economist, argues that the Russian political governing model is closer to a Sultanate than a more egalitarian Mongol system.

Boyars and Tsars of Muscovy, together with the Byzantine/Nordic governance model of the Kyivan Rus, could not effectively resist the Mongol invasion. Muscovy rulers learned the lesson and invented a fusion of Byzantine traditions (essentially Orthodox Christianity as a source of legitimacy for the Tsar) with governing and

military tactics borrowed from Muslim Khanates they conquered in the south. As Muscovy expanded to old Slavic territories and eventually turned into the Russian Empire, the same governance model was applied to the new territories, with expansion becoming the inherent part of a newly forged identity. As a renowned scholar of Russian/Soviet history, Richard Pipes once [noticed](#), “Russians have difficulty feeling Russian unless they rule others.”

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Russian leaders found it convenient to adopt what Max Weber later called the patrimonial system, under which the tsar and his bureaucracy held all the power and subjects had no rights, only duties. The patrimonial systems strived only in the Russian and Ottoman Empires, both oriental in nature but nowhere else in Europe. Russian rulers felt that Russians needed to rule others to feel genuinely Russian.

Looking at today’s Russia, it is evident that Putin’s system is the purest form of Patrimonialism, where he and his bureaucracy have the power and ability to declare land and the people of the land in servitude to the state, depriving them of the right of independent existence. The “Putin equals

Russia” model is promoted daily by state propaganda, much like the Soviets promoted the “Lenin equals the Party” slogan.

This governance model was attempted in Ukraine in the 1990s but never worked. Public upheavals, such as the Orange Revolution and Euromaidan, highlighted the divergence between the Ukrainian and Russian governance systems and the attitudes of the two peoples to authoritarian rule. Even though plagued by corruption and inefficiencies, the Ukrainian system proved to be different from the Russian “Orthodox Sultanate.”

Religion, an Opioid in the Hands of the Rulers

The Russian Orthodox Church played a significant role in influencing large sections of the population. The “Moscow - the Third Rome” doctrine posited that the Moscow ruler was the universal ruler of Eastern Orthodox nations. This doctrine justified Russia’s conquest of neighboring Christian nations, eradicating their autocephalous Orthodox Churches and imposing Russian Orthodoxy.

This formula was widely employed by Russia during the conquest of neighboring Christian nations (Ukraine and Georgia included), abolishing autocephalies of neighboring Orthodox Churches, eliminating the national church authorities,

and imposing the Russian Church as a determining institution for religious life.

The war in Ukraine led to the split of the Ukrainian Church from its Russian counterpart and the persecution of the Russian Church in Ukraine. The Russian Orthodox Church's alignment with invading forces resulted in bizarre displays of support, including [portraying](#) Joseph Stalin and Vladimir Putin on icons and blessing military equipment.

Even though Russia is primarily considered a state with a predominantly Orthodox Christian population, the number of non-Christian populations is rapidly [growing](#). Religious tolerance remains relevant only as long as it serves the Kremlin's goals. At the same time, regions like Chechnya already enforce their brand of the rule of law – a loose combination of the laws and constitution of Russia fused with the Shariah law. A quick look at the Northern Caucasus republics reveals a drastic [decrease](#) in the ethnic Russian/Slavic population in those republics, resulting in very little (if at all) influence of the Russian Orthodox Church. The same can be said about Siberia, where many Chinese-origin “new” Russian citizens do not care much about any religion.

Asian Geography with European People

While 23% of Russia is in continental Eu-

rope, 78% of its population resides there. The European part boasts the most developed infrastructure, including vital ports like Black Sea ports, Baltic Sea ports, and an Arctic Ocean port in Murmansk. These gateways to global maritime trade necessitate interaction with the West, yet Russia's political choices have skewed it toward the east.

Russia has historically sought to secure “access to the warm seas,” often framed as protecting Orthodox Christianity, a pretext used during the first Crimean War. Not much has changed in Russian political thinking; the new [“justification”](#) for invading Ukraine sounded like a historically tested thesis of “protection of the Russian-speaking population.”

For Russian decision-makers for centuries, a virtual line between St. Petersburg and Rostov-on-Don was a self-imposed defense line connecting Russia to the European Peninsula. Every time Russia had to defend that “line,” it was due to the military invasion of foreign armies, be it Napoleon or Hitler.

For the south, Russian ambitions extended as far as “liberating” Constantinople/Istanbul, requiring control of the North and South Caucasus on roughly several “defense” lines: the closest to the Russian heartland was the Sochi-Makhachkala line, while when Russia ruled the South

Caucasus, the Batumi-Baku line was an important threshold.

Russian expansionist military campaigns against Georgia and Ukraine pushed aside pretentious historical ideological or religious justifications, and occupation forces followed a geographic logic by creating the Sevastopol-Sokhumi line on the occupied territories of both countries.

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Russia’s games with geographic borders and the quest to deter NATO expansion through military campaigns have backfired. Sweden and Finland, two neighbors, have all but joined NATO, while Ukraine stands as Europe’s first line of defense. The old Soviet joke, “Which countries does the Soviet Union have borders with? Whichever it chooses to,” has become one of the defining elements of the modern Russian political psyche and part of the Russian national identity.

It looks like Russia will continue treating geography as it has throughout history, but this time, as the former Prime Minister of Sweden Carl Bildt [noted](#), the profound hubris may yield different results.

Not Anymore the Second Best Military

The Ukrainian resistance has exposed the Russian military’s vulnerabilities and dispelled myths about its strength as the second mightiest military in the world. The losses suffered by the Russian army in terms of personnel and equipment far outweigh any justifiable claimed gains. The failure of Russia’s initial plans is most blatantly evident in Moscow procuring weaponry from Iran and North Korea to sustain the military effort.

Glorified on TV and cartoon-presented “superior” new Russian weapons are “the same old” with little “facelifts” and extras. Most of them were developed during the Soviet times but were ditched as unrealistic or undesired by those times. The “hypersonic” and “unstoppable” Kinzhal missiles are good examples. With the Cold War era Patriot system, Ukrainians managed to [down](#) six of them in one night. Their subsequent closer examination revealed that they were well-known Iskander missiles with modifications.

Specialists of the Soviet military industry often underlined that while theoretical developments of new weapon systems were always happening in Moscow, engineering was almost exclusively Ukrainian. Such a collaboration was still feasible and practiced before the war, but that ship had long left the harbor. Now, Ukrainian engi-

neers exhibit ingenious marvels on their own, adapting complex Western military systems to Soviet-era gear and “testing” them on Russian invaders.

The war further [exposed](#) that all modifications of Russian weaponry were based on electronic components from the West. While smuggling these components is still an option, the proper and scaled production of modernized systems is challenging, let alone considering exporting such systems.

As Ukrainians and Russians closely examine, adapt, and develop countermeasures for each other’s tactics or weapon systems, the rest of the world is also watching and learning. Russian weapons are no longer seen as a desired product for acquisition. Even existing contracts cannot be fully executed due to a shortage of weaponry for the “special military operation,” as Russia labels the war.

At the same time, Chinese weapons, primarily based on Soviet prototypes, are substituting Russian military supplies, further shrinking Russian participation in the world gun trade. As per statistics [provided](#) by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Russia’s portion of worldwide arms exports experienced a decline, dropping from 22% during the period from 2013 to 2017 to 16% from 2018 to 2022. When data for the period from 2023 to 2027 is released, SIPRI

estimates that it will reveal a significant and rapid decline in Russian arms exports.

Eastward-Looking Economy

Russia’s economy has long relied on raw materials, with discussions about diversification ongoing since the Soviet Union’s dissolution. After the invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin anticipated that the West, heavily reliant on Russian energy resources, would eventually return to business as usual despite initial sanctions.

While in absolute numbers, the Russian economy might [look](#) “fine,” a closer examination reveals severe problems with the vector of economic development. Europe [was](#) the primary market for Russian hydrocarbons, corresponding to 45% of its natural gas supplies (155 billion cubic meters). Russia [was](#) also one of the largest suppliers of crude oil (108 million tons), oil products (91 million tons), and nearly 54 million tons of [coal](#), roughly half of European consumption. From today’s perspective, Russia has [lost](#) at least half of its European market and will lose more.

Meanwhile, Russia’s energy exports are diverted to Asia (mainly to China and India), where the price is very far from what the West would offer. For example, Russia is still [struggling](#) to convert USD 30 billion worth of INR (the result of selling oil to India with a significant discount in the local currency) into a more convenient [curren-](#)

cy. China is so far reluctant to finance a second line of the gas pipeline from Russia, called “Sila Sibiry” (Power of [Siberia](#)). The existing pipeline can transport only 15 bcm; ideally, it can reach 38 bcm by 2025. The price for supplied gas paid by China is significantly lower than what the EU countries would pay.

In a nutshell, the Chinese route of the gas trade cannot substitute or even get closer to what Russia has lost by cutting trade with Europe. Regaining trust in Europe will be difficult since trade routes are physically disrupted (exploded and unreparable Nord Stream 2) or used for a reverse supply (part of the Druzhba pipeline through Ukraine). The same fate is shared by Russian airlines, trucking companies, and heavy industry, with the diamond industry in the queue. Products from China and other Oriental countries dominate the Russian market. Even secondary imports of sanctioned Russian goods mostly come from the east.

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As a result of the war against Ukraine, the Russian economy will become further re-oriented to the east with increased dependence on the goodwill or good grace of not-so-democratic states with not-so-market [economies](#).

As British scholar James Sherr accurately observed, Russia is a scary country when viewed from Europe, but it is a declining power from an Asian point of view. Sanctioned by the West, Russian political leadership pivoted to the east, trying to find a sympathetic ear among the “enemies of the West.”

This collaboration, however, increasingly looks like the exploitation of Russian weaknesses for immediate economic benefits by squeezing as many commodity discounts and technologies as possible from sanctioned Russia. The main beneficiaries, like certain Gulf States, China, Turkey, and India, seized the momentum to maximize benefits before eventually risking becoming subjects of secondary Western sanctions.

Turkey now claims that it is having difficulties [banking](#) with Russia. India is [decreasing](#) its purchase of Russian oil due to “difficulties with the sanctioned fleet,” China is supportive verbally but very reluctant practically, and the UAE has started to [impose](#) restrictions on Russian capital. Only North Korea and, to a certain extent, Iran remain unconditional suppliers of military hardware to Russia amid the conflict – not very noble partners for an alleged superpower.

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With its pivot to Asia, the Russian leadership is trying to position itself as a “defender of conservative values” allegedly abandoned by the Western leaders. A lot of emphasis is being placed on anti-LGBTQI+ rhetoric and family values. Almost every month, new scandals [erupt](#) in the West, exposing Russian attempts at cybercrimes, interference in elections, espionage, or just brutal assassinations. Ironically, a big part of the Russian population is concurring with its government’s efforts to be a “spoiler” and a “bad guy,” yet another confusing threat to the unformed national identity.

Putin’s and his circle’s spite for the West is grounded not on “too many cheats and unfulfilled promises” as alleged by the Russian leadership but on the nature of the Russian state with robust features of Patrimonialism, unacceptable and incomprehensible for liberal democracies. Putin may temporarily feel welcomed by the Eastern powers, but eventually, he will drive Russia into servitude to the China-dominated east.

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In 1853, Russian Tsar Nicholas I called the Ottoman Empire a “sick man of Europe,” a term widely used to describe the demise and crumbling of a once-great power. It looks like Russia’s war against Ukraine and the West is turning Russia into a “sick man of Asia.”

Implications for Georgia

Russia’s transformation into a “sick man of Asia” also holds consequences for Georgia. A more European Russia would offer a cooperative partner for discussions, while “Asian Russia” would impose its governance, economy, security, and religious values on its periphery.

Georgia’s political system mirrors Russia’s patrimonial model, with a single individual and their cronies exercising total control. However, Georgia’s Orthodox Church still wields influence, differentiating it from Russia. Further Russian influence will also damage the Church’s authority and isolate it from mainstream European Orthodox autocephalies.

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As Russia distances itself from the West, Georgia’s efforts to follow or pivot toward China are shortsighted and contradict its

declared national interests. At this stage, Georgia's alignment with China remains mostly talk. While the Georgian government may try to mimic Russia in this regard, China cannot offer the economic, political, and security benefits the EU/NATO integration can, no matter how many strategic documents the two countries co-sign. Therefore, for the Georgian government, there is no real alternative to the EU and NATO integration.

Further, the EU remains the only stable and predictable market for Georgia, similar to what the EU was for Russia. Despite Georgia's increasing [trade](#) with Russia, the Russian market will always be volatile for Georgian exports, and if Georgian companies want to find markets in Asia, they must do so without Russian intermediaries and Moscow's support.

Short-sighted and short-lived economic benefits caused by the influx of Russian capital and people due to the invasion of Ukraine exhausted themselves and most likely will instigate the reverse effect. Already, more Russians [left](#) Georgia than entered in 2023.

If Georgia remains over-dependent on hostile Russia, it will risk undermining the full realization of Georgia's valuable transit potential from east to west and potentially from south to north – a possibility that might have a new window of opportunity after the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue by Azerbaijan. Attempts to align with Beijing might not help.

If Russia remains confused about its identity and state borders, Georgia will remain in the dangerous zone as long as it is not adequately integrated into the EU and NATO. “Confused” Asia-leaning Russia will eventually be circling a Sino-centric orbit. Therefore, the fundamental down-the-road decision for Georgia will be either a part of the Western world or the Sino-Soviet world with corresponding governance systems, economic models, and value systems.

Georgia's history and firm European identity provide a straightforward answer to this question – the EU over Russia and the West over the East. ■