

## A Very Ambiguous Empire

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DOI:

[10.1080/09668136.2017.1412398](https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2017.1412398)

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*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Oskanian, K 2018, 'A Very Ambiguous Empire: Russia's Hybrid Exceptionalism', *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 70, no. 1, pp. 26-52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2017.1412398>

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First checked and validated 25/8/2016

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## A Very Ambiguous Empire: Russia's Hybrid Exceptionalism

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July 2016

## Introduction

Western (and, in fact, Russian) academic debates on Russia's identity are nothing new. After the end of the Cold War, they experienced something of a revival; and the coming to power of Putin further intensified both research and informed speculation on the Kremlin's view of its place in the world (see, for example Blum, 2008; Chafetz, 1996; Hopf, 2002; Kassianova, 2001; Neumann, 1996; Tolz, 1998; Tsygankov and Tarver-Wahlquist, 2009; Tsygankov, 2013). During the 1990s, Russia was marked by precipitous decline through multiple centrifugal forces, economic crises, and political uncertainty, its great power status precariously preserved thanks to its nuclear arsenal and a United Nations veto. By contrast, for most of the past decade, Moscow has displayed a renewed assertiveness both within 'its' immediate vicinity and the wider world, demonstrated by the war in Georgia, its more recent annexation of the Crimea, and its hybrid intervention in Eastern Ukraine; questions as to its elite's, and wider society's world-view have thus gained in importance both inside and outside the narrow circle of academia.

One such question relates to Russia's view of its role in its 'Near Abroad' - as it has called the fellow republics of the former Soviet Union since the latter's implosion in 1991 - or, more formally, its 'sphere of privileged interest', a term especially emphasised following the August 2008 Russian-Georgian war (Clover, 2008). Around 2002-3, some scholars, perhaps rather prematurely, proclaimed the acceptance by Moscow of the fragmentation of this traditional zone of influence into sovereign, independent states (Buszynsky, 2003), of Western involvement within it (Stent and Shevtsova, 2002), or of an albeit tenuous 'Western choice' in its foreign and security policies (Baev, 2003). Put mildly, over the past decade, a slew of long-term processes and shorter-term events have put this view in serious doubt. Putin's military interventions in Georgia and Ukraine provide ample evidence of Moscow's determination to prevent Western encroachment into the region, overriding its neighbours' preferences; and his *Eurasian Union* is seen by many observers and commentators as an attempt to re-constitute a 21<sup>st</sup>-century informal version of the various, Russian-led empires and hegemonies that straddled this geo-political space (Gvosdev, 2012; Shevtsova, 2014; Voloshin, 2012).

As I shall argue below, these dominant - or domineering - foreign policy behaviours should not be seen as a free-standing temporary quirk, resulting solely from the Putin regime's specific ideological

proclivities. Instead, contemporary Russia's hierarchical world-view is sustained by a long-standing power-knowledge nexus similar – but not identical - to the one identified by Edward Said (1985b, 1994) in the unequal relations between 'West' and 'East'. In fact, the long-term discourses underlying Russia's foreign and security policies, both at an official and a wider societal level, contain implicit – and sometimes explicit – justifications of hierarchy through claims of Russian superiority' in a specific civilizational sphere with a 'shared history' – the 'near abroad'.

Such imperial narratives and practices are rooted in elements of both its predecessor states – the Romanov Empire and the Soviet Union – but adapted to the post-colonial conditions of 21<sup>st</sup> century International Society, where 'naked' imperialism remains anathema. Particularly when it comes to relations between Moscow and its historic 'Eastern' dominions in the Caucasus and Central Asia, these discourses are recognisably 'orientalist', mimicking the Western narratives superiority over a 'degenerate' Orient identified by Said. But in Moscow's case, these narratives are accompanied by a specific, simultaneous dissociation from the West: Russia's present leaders tap into a vast reservoir of historic cultural ambiguity in denying the agency and cultural authenticity (or *samobytnost*) of both their 'irrational' *oriental* and pro-Western *occidental* subalterns. These attitudes have a long history in Russia, and their recurrence in different guises over two centuries points to their longer-term staying power in the contemporary era.

Echoing others who have described Russia as 'hybrid' (Morozov, 2013; Turoma and Waldstein, 2013), I shall refer to these contemporary Russian discourses and practices of hierarchy as 'hybrid exceptionalism'. Denoting the driving ideology, the hegemonic ideational superstructure underwriting Moscow's imperial identity since the time of the Romanovs, 'exceptionalism' refers to the civilising projects pursued by Russia's various incarnations (Czarist, Soviet, contemporary) – whose variability cloaked an almost unbroken consistency in its narratives of Empire. Meanwhile, 'hybridity' points to Russia's above-mentioned liminal position between East and West, and the current Russian elite's tendency to combine historical elements of the various iterations of empire with contemporary hierarchical discourses, drawn from liberal economic rationality and interventionism. Taken together, these two aspects allow one to, on the one hand, discern specifically Russian, non-Western

orientalising ‘discourses of Empire’, and, on the other hand, identify elements of continuity – despite of wildly differing ideological contexts – over two centuries.<sup>1</sup>

The following sections will expand on this theme of ‘hybrid exceptionalism’; the first will unpack the concept by placing it within theoretical scholarship on empire and hierarchy, and linking it with Russia’s specific conditions. Three empirical sections will subsequently provide a genealogy of Russia’s discourses of alterity and hierarchy, and their interaction with Czarist, Soviet and contemporary practices of empire. The ‘hybrid exceptionalism’ of Romanov Russia will be apparent in an imperial discourse that justified the subjugation of and control over subaltern peoples in the West and the East, in the latter case accompanied by cultural narratives and scientific practices that were identifiably *orientalist*. Similarly, the Soviet Union’s civilising mission at the vanguard of socialism will be seen to display a remarkable continuity in its Russian-centred hybridity, after a brief (and quite exceptional) ‘nativist’ interlude in the early years of the Soviet Union. The final empirical section will combine the insights on both Romanov and Soviet ‘hybrid exceptionalism’ with an analysis of Russia’s contemporary hierarchical narratives and policies. While each of these periods will, inevitably, have their temporally and ideologically specific characteristics, the underlying theme of continuity will

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<sup>1</sup> Many of these points would appear to equate this *hybrid exceptionalism* with the neo-Eurasianist ideologies that have emerged in Russia following the fall of the Soviet Union, placing Russia in a proper civilizational area, between Europe and Asia (Ingram, 2001; Kerr, 1995; Laruelle, 2012); both are, however, conceptually distinct. In sum, hybrid exceptionalism is an implied *meta-narrative* broadly capturing the entanglement of discourse and power in the former Soviet Space; Eurasianism, by contrast, is a much narrower category, an explanatory and prescriptive ideology *explicitly* formulated by a certain number of individuals, forming part of a much broader and longer-term power/knowledge nexus. Hybrid exceptionalism has been and is expressed in a number forms – Orthodox Christian messianism, imperialism, Marxist-Leninist determinism, neo-liberal interventionism/economism, and Eurasianism: all of these are philosophically at times antithetical discourses that share but one aspect, namely the hegemonic reproduction of hierarchical practices between St. Petersburg/Moscow and ‘the rest’ through their naturalisation and reification.

emerge through the adapted use of both Tsarist and Soviet tropes and practices within the Kremlin's, and wider Russian society's orientalisising and hierarchical, civilizational and civilising world-views.

### Introducing 'Hybrid Exceptionalism'

Claiming an imperial continuity between entities as diverse as Czarist Russia, the Soviet Union, and the Russian Federation might, at first glance, seem fraught with problems. Under the Romanovs, far from being a source of stigma and illegitimacy, 'empire' entailed a measure of prestige and status in International Society; and few would hesitate to apply it and ascribe an unashamedly hierarchical world-view to the expansionist, autocratic Russian state of the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Lieven, 1995, p. 607). Applying the term to the Marxist-Leninist – and avowedly 'anti-imperialist' – USSR is more problematic, but only just so: the Soviet Union was routinely called an 'empire' or 'colonialist' (see Hirsch, 2005; T. Martin, 2001a; D. T. Northrop, 2004; Rusinko, 2003; Skandrij, 2001; Suny and Martin, 2001; Verdery, 2002), but merely *after* its various minorities had started to agitate against the centre, as pointed out by Beissinger (2005).<sup>2</sup> The collapse of the erstwhile superpower muddied the waters even further: the formal sovereign equality of the various successor states, Russia's post-Soviet identity crisis, and the stigma attached to empire and hierarchy in the post-imperial/post-colonial era made applying these concepts to the former Soviet Union far from straightforward, as apparent in several roundtables published on the issue (e.g. Collier et al., 2003; Spivak et al., 2006).

Much depends on the demarcation of the concept of 'empire': indeed, if, following Watson (1992, p. 16), one takes a restrictive definition and takes a legalistic or formal approach – defining empire as the 'direct administration of different communities from an imperial centre', the former Soviet space most certainly does *not* qualify, especially if one takes Russia's statements as to its respect for the sovereign equality of its neighbours at face value. At the same time, 'empire' is a multi-faceted term, whose

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<sup>2</sup> Territorial contiguity, the relative legitimacy of late Soviet Communism, the mostly unchallenged dominance of Russian language and culture, lack of information on disruptive domestic events, and the anti-colonialist nature of the Soviet Union's ideology/rhetoric conspired to keep issues related to the hierarchical control of subaltern ethnic groups firmly in the background for most of its history (Mark R. Beissinger, 2005, pp. 27-33).

meaning has expanded considerably from a strictly legal-international context. This expansion started in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when writers like Hobson (1902), Lenin (1916) and Schumpeter (1951) employed the term in a socio-economic – rather than formal-legalistic - vein. In the broader contemporary literature, a plethora of writers - working from Liberal and various Marxian or Gramscian traditions – have further developed the concept to include de-facto political hierarchies, structural material factors, and more subtle ideological mechanisms of domination and control that allow discourses to camouflage fundamentally unequal, informal contemporary imperial practices (Doyle, 1986; Galtung, 1971; Hardt and Negri, 2001; Keene, 2002; Wallerstein, 1984). From their perspective, the question becomes not so much whether hierarchy exists as a positive, readily apparent *legal* norm, but whether it is – often surreptitiously - reproduced through iniquitous structures, hegemonic ideologies, and/or practices of domination and resistance.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> From such a broader, empirical perspective, various writers – including Beissinger and Suny - *have* already described both the USSR and contemporary Russia as ‘empires’. Beissinger thus employs a relational, intersubjective view of the concept, as a “situation in which claims to being subject to imperial control grow widespread, gather weight, and become increasingly hegemonic” (Mark R. Beissinger, 2005, p. 20). The status of the Soviet Union and Russia as empires thus emerges from their imposition of *informal* mechanisms of control onto ostensibly unwilling subjects – and this approach takes full account of the pejorative connotations to the term (Mark R Beissinger, 2008). Suny takes a rather broad view, defining ‘imperialism’ (“the building and maintenance of empires”) as ‘the deliberate act or policy that furthers a state’s extension or maintenance for the purpose of aggrandizement of that kind of direct or indirect political or economic control over any other inhabited territory that involves the inequitable treatment of those inhabitants in comparison with its own citizens or subjects’ (Suny, 2001, p. 25). What is clear from both approaches is the extent to which these unequal relations must nowadays be obfuscated and surreptitious, in light of the formal legal and moral equality of polities and populations; but the question emerges as to how such inequality continued to be reproduced despite of the clearly negative attitudes towards ‘empire’ and ‘imperialism’ in today’s post-colonial international society and, earlier, the nominally ‘anti-imperialist’ USSR.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (MacFie, 2000; 1985b) is perhaps the best-known of the ideational approaches to the issue of informally, culturally reproduced empire and hierarchy. Said's broad attack on 'orientalist' narratives underpinning European colonialism in effect employed a Foucaultian hermeneutical approach, a broadly critical 'archaeology of knowledge' (Foucault, 2012), incorporating two distinct lines of attack (Said, 1985b, pp. 201-25): on the one hand, it dissected deeply held *cultural* prejudices underlying the construction of a 'barbaric, Asiatic East' as the other of the 'civilised, European West', in what he referred to as 'latent orientalism'. His second line of attack was more specifically aimed at the 'manifest' orientalism of the formal scientific study of the 'Orient' that emerged during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, very much in parallel to the colonisation of increasingly extensive territories in the Islamic East.

Far from being of merely historic significance, such discourses were seen to feed into *contemporary* societal attitudes towards the Middle East and, more broadly, the global South, remaining clearly visible in the discourse and practice of today's policymakers and scholars (Said, 1985b, pp. 284-354; 1994, pp. 341-408). A significant body of work has thus emerged relevant to International Relations, studying the contemporary effects of both latent and manifest orientalism on issues as diverse as Western foreign policy (Little, 2008), contemporary representations of the Middle East and Islam in the media (Bernstein and Studlar, 1997; Rane et al., 2010), their roles in shaping the narratives on terrorism in the post-9/11 world (Dabashi, 2009; Morton, 2007; Salaita, 2006), and, more generally, the (neo-)liberal division between the civilised 'self' and the un-civilised 'other'. Each of these studies lays out the role of discourse in excusing and normalising unequal power, and, ultimately, informal variants of empire, following or assisted by the methodology pioneered by Said.

The contemporary norms of international society preclude a formal, legal recognition of direct imperial or colonial domination and ambition; empires in this 19<sup>th</sup>-century sense of the word are non-existent. The advantage of a 'Saidian' postcolonial analysis lies precisely in its ability to uncover the structures of domination that lie implicit in the assumptions that underlie what Foucault (1991) would have referred to as the 'governmentalities' of the dominant. Both these aspects of discourse were instrumental in legitimising the manifold practices sustaining unequal relations between West and East in the past, and, in fact, between North and South in the present. Said's central contribution was

positing 'empire' and (neo-)colonial domination as a complex of reified hegemonic discourses reproducing the hierarchical relations between (former) colonisers and colonised: in his words, '...neither imperialism nor colonialism are simple acts of accumulation and acquisition. Both are supported and perhaps even impelled by impressive ideological formations that include notions that certain territories and people *require* and beseech domination' (Said, 1994, p. 8). Crucially, his approach allowed the scholar to pierce through the appearances upheld by established narratives to uncover the unequal relations they enabled and legitimised.

Can Orientalism be applied as readily to Russia (in its various historical forms) as to the West? In his lifetime, Said left the orientalisng tendencies of the Soviet Union (and its imperial predecessor state) largely unaddressed, a blind spot for which he was criticised by his detractors, notably Bernard Lewis (1982). In contemporary, broader Saidian scholarship, attention has thus far overwhelmingly focused on the Tsarist period, its 'orientalisms' analysed mostly by historians, anthropologists and Russicists like Layton (1994, 1997), Jersild (2002), Schimmelpenninck van der Oye (2010) and others (see Cronin, 2015). Russia's ambiguous position between East and West has been partly responsible for scholars' reluctance to analyse its discourses of Empire in a Saidian vein; its status as a territorial – rather than overseas – empire also to some extent cloaked the colonial nature of its practices and ideologies. These ambiguities have already generated some debate on whether the Romanov empire could truly count as an 'orientaliser', particularly among historians (see Adeeb, 2000; Knight, 2000a, 2000b; Todorova, 2000). That debate was answered with a qualified 'yes': it was indeed possible to analyse the orientalism of the Tsars, *provided one took account of Russia's specificity, its liminal position between East and West*, its affinity with, and foreignness from both orient and occident.

This paper's central concept - 'hybrid exceptionalism' – is aimed at extending the same cautious, adapted view of *orientalism* towards the Soviet Union and contemporary Russia. Following Said's view of 'empire' as a complex of narratives and attendant practices reproducing structures of domination, rather than formal legal arrangements or overt ideological claims, it sheds light on two continuous aspects in Czarist, Soviet and contemporary hierarchical Russian relations with 'its backyard'. The first – 'exceptionalism' – links into to broader Saidian scholarship by referring to narratives that justify the hierarchical imposition of social (and, later, international) order and control

on subject peoples through a series of civilising missions. The second – ‘hybridity’ – accounts for Russia’s specificity by acknowledging its long-term position between ‘East’ and ‘West’, as an empire that, in contrast to its Western counterparts, was both ‘orientaliser’ and ‘orientalised’, in its three iterations. In the process, ‘hybrid exceptionalism’ allows the view of Moscow as a fundamentally imperial power to survive the glaring discontinuities in its history – the 1917 revolution, the fall of the USSR, placing the skewed symbiotic relationship between metropole and periphery within a ‘longue durée’ analysis.<sup>4</sup>

As pointed out in the introduction, over the past two centuries, Russia has justified its dominance over imperial subjects through three distinct civilising missions. The first defined Tsarist Russia as distinct from the West – in spite of its selective adoption of elements of Western modernity - but superior to the Orient because of its Orthodox Christianity and its *partially* European identity. The second applied a Marxist – and therefore distinctly Western – ‘civilising mission’ onto often unwilling non-Russian subjects, while at the same time remaining distinct from, and hostile to, a capitalist West. The third has

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<sup>4</sup> This approach begs two questions: firstly, as to as to the meaning of ‘civilisation’ – and, consequently, ‘civilising mission’ – within its ‘exceptionalism’; and, secondly, as to the nature of the ‘East’/‘West’ distinction implied within the concept’s ‘hybridity’. One important point of departure is the discursive – and, hence, intersubjective - nature of both these two central elements: rather than being objectively defined ‘givens’ – as they would be under a positivist epistemology – they feature as here as *tropes* and *assumptions* within the discourses and practices of Russia’s elites, and its broader society. As such, ‘civilisation’ therefore refers to implicit or explicit *claims* of cultural specificity made by the metropole regarding itself and its periphery, often accompanied by a tendency to impose culturally specific norms onto that periphery through a ‘civilising mission’. Similarly, ‘East’ and ‘West’ do not feature as objective categories – in fact, Edward Said (1985a, pp. 89-91) warned against their reification into a static, simplistic binary – but as elements within Russia’s narratives: the question is not so much where Moscow is situated in the complex space between Orient and Occident, *but where it places itself within it* – as would have to be expected considering the strongly poststructuralist slant within Saidian/Foucaultian analysis.

nowadays adopted elements of the two preceding imperial projects to justify dominion over a distinct sphere of cultural, political and economic influence, adapting elements of contemporary liberalism to its hierarchical needs. But while the substance of Russia's subsequent civilizational claims may have changed, their role in reproducing imperial, hierarchical world-views has remained constant, much like in the case of 'the West and the rest' (where Said himself traced such claims back as far as to ancient Greece). It is to the hybridity and exceptionalism of the first of Russia's three imperial manifestations – under late Tsarism – that I now turn.

### Hybrid Exceptionalism under the Romanovs

The 'hybrid exceptionalism' of Tsarist Russia was based on its centuries-old position between East and West, and emphasised different elements as the empire transitioned into modernity. As a central pre-modern marker of identity, Orthodox Christianity was perhaps the most important – and oldest – element in Russia's various pre-revolutionary civilising missions. Interactions with the Western enlightenment then saw the emergence of more modern, secular features within its imperial 'power-knowledge nexus' during the 19<sup>th</sup> century: Russia's *mission civilisatrice* first shifted towards enabling forms of ethnic authenticity compatible with the imperial project – among others through the application of modern sciences and administrative methods – before the emergence of nationalism and mass politics encouraged a greater emphasis on outright *Russification* during the final decades of Romanov rule. All three elements – Orthodoxy, authenticity, and Russification – helped Russians to carve out a distinct civilizational space for their particular version of empire, one that, like its Western counterparts, argued superiority over the East, while at the same time maintaining a distance from the West.

Christian Orthodoxy interacted with Russian empire in various ways over three centuries of the Romanovs' reign, not least by providing ideological justifications for territorial expansion and facilitating mechanisms for elite co-optation that emphasised its difference from both the Islamic East and Catholic/Protestant/Enlightened West. Russia's expansion into Siberia in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the colonisation of its 'terrae nullius' by Slavic migrants were accompanied by widespread proselytising among its native inhabitants (Lincoln, 1994; A. Wood, 2011a). Orthodox Christianity also featured heavily in its justifications for its genocidal campaigns in the North Caucasus in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, and its expansionist policies in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Not

without a considerable degree of imperial self-interest, Orthodoxy also allowed Russia to portray itself as the natural protector of the - overwhelmingly Orthodox - Christian minorities in the Ottoman Empire, over and above the non-Orthodox - and therefore alien – West.<sup>5</sup>

More importantly, Orthodoxy had long enabled the co-opting conquered elites into the empire's mechanisms of control, not least by encouraging their conversion to the Russian Orthodox faith. This is how large sections of the Tatar nobility were incorporated into the Russian ruling class following Muscovy's conquest of Kazan; and even if the Polish and Georgian aristocracies had at first been given special privileges and allowed to maintain their religious and cultural specificity after their incorporation into the empire, a move into the highest reaches of the Empire's ruling bureaucratic-aristocratic elite still required conversion to the Russian Orthodox faith (Kappeler, 2001; Rhineland, 1975; Thaden, 1984, pp. 63-80). Following the 1830 and 1863 Polish uprisings, pressure on the Polish (and German Baltic) nobility to convert to this marker of non-Western, Russian civilisation was increased substantially – and Orthodoxy's upholding of the dividing lines between the Empire and the West's 'Jesuitical' Catholicism became especially salient (Kappeler, 2004; Weeks, 2001).

But as modernity slowly crept into the socio-economic and intellectual fabrics of the Empire, more secular cultural and scientific narratives came to complement these *religious* justifications of expansion and domination. The Polish uprisings, Imam Shamil's Caucasian wars, and the failure of proselytising and immigration into overwhelmingly Muslim Central Asia and the Caucasus<sup>6</sup> pointed to the failure of

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<sup>5</sup> As characteristically stated in one 1815 memorandum, '[T]he emperor is the natural protector of Christians of the Greek Oriental rite placed under Ottoman domination [...] All the stipulations with the Porte bestow on him the right to watch over the maintenance of their prerogatives in several parts of the Ottoman empire, and the emperor of Russia exercises that [right] of protecting them actively in placing them under his immediate jurisdiction through the services of his agents' (quoted in Jelavich, 1991, p. 22).

<sup>6</sup> Russia similarly allowed Muslim Caucasian and Central Asian tribal leaders to maintain a considerable degree of autonomy in return for submission to Russian imperial authority during the first

traditional methods in providing cohesion; alongside the gradual emergence of nationalism and mass politics, and a related push towards administrative modernisation in the latter half of the century, this led to more intrusive – and secular - forms of imperial governance. The Tsars and their administrators could no longer rely on (now discernibly undependable) co-opted elites and their dynastic or religious allegiances; they had to directly address the *ethno-linguistic* or *religious* loyalties of broader segments of their subaltern populations, in both West and East. By the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the authorities decided on actively integrating these subject populations into the Empire through a hodgepodge of policies, including the promotion of ‘authentic’, scientifically managed national cultures in ways compatible with their imperial project, and the linguistic, and the more pre-modern religious Russification of populations and/or territories.

In keeping with the ‘hybrid exceptionalist’ imperative to justify dominion in both directions, this phase of Russia’s civilising mission was formulated slightly differently in East and West. In the West, it was, of course, difficult to argue that Poles or German Balts – with their established Western cultures, looked up to by at least parts of Russian society - were in need of ‘civilisation’ – policies therefore centred on their conversion to Orthodoxy, as outlined above; but other peoples – like the Lithuanians –

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decades of its forays into these regions (Khodarkovsky, 2011, pp. 7-21). The Caucasus’ genocidal pacification through a well-documented scorched-earth campaign starting in the 1840s (Brooks, 1995) were followed by (largely unsuccessful) efforts at Russifying the lands forcibly vacated by the Northwest Caucasian tribes through the migration of ‘loyal’ Slavic and non-Slavic Christian settlers, something also attempted (equally unsuccessfully) in the Central Asian ‘colonial frontier’ (Clem, 1992). Imperial policy also came to attempt the active conversion of local peoples to Orthodox Christianity, their incorporation into the mystical, orthodox spiritual fabric of the empire through the imposition of theological and ritual uniformity, as had been the case in earlier centuries, in Siberia (Geraci, 2001, pp. 86-115). These efforts, among others, encompassed the many Caucasian tribes that, while nominally Christian, practiced a syncretic mix of Paganism, Christianity and Islam (Gnolidze-Swanson, 2003; A. Jersild, 2002, pp. 36-58), while largely omitting the more straightforwardly Muslim populations of Tatarstan and Central Asia.

lacked a written language, and Russia's imperial administrators made sure that any attempts to provide them with this element of civilisation would occur on their terms, for instance by banning use of the Western – Latin script in favour of Cyrillic. Elsewhere, this emphasis on 'authenticity' implied a denial of the specificity of non-Russian Eastern Slavs – Belorussians ('White Russians'), Ukrainians ('Little Russians'): both their languages were banned from public written use, while their respective cultures were to be cleansed of 'artificial' Polish and Catholic influences in favour of their 'authentic' Russian and Orthodox roots (Saunders, 1995; Staliūnas, 2004, 2007). According to Shkandrij (2001, p. 161), in Ukraine's case, '[a] serviceable history, anthropology, and ethnography had, therefore, to be developed out of the denial of difference': Russian empire came to define itself as a guardian or enabler of authenticity, and made sure that – through adaptation or assimilation – any emerging mass cultures would fit into the broader fabric of its society.<sup>7</sup>

This secular civilising mission, including Russia's role of 'enabler', came into even clearer relief during and following the incorporation of the Caucasus and Central Asia into the Empire during the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Baddeley, 2013; Breyfogle, 2005; Pierce, 1960). In broader culture, Russia's imperial governance was justified through a 'latent orientalist' cultural output, where Russia's ambiguous position variably legitimised its overall superiority – and necessary rule - over 'its' colonised 'Orient'. Culturally - as extensively documented by Layton (1994) - from the very beginning of Russia's Oriental entanglements, subjugated regions like the Caucasus became part of the Empire's cultural imagination, first through the works of its still-revered poet, Alexander Pushkin (Hokanson, 1994), and subsequently through the oeuvre of literary greats (like Lermontov and Tolstoy) and writers of what we would nowadays refer to as 'pulp fiction'. With a few exceptions, including parts of Lermontov's oeuvre (Scotto, 1992) and the older Tolstoy's (1996, pp. 7-14) highly critical Haji-Murat - much of this

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<sup>7</sup> The rather conflicting nature of the resultant policies led one Interior Minister to comment in 1864: '[There is a] contradiction between acknowledging the area as quite Russian and historically Russian ... and the subsequent measures. If it is acceptable to act like this in a Russian region, what would we do in a non-Russian one? [...] But how can one introduce the Russian element into a region that is already Russian?' (as quoted in Dolbilov, 2004, p. 249).

early Russian literary treatment of conquered lands and peoples functioned as a justifying metaphor for Russian imperial domination in ways paralleling the East's treatment in the Western 'orientalist' literature surveyed by Said.

The emerging scientific approach to the study of oriental peoples – Said's 'manifest orientalism' – similarly justified practices that denied the agency and rationality of the subjugated, and shaped them in ways befitting their imperial masters' civilizational design: just as in its Western colonial counterparts, the emerging disciplines of ethnography, linguistics and archaeology became tightly interlinked in Russia's imperial rule (A. Jersild, 2002). In that sense, the emergence of orientalist-scientific ethnography in the Russian Empire followed a broadly Western pattern, and a familiar Western orientalisating logic in its combination with imperial administrative practice (A. Jersild, 2002, pp. 110-25): the Caucasians' and Central Asians' traditional legal frameworks were studied, catalogued, and adapted to the requirements of Russian imperial rule, while the history and language of the 'orientals' were redefined on distinctly imperial terms.<sup>8</sup> Needless to say, these efforts often led to essentialist outcomes, doing away with subtle variation and the hybridity of various Caucasian and Central Asian cultures; essentialist outcomes which – so the imperial administrators hoped – would conform to more modern forms amenable to integration into an autocratic empire (Brower, 1997; A. L. Jersild, 1997).

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<sup>8</sup> In places like the Caucasus, Russians (and Russianised local elites) were very much involved in devising written languages for the largely illiterate tribes under their control, in an effort to facilitate their march towards 'civilisation', with the Georgians very much doing the same for 'their' own 'mountain' kinsmen (Manning, 2008). In addition, with the help of ethnographers, imperial administrators – initially at least – codified and systematised the application of 'adat' – the non-Islamic, tribal forms of jurisprudence of Eurasian Muslim peoples – and integrated it into the broader imperial judicial system, partly in an effort to displace the role of Sharia, or Islamic law – closely associated with Imam Shamil's Murid (Sufi) rebels – in these societies (Kisriev and Ware, 2006; Mostashari, 2001). Similar efforts were applied to the tribal and linguistic groups of Central Asia.

But, as argued by Schimmelpenninck Van Der Oye (2010), there was a crucial difference in nuance between Western and Russian oriental studies, in that the Russian school tended to place itself closer to 'its' subject-matter. From the beginning, the 'othering' of the East was not as pronounced and absolute as that seen in the West: in fact, Russia's special affinity with the East, its *hybridity* was argued by a slew of Russian 'orientalists' to give them an advantage in 'understanding the oriental'. In the words of one such early orientalist-administrator, Andrei Snesev:

The conquest of Asia was cruel and boorish, particularly in the areas where the purer representatives of Europe came into contact with the local population. Our [Russian] mode of conquest was distinguished by its soft, subdued approach. Thanks to the long presence of Turko-Mongol-Finnish peoples, both on our territory and in the neighborhood, [and] our familiarity with their world and their way of life, we appeared neither arrogant nor disdainful during our conquest, and we differed little from the nations we conquered (as quoted in Volkov, 2015, pp. 695-96).

The implication was that the Russian Empire likewise had a civilisational advantage and augmented legitimacy over its Western counterparts in lording over its various 'oriental' peoples.

Russia's emphasis on 'managing authenticity' did not last long, in either West or East, as Russia's imperial policies switched to outright *Russification* as state policy during the final decades of Romanov rule, influenced by the strengthening of nationalist movements in the West – Poland, Finland, the Baltic nations – their emergence among larger Oriental ethnic groups – the Georgians, Armenians, Caucasian Tatars – and the creation of the reformist Islamic Jadidist movement in Central Asia: in the East, it led to the abolition of the traditional laws and administrative mechanisms which had previously been incorporated into imperial rule. Throughout the Empire, it led to the more vigorous imposition of the Russian language through education, rather than the previous 'enabling' of hitherto illiterate cultures. Civilisation was now more straightforwardly defined as homogenous *assimilation* into a supreme, distinct Russian culture. Late Romanov Russia's 'civilising project' thus became clearly discernible as one of direct, top-down *cultural* imposition, an approach that was only partially and temporarily brought to an end in the revolution of 1917 (Kappeler, 2001, pp. 283-327; Weeks, 1996).

Under the Romanovs, 'hybrid exceptionalism' was clearly visible in the variety of civilising projects that placed Russia, ever so ambiguously, between East and West; and at the end of the Romanov period, hybrid exceptionalism had come to stress 'Russification' as its civilising project. But regardless of whether its religious, cultural and scientific justifications resulted in an imposition of Christian Orthodoxy, the manufactured and self-serving 'authenticities' of subject peoples, or modernity-through-Russification, they always were meant to reinforce Russia's leading role in its 'sphere of influence'. Russia's ambiguous position, between East and West, enhanced this claim to supremacy. Where Russia was seen as part of civilised Europe, it could be described as the bringer of Western enlightenment to the orient, in broader Western orientalist style; where it was perceived as more distant from the West, its greater affinity with the Orient could be put forward as an argument in favour of its enhanced ability to 'understand' and therefore manage and civilise the East, while also constructing Western – nationalist, non-Russian - notions of modernity as 'alien' and hostile in its Western dominions. Either way, the leading role of the heirs of Muscovy over the Eurasian landmass – from Warsaw to Vladivostok - was presented as entirely justified. As we shall see in the next section, the Bolshevik revolution would now come to challenge many aspects of these imperial discourses; but these challenges to empire would only prove partial and temporary.

### Hybrid Exceptionalism and the Commissars

The Bolshevik revolution should have heralded a radical break with this 'hybrid exceptionalist' civilising project of the Tsarist empire. And, indeed, at its inception, the Soviet Union defined itself *against* the imperial nature of its Russian predecessor state, rejecting 'Great Russian chauvinism' in favour of the emancipatory national consciousness of subject peoples. This early Bolshevik challenge to empire would, however, remain quite partial and temporary: minorities would still come to be seen within the context of a civilizational project that, while radically secular, modern, and avowedly anti-imperialist, still implied a developmental hierarchy, managing and shaping minorities for its purposes through de-facto colonial practices that echoed some of the Romanov empire's. As remarked by one student of Soviet policies in the Baltics:

Soviet ideology, together with totalitarian practice and colonial ideologies, created a complex fusion, whereby Soviet, colonial and totalitarian features merged, whereby

communism signified colonialism, and whereby the colonial regime was enforced by totalitarian measures (Annus, 2012, p. 39).

Through the veil of a vastly different ideological context, continuities with the hybrid exceptionalism of Tsarist Russia could still be clearly discerned: like Christian Orthodoxy, Marxism-Leninism was an ideological peculiarity which enabled the imposition of a civilising project on often unwilling subjects in both West and East; through its nationalities policy, the USSR still laid claim to the ‘authenticities’ of its various peoples in ways compatible with that civilising project; and when Russian nationalism was partially rehabilitated under Stalin, the position of the *Russians* and *Russian culture* at the head of this ambiguous civilizational project – Western, *but not quite* – was once again restored.

The USSR’s liminal position between East and West was reinforced through its ideological and socio-economic peculiarity. Marxism-Leninism was a product of the Western enlightenment, while at the same time providing an element of radical difference from the capitalist – or fascist - West. At the same time, Marxist-Leninist Orthodoxy justified a civilising mission over a ‘backward’ East, while allowing for closer identification with that very East: the Soviet Union’s mission was as much the Orient’s liberation from its own retrograde traditions, as from the malevolent imperialism of pre-revolutionary Russia, and the West. These claims took on an international dimension following World War Two and de-colonisation, when the USSR styled itself a guardian of Marxism-Leninism in Central and Eastern Europe, and the proponent of emancipation in the global South. Like its imperial Russian predecessor, the Soviet Union found itself laying claim to an orthodoxy – albeit one of a radically secular kind; and once again, that orthodoxy lay at the centre of a civilizational project that profiled itself in two directions: against the capitalist nature of the West, and the backwardness of the traditional East.

This civilizational project also displayed parallels with the hybrid exceptionalism of Tsarist Russia in its creation of 'authentic' and compatible forms of nationhood.<sup>9</sup> Soviet Nationalities' Policy's ultimate aim was the inevitable voluntary 'fusion' (*zliyanie*) of all the USSR's peoples into one single socialist nation, the transformation of all citizens, regardless of ethnicity, into the *homo Sovieticus*; but to that end, the Soviet Union's various peoples would first have to be shaped and moulded in ways compatible with this revolutionary civilising quest, much in the way they were made compatible with Romanov Russia's imperial mission. This *moulding* implied the continued relevance of a *hierarchical* world-view: ample use of the term 'backward' by the Bolsheviks – including Lenin himself (see Lenin, 1920) – already indicated the continued relevance of a civilizational hierarchy. This was particularly apparent in both the administrative structures of the USSR, and the cultural attitudes of those doing the 'civilising', attitudes that often replicated the *orientalist* attitudes typical of the more openly colonial 'civilisers' of the West. Thus, according to Zinoviev (speaking at the 1920 Baku Congress of the Peoples of the East),

...the working masses of the East are in some places, through no fault of their own, very backward: illiterate, ignorant, they are sunk in superstition and believe in spirits, they are unable to read newspapers, they do not know what is going on in the world at large, they

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<sup>9</sup> The Bolshevik's predominant views on nationality and self-determination differed considerably; their basic point of departure remained Stalin's 1913 pamphlet – entitled 'Marxism and the National Question' (Stalin, 1935). Following the 1917 revolution, and, in particular, in the run-up to the XIIth party congress, there was an intense debate among the Soviet Union's rulers on how these ideological premises would be translated into the administrative structures of the Soviet Union. Lenin's solution – territorial autonomy centralised through party organs – was a compromise between those who advocated a weak centre, and those – including Stalin – whom Lenin saw as underestimating the dangers of a centre dominated by Russia (Pipes, 1997, pp. 242-97). Self-determination – based on primordialist, linguistic notions of nationhood and territorial autonomy - would eventually allow this 'affirmative action empire's' (T. D. Martin, 2001b) various peoples to develop in their own, culturally specific ways to eventually transcend ethnic division in favour of internationalist class identification.

do not understand the most elementary principles of hygiene. [...] The task of the more civilised, more literate, more organised workers of Europe and America is to help the backward toilers of the East (Marxists.org, s.d.).

Administratively, the ‘national question’ was resolved through territorial autonomy, but the level of autonomy and representation between various peoples varied greatly: some were deemed sufficiently developed and numerous to achieve ‘Union Republic’ status; others had to content themselves with ‘Autonomous Republics’ and ‘Oblasts’. Similarly, the Party and many of the Soviet Union’s early social scientists had a rigid, Marxist-teleological – and hierarchical – view of ‘national development’ (Cadiot, 2007, pp. 156-58; Hirsch, 2005, pp. 7-10). On the road to socialism and modernity, various groups evolved through different phases of civilisation – tribe – people – nationality – nation – each representing a higher level of development. An externally imposed Nationalities policy was to aid these peoples in their development, which, during the brief period of *korenizatsiya* – or ‘nativisation’ – entailed the development of a national consciousness compatible with the Marxist-Leninist project.

To that end, Soviet Nationalities Policy made short shrift of any traditional norms that might stand in the way of its various peoples’ development towards the Communist ideal, while maintaining essentialist and historicist ideas of ethnic identity and advocating narratives of a sanitised, homogenised imaginary past *compatible with their path towards socialist modernity*.<sup>10</sup> In the Western

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<sup>10</sup> From the early Soviet period, the associated practices of imperial control included technologies of terror developed under a different ideological context – under the Romanovs, providing yet another element of continuity; as pointed out by Holquist (2001) and Weitz (2002, p. 9), the commissars used the same techniques to very dissimilar, revolutionary ends. All groups deemed unreliable and counter-revolutionary became the object of these disciplining practices; some of these – like the Chechens and other North Caucasian ‘bandits’ – had also been the target of *Tsarist* repression (Bennigsen, 1983; Werth, 2006, pp. 352-54). Others, like the Cossacks, had actually been agents of colonisation under the Tsars, and were now seen as campaigns (Holquist, 1997). The early Bolsheviks’ opposition to

republics like Ukraine, moulding that modernity – and the new, Soviet native elites - according to the Bolsheviks’ civilisational template implied an emphasis on banishing ‘bourgeois’ nationalism’, and Christian (Orthodox, but especially Catholic) ‘superstition’ in favour of national identities and cultures that were ‘national in form and socialist in content’ (Liber, 1992; Luckyj, 1990). In the East, the Bolshevik imposition of ‘authenticity’ was defined in opposition to the perceived backwardness of the Caucasians’ and Central Asians’ customary and religious laws, taking on distinctly *orientalist* undertones by upholding an East/West binary between ‘civilisers’ and ‘natives’ (Keller, pp. 141-74; Ware and Kisriev, pp. 26-31).<sup>11</sup>

This already indicates the extent to which early Bolsheviks’ removal of *Russia* and the *Russians* from the top of this civilizational pyramid was partial and temporary at best. ‘Great Russian Chauvinism’ was indeed frowned upon as a cardinal sin during the period of ‘Korenizatsiya’; but the supposedly more universalist, ‘scientific’, and class-based ‘nativisation’ and ‘brotherhood of nations’ were still hierarchically imposed on the Soviet Union’s minorities.<sup>12</sup> Following Stalin’s consolidation of power, the ‘national-Bolshevik’ reformulation of Soviet nationalities’ policy in the 1930s and, in particular, the ‘Great Patriotic War’ then saw a gradual turn to Russo-centrism in this already highly essentialised

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Russian chauvinism also meant the reversal of migration flows, with Russian settlers removed from areas assigned to minority ethnic groups (Holquist, 2001, pp. 131-32).

<sup>11</sup> As documented by Northrop (2001, p. 206), ‘...[m]ost Russians living in Uzbekistan made a point of calling themselves "European," rather than "Russian"; in reports, statistics, and propaganda exhortations, they drew the contrast starkly between "European" and "local national" ways. (The "European" label was also claimed by other Slavs and, indeed, by nearly every non-Muslim group living in the area, with the exception of the indigenous Jewish community.) If anyone in Central Asia had to change, it was clear who it would be: "European" practices were the (modern) model to which (backward, primitive) Uzbeks would need to adjust’.

<sup>12</sup> Incidentally, the Soviet idea of a ‘brotherhood of nations’ curiously echoed the term used by the Czarist military to describe the co-optation of hostile groups and elites: becoming ‘a brother to the conquered’ (Grant, 2009, p. 57).

and hierarchical system, weakening its universalist ideological base through the explicit rehabilitation of Russia's imperial past (Brandenberger, 2002), and a renewed emphasis on Russian language and culture.<sup>13</sup>

The Russian nationality was elevated to the status of 'first among equals', based on its pioneering role in the furthering of the socialist way of life, and its dissemination towards the ethnic groups of the USSR (Brandenberger, 2001, pp. 279-81).<sup>14</sup> The established narrative became one of continuous

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<sup>13</sup> Starting from the 17<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, in 1932, Soviet policymakers increased the role of the Russian language - as the 'lingua franca' - in education, making it a compulsory subject; this was also often accompanied by the 'cyrillisation' of the various Latin scripts that had proliferated in the various ethnic-minority languages throughout the USSR (Blitstein, 2001; Grenoble, 2003, pp. 54-57; Smith, 1998, pp. 143-60). The 'Great Patriotic War' finally saw a dramatic rehabilitation of the Russian nationalism: imperial heroes who had previously been ostracised were rehabilitated and were put forward as role models. Tsarist imperial expansion remained partially rehabilitated and was differentiated, through the 'lesser evil' thesis, from the inferior, and more exploitative *Western* forms of empire as a movement preparing the ground for modernity and hence, socialism and Soviet power (Schwarz, 1952). At the same time, many elements of Tsarist imperial practice - the ethnic cleansing of 'unreliable' groups, migration as an instrument of hierarchical control - intensified from the 1930s, and were once again directed against national minorities rather than the exponents of Great-Russian chauvinism, as they had been in earlier years. Stalin's ruthless suppression and/or deportation of the Ukrainian Kulaks, the Volga Germans, the Chechens, the Crimean Tatars and Meskhetian Turks echoed, in more ways than one, the scorched earth policies applied against Northwest Caucasian groups deemed unreliable by the Tsarist authorities during the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Burds, 2007; Naimark, 2010, pp. 80-98). In the Baltics, immigration of ethnic Russians was actively encouraged by the centre; and migration flows by Slavs into Central Asia resumed.

<sup>14</sup> References to this leading Russian role abound in the various non-Russian Republics', and, in fact, the Soviet Union's own, national anthems - composed, not accidentally, during and after World War Two.

Russian-led civilisation, albeit with the crucial separation between a 'distorted', lesser-of-all-evils civilising project before 1917, and the common, Russian-led journey towards Communism after 1917 – a narrative that, according to Murvar (1971) and Hosking (2006, pp. 10-35), hid a (quasi-)religious civilizational messianism shared by both the Russian and the Soviet empires. Russians were a civilising force in Soviet mythology, as they had been in its Tsarist counterpart, even taking into account the dramatic variations in the specific content of the 'enlightenment ideal' pursued by the civilisers. The Soviets' definition of that mission against capitalism, 'bourgeois nationalism' and Nazism in the West, and feudal/Muslim 'backwardness' in the East mirrored the opposition of their orthodox predecessors against, respectively, Western Catholic heresy and Islam in a pre-secular age.

Attitudes towards the Tsarist empire briefly became more ambiguous in the years following de-Stalinisation, and the harsher imperial practices outlined above were abandoned: historians in, for instance, the Caucasus and Central Asia did once again critique Tsarist colonial policies from the late 1950s onwards (Tateishi, 2013; Tillett, 1961, pp. 260-69; 1964). But tolerance of such criticism remained limited, waxing and waning with the acceptance by the centre of 'national communist' leadership in individual Union republics. Beyond these scholarly-historical debates, and the partial rehabilitation of some 'enemy peoples', the position of the Russians and Russia at the top of a distinct, Soviet civilizational hierarchy remained an enduring feature of official everyday narratives. As typically stated in the 1961 CPSU Party programme:

With reciprocal fraternal assistance, primarily from the great Russian people, all the Soviet non-Russian republics have set up their own modern industries, trained their own national working class and intelligentsia and developed a culture that is national in form and socialist in content. Many peoples which in the past were backward have achieved socialism by-passing the capitalist stage of development (CPSU, 1961, p. 13).

Moreover, by that time, the Soviet Union's East/West liminality and sense of hierarchy had also come to expand outwards with the incorporation of Eastern and Central Europe into the socialist camp, and the collapse of the Western colonial empires, resulting in a double hierarchy of sorts: Russians leading

the peoples of the Soviet Union, and the culturally distinctly Russian Soviet Union in turn leading the *world* towards the Communist ideal.

In Eastern/Central Europe, Moscow acted as the guardian of Marxist orthodoxy against Western-inspired counterrevolution – through force of arms if need be (Ouibet, 2003); and following from the early Bolsheviks' identification with Asia's 'backward, oriental' peoples, the USSR saw itself as a leading proponent of a de-colonised South. Its ideology may have been Marxist-Leninist, and Russia's place at the pinnacle of the project indirect, but in its rejection of Western norms, and its claimed familiarity with groups at the lower levels of a hierarchy, the Soviet Union's behaviour nevertheless echoed, however distantly, earlier claims made in Tsarist Russia regarding 'its' western and eastern subalterns. These claim was materialised, modernised, and globalised: as the leading *socialist* state, the Soviet Union was now the guardian of a once-subjugated South/East against Western capitalist encroachment; and Russians were the 'first among equals' within this socialist state, at the top of a hierarchy going all the way down to newly de-colonised nations in need of Moscow's guidance and protection.<sup>15</sup>

Both imperial Russia and the USSR saw themselves as 'exceptional' through their very different, top-down 'civilising projects: a varying combination of Orthodoxy, *samobytnost* and/or Russification in the case of the Tsars, socialist modernity in the case of the Soviets. These projects involved a clear

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<sup>15</sup> Matusевич (2008, p. 67), for instance, describes how '...in their quest for racial equality [with sub-saharan Africans], the well-intentioned Soviets inadvertently displayed the kind of self-abnegation that [...] smacked of paternalism'. Quist-Adade (2005) similarly identifies a transition from 'communist paternalism to outright negativity' in Soviet reporting on Africa during the periods before and during Gorbachev's reforms. Soviet attitudes towards other 'brotherly socialist nations' similarly upheld surprisingly orientalist stereotypes: Asians, Arabs, Africans, were clearly cast in a friendly but always subservient role, ready to receive the guidance of their Soviet (and, more often than not, Russian) elder brothers.

'hierarchy of peoples', and in both late imperial Russia and the (post-)Stalinist USSR this hierarchy<sup>16</sup> came to place Russian culture at its pinnacle. In their civilising zeal, both imperial Russia and the USSR essentialised their minorities, and endeavoured to shape them in ways that would be compatible with continued dominion over them, whether in terms of Christian Orthodox autocracy or a dictatorship of the proletariat. Both entities periodically employed similar disciplinary practices – ethnic cleansing and forced migration – towards recalcitrant ethnic minorities. And, crucially, both situated themselves, simultaneously, *outside* and *inside* the West and the East, by taking over and adapting Western ideologies and social-scientific technologies to their specific circumstances, and positing intrusive civilising projects over and above colonial subjects with which they paradoxically identified themselves to some degree.<sup>17</sup>

By the time Gorbachev's glasnost subsequently de-stabilised the USSR and swept away its ideological assumptions, the Russian and Soviet identities had become so intertwined that, unlike many of its sub-alterns, the nation once at the pinnacle of the socialist experiment was left without a coherent sense of

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<sup>16</sup> This inequality was also clearly visible in the upper echelons of power, which were very much dominated by Russians, or members of the two other great Slavic ethnic groups of the USSR – Ukrainians and Belorussians. Throughout its history, membership of the Central Committee of the All-Union CPSU disproportionately Slavic; differences at the very top – the Politburo – were even more dramatic, with non-Slavs like Mikoyan, Shevardnadze, Aliyev very much the exception (Rigby, 1972).

<sup>17</sup> If anything, the final decades of stagnation saw a reinforcement of this hierarchical view, as the USSR moved away from Khrushchev's reformism to return to orthodox certainties of the late Stalin era: the removal of 'national Communists' in a number of Soviet Republics and intensified efforts at Russification – partly in response to the demographic growth of non-Russian nationalities (Solchanyk, 1982, pp. 23-24) - were a clear indication of this reversion. As one observer put it: 'Now Soviet nationality policy asserts that the heights of Soviet and world culture can be reached only through Russian' (Bilinsky, 1981, p. 319). This implicit return to Russification did not go unnoticed in the various Soviet Republics, where discontent could be registered through samizdat critiques and the occasional public demonstration of discontent (Solchanyk, 1982, pp. 33-38).

self. Moscow had to re-define itself once again, and, after about a decade of doubt and prevarication, it eventually settled on an appropriately adapted version of ‘hybrid exceptionalism’, uniquely combining elements of Russia’s imperial and Soviet legacies with contemporary elements in once again justifying Russian leadership over a distinct – and now internationalised - civilizational space. Having already survived one revolution, ‘hybrid exceptionalism’ was to re-appear, in rejuvenated form, in the aftermath of ideological collapse and geopolitical retreat; this remarkable continuity of Russia’s imperial vision into the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the subject of my next section.

## Hybrid Exceptionalism in Contemporary Russia

Throughout the turbulent 1990s, Russia’s perceptions of its place in the world remained in flux. Having been defined in terms of the various, above-mentioned civilising missions, largely devoid of a national identity outside of the Tsarist or Soviet hierarchical contexts, Russia’s elites had to reconstitute their country’s place in the world. While a variety of competing views on national identity emerged during the period,<sup>18</sup> these broader ideological divisions masked a simple fact: namely, that almost all sections of the emerging elites and counter-elites, except perhaps for a minute liberal fringe, continued to see Russia as a *Great Power*, with a distinct, leading role within ‘its near abroad’. At

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<sup>18</sup> As described by Tolz (1998), several competing national identities emerged during that period: ‘Union’, ‘Eastern Slavic’, ‘Russian-speaking’, ‘racial’, and ‘civic’, some of which did *not* necessarily include elements of empire. But the red-brown opposition held fast to the Soviet-nostalgic ‘Union’ identity, and even the citizenship law adopted by the supposedly liberal Yeltsin government “pointed to a mixture of RF civic and Union identities as the identities of the people whom the RF leadership believed it was governing” (ibid., p. 1008); the theme of ‘empire’ thus remained an ever-present feature of Russian mainstream political discourse. Shevel (2011) has meanwhile identified five nation-building agendas; but “the explicit exclusion of Ukrainians and Belarusians from the body of the ‘true’ nation is highly problematic in Russia”, complicating the only – Russian-territorial – nation-building agenda *without* irredentist implications (ibid., p. 183). Hosking (1998), finally, identified four different ways the ‘Russian nation’ could be defined (imperial, Slavic, Russophone, and civic); ‘Yeltsin’s government has veered back and forth between these versions of Russian nationhood’ (ibid., p. 458) and ‘...[the Russians were] still a long way from the nation-state as we understand it’ (ibid., p. 461).

most, the debate between liberals and the rest revolved around the question as to whether Russia would be a 'normal' Great Power (Kozyrev, 1992, p. 10) – integrated into the international liberal institutional order – or one standing outside of and separate from the West, in a more traditional, territorial sense of the term.

It was only with the advent to power of Vladimir Putin that views began crystallising around a more or less coherent view: Putin had already emphasised the importance of Russia's role as a '*Derzhava*' in his landmark 'Millennium Manifesto' (Putin, 1999a),<sup>19</sup> where Russia was defined in unmistakably imperial terms, and a highly essentialised 'mentality of the Russians' was directly linked to a 'belief in the greatness of Russia', a purported adherence to a strong, not necessarily liberal state and a belief in social solidarity. Following the initial, post-9/11 thaw in relations with the West, the Kremlin soon moved towards defining *derzhavnost* – great power status – in terms that appropriated liberal, Western language, together with noticeably un-Western, illiberal elements. In subsequent years, Moscow has proceeded to forcefully assert its exclusive claim over the former Soviet space, through direct military interventions (in Georgia and Ukraine), and an alternative, top-down integration project – the Eurasian Economic Union.

These interventions and integration projects have been justified through narratives that mirror previous incarnations of 'hybrid exceptionalism' by once again defending Russia's position at the top of a hierarchy in a civilizational area distinct from both West, and East. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, such narratives can no longer rely on Christian Orthodoxy or Marxism-Leninism as their main ideological anchors. Instead, these discourses involve the *selective* and visibly instrumental application of liberal discourses on economic rationality and international legality; and, as in previous periods, these are complemented

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<sup>19</sup> Putin's manifesto provided an early indication of its differentiation from the West through his specification of the 'Russian idea', which, in itself, finds its origins in the writings of Vladimir Solovyev, a prominent Slavophile of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (McDaniel, 1996). In Putin's words, 'Russia was and will remain a great power...' and '...It will not happen soon [...] that Russia will become the second edition of [...] the US or Britain...'.

by the attempted appropriation of the ‘authenticity’ of subaltern groups in ways that fit the Kremlin’s hierarchical world-view which, once again, places Russia and Russians at the summit of a distinct civilizational (and geopolitical) space.

Russia’s contemporary ‘hybrid exceptionalism’ constitutes a partial adaptation of its governmentality to the ideological and structural realities of the post-Cold War world, where the West’s *liberal* norms have become hegemonic, and the former Soviet empire has fragmented into formally sovereign states. As amply documented in the post-colonial literature (and beyond), contemporary liberal norms reject manifestations of *formal* empire, while at the same time normalising a de-facto global hierarchy with a core of Western states at its pinnacle (e.g. Barkawi and Laffey, 1999; Donnelly, 2006; Duffield and Hewitt, 2013; Hinnebusch; Pieterse, 2004); Saidian scholarship has also demonstrated the ways in which these (neo)liberal, Western-centric, hierarchical logics are complemented by the cultural, civilizational narratives of Orientalism, justifying Western dominance over and intervention into the global South/East (e.g. Dabashi, 2009; Das, 2014; Little, 2008; Morton, 2007; Springer, 2011). In a parallel manner, Moscow’s partial appropriation of liberal (economic, international legal) normativity has allowed for the reproduction of such informal hierarchies at a regional scale; and an adapted form of civilizational discourse – one that emphasises difference from both East *and* West – has come to complement these neo-liberal narratives in an attempt to uphold an exclusive cultural space.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, the liberal concept of regional economic integration provides the Kremlin with a convenient way of funnelling an apparently egalitarian, ostentatiously positive-sum narrative towards the building of what Anatoly Chubais has called a ‘liberal Empire’ (Asia Times Online, 2003). Similarly, Russia’s appropriation of the liberal language on ‘humanitarian intervention’, and its involvement as a ‘peacekeeper’ in various conflicts in its neighbouring states – conflicts often instigated or artificially

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<sup>20</sup> This combination of liberal *economism* with a civilizational discourse is hinted at in the Kremlin’s 2013 Foreign Policy Concept’s section on ‘Regional Priorities’, where arguments in favour of the Eurasian Economic Union (art. 43) are immediately followed by the construction of a distinct civilizational sphere in the CIS (art. 44) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2013).

prolonged by itself – place the ostensible provision of international law and order in Russia’s great power hands throughout the ‘near abroad’. As is often the case in West-South/East relations, hierarchical practices have been legitimised through references to supposedly neutral mechanisms of economic expediency and impartial requirements of international legality.

Under Putin (and, arguably, before), Russia’s leadership in pushing regional integration has always been clad in a language of sovereign equality and economic rationality, with the direct comparisons of the Eurasian Economic Union and the European Union in Putin’s (2011) landmark article as perhaps the best example. What has often escaped the many authors who have argued that Russia had become a quasi-corporate entity - ‘Russia, Inc.’ (Dmitri Trenin, 2007) - is the extent to which these narratives, in combination with fundamentally unequal practices and legacies of dependency, serve the surreptitious reproduction of hierarchical relations in a (neo)liberal age. Thus, the presenting of selected, ostensibly technical disciplinary measures against recalcitrant neighbours in an apolitical, economic language has been a hallmark of Russian policies since the early 2000s. For all the open talk of Russia becoming an ‘energy superpower’ (Baev, 2008, pp. 117-54; Blank, 2011), vital gas supplies are never cut off for openly geo-political reasons; instead, they are usually presented as being subject to the impersonal mechanisms of the market (Balmaceda, 2012; Feklyunina, 2012; Nygren, 2008). Agricultural produce are, similarly, never openly banned as a disciplinary measure, despite the frequent coincidences of technical lacunae and geopolitical expediency (Cenusa et al., 2014), and the occasionally more thinly veiled threat from figures close to the Kremlin (e.g. Socor, 2014; Spillius, 2013).

A similar, only thinly disguised hierarchical view is also present in Russia’s ostensible adoption of liberal, Western-style discourses on International Law. As early as in 1993, Boris Yeltsin thus argued in favour of an open-ended United Nations mandate to address threats to international security within its near abroad (Hill and Jewett, 1994, p. 1); when this failed, subsequent foreign policy and security concepts incorporated such a right to intervene in case of threats to Russia’s national interest or (broadly defined) Russian-speaking minorities (Russian Federation, 2000, 2005c, 2005b, 2005a, 2008); at least up to the Crimean annexation, any resulting interventions were generally justified through language that, however spuriously, mirrored that of the West. The 2008 Georgia war was thus

presented as an attempt to ‘prevent genocide’, echoing justifications for NATO’s earlier intervention in Kosovo (see AFP, 2008; Kremlin.ru, 2008; UNI, 2008). The claim to international legality has become more difficult to sustain in Ukraine; but it has been upheld, however imperfectly, through the repetition, in the earlier days of the conflict, of spurious arguments on humanitarian intervention and self-determination – both inherently *liberal, Western* concepts – and a simultaneous adherence to (im)plausibly deniable hybrid warfare (rather than open intervention) in pursuit of Ukraine’s submission to a Russian sphere of influence (see Allison, 2009, 2014; Kremlin.ru, 2014a; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2014a; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2014b).<sup>21</sup>

Russia’s ‘make-believe’ liberalism is an adaptation to its status as, in Morozov’s (2013, 2015) words, a ‘subaltern empire’: an entity with imperial ambitions, but with structurally subordinate status in the contemporary capitalist world order. The (mis)appropriation of liberal language becomes an act of *mimicry* designed to justify hierarchical interventions in a distinct geopolitical space, in much the same way such interventions are justified *globally* by the dominant West. As Makarychev (2008, p. 30) explains: ‘it is Russia’s denial of politicised practice that underpins its claims to being a “normal country” [...], which does not need to be “normalised” by others’; but the problem for Russia is that it is *not* part of the hegemonic West, and that it therefore places itself outside the consensus on ‘normalcy’ by presenting its particular interpretations of the norms propounded by the hegemonic core. Lacking that consensus’ hegemonic authority and structural power, contested by that Western core, Russia’s claims – liberal in form, imperial in content - therefore take on a forced, artificial appearance, providing an at best imperfect justification for regional hierarchy in the contemporary world.

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<sup>21</sup> Such feigned international legality and economic rationality to some extent mirrors Russian domestic politics, and its adherence to concepts like ‘sovereign democracy’: as pointed out by a variety of authors (Krastev, 2006; Roth, 2009; Wilson, 2005), such ‘virtual politics’ *also* involves upholding the appearance of legality and economic expediency while skewing political and economic processes in favour of an state-connected elite.

The lack of credibility in these liberal discourses is (only partially) compensated for by a broader narrative aiming to *dissociate* ‘state-civilisation’ Russia (Putin, 2012) from the Western core; as pointed out above, this is yet another element where Russian narratives parallel those of the West, whose *orientalist* discourses complement neoliberalism’s claims to legitimise civilizational hierarchies on a global scale. But, as during its previous, Tsarist and Soviet incarnations, Russia’s long-term predicament - as both *orientaliser* and *orientalised* – has meant an adaptation of those civilizational discourses towards the construction of an ambiguous space *between* East and West. This is precisely where the continuities of Russia’s contemporary hybrid exceptionalism with its previous versions – asserting hierarchy over an ambiguous civilizational space – emerge at their clearest, as Moscow once again lays claim to a Russo-centric ‘authenticity’ that asserts difference from the West, while maintaining a superiority over the East.

Contemporary hybrid exceptionalism’s creation of Russia’s exclusive civilisational space starts with a selective reliance on imperial and Soviet historical markers of identity, found in both its official and broader societal narratives. Especially under Putin, such markers of Russian imperial power – including the Romanov expansion, Orthodoxy, and a selective, Russo-centric view of the USSR - have been largely rehabilitated, and subjected to apologia (Adler, 2012).<sup>22</sup> There is very little self-criticism – of the kind seen in the 1990s, or following 1923 - in that regard. These narratives of Russia’s role have combined the country’s traditional East/West ambiguities in both the imperial and Soviet eras into a more or less coherent hierarchical view of the ‘Near Abroad’, loosely based on a contemporary – and *implicit* - reformulation of the old Russian notion of *samobytnost* - or ‘authenticity’.

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<sup>22</sup> One speech by Putin – notably at the 2013 ‘Orthodox-Slavic Values: The Foundation of Ukraine’s Civilisational Choice’ Conference - is typical in rehabilitating and tying together specific values, the Tsarist and Soviet experiences, and contemporary integration projects. After pointing out the many advantages bestowed on Ukraine as part of the Russian Empire and the USSR, the Russian president concludes: ‘We live in different countries today, but this fact in no way crosses out the common historic past that we share, and that is our asset and the foundation upon which we can build new integration ties.’ (Kremlin.ru, 2013). See also Adler (2005) and Liñán Vazquez (2010).

As argued in the previous sections, imposed ‘authenticity’ played a role in justifying empire during both the Romanov and Soviet periods. In the romantic nationalist context of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was linked to the discovery of mystical Russian and non-Russian ethnic authenticities; and it was also employed as a major legitimising argument in favour of the imperial subjugation of ethnic minorities, with Russia cast as the facilitator of their discovery of ‘authentic’ roots (as opposed to corrupting foreign influences like, say, Muridist Islam in the Caucasus, or Catholicism in Poland and the western borderlands). Under the early Bolsheviki, during the period of *korenizatsiya*, the idea of developing an authentic national identity under Moscow’s guidance was, again, relevant to the Marxist-Leninist Soviet ‘civilising’ mission; such essentialist redefinitions of ‘authentic’ national identities continued in the more Russo-centric Stalinist and post-Stalinist periods. Today, contemporary Russian narratives combine elements of imperial and Soviet history to construct authenticities that are distinct from both East and West, while questioning the genuineness of those individuals and groups within the former Soviet Union that do not fit a specific civilizational mission - in much the same manner as during Russia’s previous imperial incarnations.

In Russia proper, the Christian Orthodox Church has become the main such marker of authenticity – as a major element of Romanov imperial identity, whose rehabilitation began under Yeltsin and received a major boost under the prime ministership/presidency of Putin. In fact, the Church is now actively promoted as a marker of national identity, its moral authority secured and amplified by the state;<sup>23</sup> a

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<sup>23</sup> For Putin, ‘the Church is an essential prerequisite for the restoration of the lost unity of the entire Russian world, a world in which the Orthodox faith has always acted as a spiritual foundation’ (Kremlin.ru, 2007), while for Medvedev, ‘[t]he desire to understand the truth and justice is a moral imperative that every person in this country has carried in his or her soul for some time. [...] This is why our state, which is secular, is interested in involving the Church in the education of children and young people, in creating new role models and supporting the defenders of our homeland.[...] the history of our country – Russia, the history of Rus – is at the same time the history of Orthodoxy’ (Kremlin.ru, 2011).

broader resulting corollary of these narratives is the dismissal of pro-Western groups as either inauthentic or corrupt, not quite conform to the different – assumedly more restrictive - Russian notions of liberalism pointed at by Putin in his manifesto.<sup>24</sup> Rather curiously, this Tsarist marker of identity is then combined with an adequately sanitised view of Soviet history: stripped of its Marxism-Leninism and Stalinism's excesses, the USSR is presented mostly in terms of the 'greatness of Russia' - as the destroyer of Nazism, a superpower, and the 'other' pole in a once bipolar world (Adler, 2012; Nelson, 2015; E. A. Wood, 2011b).<sup>25</sup> This selective nostalgia concentrates overwhelmingly on the Second World War (or the 'Great Patriotic War'), and on an idealised notion of Soviet-Eurasian ethnic

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<sup>24</sup> The Kremlin has complicated the activities of non-Orthodox Christian denominations and cults – in Medvedev's words 'very dubious ideologies and all sorts of rubbish' (Kremlin.ru, 2011) – throughout the Russian Federation, and defers to the Church in social matters, legitimising policies that strongly demarcate Russia and the Russians from an immoral and individualistic, 'genderless and infertile' West, in language mirroring that of the Eurasianists and Slavophiles of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Sharafutdinova, 2014, p. 618). Within Russia proper, regulation of foreign- (usually Western-) funded NGOs is clearly based on the association of such foreign funding with the corruption of authentically Russian politics. The values they espouse – democracy, human rights, gender, LGBT rights – are designated as un-Russian, dismissed as instruments of Western cultural intrusion: the Putin government's use of homophobic legislation, and his rehabilitation of a – moralising, very conservative and subservient – Russian orthodox Church feeds into this association of a conspiratorial pro-Western stance with 'moral degeneracy', and creates a major rallying point for conservative and pro-Russian forces throughout the former Soviet Union (Lomagin, 2012; Verkhovsky, 2002; Yablokov, 2014).

<sup>25</sup> The 'Great Patriotic War' functions as a major point of reference in this rehabilitation of the Soviet past, as do reminders of the industrialization and modernization achieved by subalterns during the Soviet Period. As stated by Putin in 2005: '...9 May is a sacred day for all nations in the Commonwealth of Independent States. We are united by our anguish, our memory and our duty to future generations. And we must pass on to those who will come after us the spirit of historic connection, common aspirations and common hope' (BBC News, 2005). See also Kremlin.ru (2010, 2012a).

harmony under Russian leadership (E. A. Wood, 2011b). Russia's contemporary elite fully acknowledges the Soviet Union's failure as a socio-economic project; this leaves the Soviet Union – uncomfortably paired with Christian Orthodoxy - as a shared historical experience, and an incubator of a separate, Russian-led civilizational pole, with its own, distinct norms, values and cultural markers, not least a shared *lingua franca*.

Crucially, this shared historical experience allows the contemporary incarnation of authenticity to be expanded to include the former Soviet Union as a whole: the shared values of the former Soviet states and its peoples – shaped and transmitted during centuries of imperial Russian and Soviet rule – have made them specific from the rest of the world. With the former Soviet Union's historically founded authenticity placed between East and West, Russian narratives end up, once again, both *identifying with* and *differentiating Russia and its dependencies from* both the Orient and the Occident. Depending on where the perceived challenges to this authenticity originate, they are either dismissed as coldly rational, Western, or irrational *oriental* deviations from an ambiguous, neither fully oriental, nor occidental self. In places like Ukraine and Moldova, efforts by subsequent governments towards European integration are thus dismissed as a betrayal of that not-fully-Western authenticity; challenges in Russia's 'own orient' – the Caucasus and Central Asia – are, by contrast, quite crudely *orientalised* as *irrational* and *criminal*, much as they were in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In all cases, both the agency and authenticity of actors moving against Russia's perceived interests are minimised and denied.

In the former Soviet Union's European parts, Russia's narrative emphasises difference from the West. Just as Catholicism or the Enlightenment were under the Orthodox Czars, or fascism and capitalism were under the Soviets, Western influences are constructed as a threat to something distinct, something authentic, now centred on the notion of 'traditional values', or on the shared Soviet history of the Western former Soviet republics. As prime minister Medvedev (2014) put it in the case of Ukraine:

There are many things that unite us. Our relations have their roots in ancient times. Unfortunately, in order to pit our two nations against each other, official Ukraine is denying objective facts, including our common culture, faith and centuries-long common

history. They are speculating on the past, imposing ideological constructs that have nothing to do with historical reality.

Much like the Russia of the Czars was positioned as the ‘Third Rome’ – the defender of the true values of Christianity – contemporary Russia is portrayed as the champion of genuine, traditional European values against their perceived degeneracy in ‘Gayropa’ (Riabov and Riabova, 2014) through what has been called a ‘Potemkin Conservatism’ (Rodkiewicz and Rogoza, 2015), as perhaps most clearly visible in the rejection of gender and LGBT rights by pro-Russian conservative groups in the FSU and beyond. Thus, according to Sergey Lavrov,

...people are tired of the attempts of neo-liberals to impose values, which have nothing to do with traditional values. They cannot even be called values. They are simply some mannerisms, which occurred in the situation of the current stage of development of western communities and are alien to the Orthodox religions, Islam, Buddhism and Judaism – all main world religions, which share the nature of their concepts (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2014c).

As a consequence, politicians and groups in taking a pro-Western line in places like Moldova and Ukraine are portrayed as ‘inauthentic’ either from this ‘traditional values’ perspective, or through a more insidious link to shared Soviet history, and, in particular, the Great Patriotic and Cold Wars. Little could be more indicative of that lack of authenticity, for instance, the frequent associations of the current Ukrainian government with Nazi collaborators like Bandera and Shushkevich – the ultimate marker of treason within a Soviet context (e.g. Kremlin.ru, 2014a; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2014d, 2014e) - or the suggestion that Moldova’s path towards the EU was somehow facilitated by the infiltration of its Constitutional Court by Romanian citizens (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2014f). The portrayal of Ukraine’s Euromaidan as a Western, NATO-led conspiracy also harks back to Soviet, Cold-War elements within Russia’s new imperial identity (Hutchings and Szostek, 2015; Kuzio, 2015, pp. 161-62; Laruelle, 2015).

In Russia's traditional *eastern* dominions, these contemporary narratives of authenticity echo the *orientalisation* of challengers to Russian imperial and Soviet authority to an even more remarkable degree. The familiar themes of irrationality, criminality, impotence and *samobytnost* – grounded in the long-standing *orientalisation* of Caucasians – are repeated in both a domestic and international context, disquietingly echoing the *orientalism* displayed against rebellious Caucasians during the previous imperial and Soviet eras in its attempts at delimiting a distinct civilizational space with Russia at its pinnacle. In 1990s Chechnya, 'caucasophobic' and 'islamophobic' (Dimitri Trenin and Malashenko, 2004, pp. 64-69) parallels with old Czarist and Soviet imperial discourses were, in fact, striking: just as the North Caucasian tribal rebels of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, or their 20<sup>th</sup>-century anti-Soviet counterparts were dismissed as brigands and (albeit at times noble) savages, Chechnya's subsequent separatist were criminalised, infantilised, and scorned as inauthentic aberrations from the required Russophile norm (Hughes, 2007; Russell, 2002, 2005).<sup>26</sup> To this end, Imam Shamil himself – the hero of the North Caucasians' 19<sup>th</sup>-century resistance against Russian rule – was invoked by Vladimir Putin (Kremlin.ru, 2004):

The North Caucasus is a major centre of diverse but united Russian spiritual culture. Any attempts to break this unity have always met with resistance, including from the Caucasus peoples themselves...I would like to recall Imam Shamil's testament to his sons. He called upon them to remain loyal to the Russian state and to live in peace and harmony with its peoples.

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<sup>26</sup> Russia's official narrative, and its press were replete with references to the supposed inability of Chechens in particular, and North Caucasus peoples in general, to maintain law and order without Russia's 'civilising' imprint (e.g. Aleksandrov, 2001; Degoev, 2001; Markov, 1997; Putin, 1999b; Soldatenko, 1994). As the revolt radicalised and acquired a pan-Caucasian, *Islamist* element, Russian discourses started combining the Western narratives on 'terrorism' with a very familiar trope: of an outside influence – Wahhabism – corrupting the originality of the Chechen nation, which, naturally, is portrayed as accepting of Russian domination (see Kremlin.ru, 2002; Kremlin.ru, 2005).

Such discourses were repeated on an international scale and at the highest levels in Russian portrayals of Saakashvili: the former president of Georgia was described by high-ranking Russian officials as ‘a madman’ (Medvedev, 2008), ‘crazy’ (McChesney, 2013), a ‘blank space’ (Kremlin.ru, 2012b), a ‘bastard’ (CIS & Presidential Bulletin, 2008), his pro-Western orientation seen as an inauthentic betrayal of the age-old ‘brotherhood’ between the Georgian and Russian nations, based on the shared experience of the Great Patriotic War and the spiritual bonds of Orthodoxy (Kolstø and Rusetskii, 2012; Kremlin.ru, 2006, 2009; Medvedev, 2008).<sup>27</sup>

These discourses do not emerge from a void; they are the product of a power/knowledge nexus that separates these areas from the West, and allocates them to a distinct, separate, authentic civilizational area where Russia has, and will continue to, reign supreme; politicians and movements going against that sphere’s authenticity are dismissed as foreign impositions, either from a hedonistic, individualistic, degenerate West, or from a restless, irrational and rebellious East. In both cases, Russia is placed in the position of guaranteeing order and continuity, of a crucial link to a shared past that must be preserved for its own sake; and the independent agency of the imperial subalterns is denied: rather than having an independent will, Ukrainians, Armenians, Georgians, Moldovans, Tajiks (...) are either seen as

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<sup>27</sup> The 2008 war provided a boost to these orientalisating discourses against Saakashvili – with even higher-level discourses reportedly descending to the level of sexual humiliation (denial of *masculinity* being one recurring element within orientalism) (Levy, 2009). In Central Asia, even the praise for Kazakhstan’s ‘very wise’ (and generally pro-Russian) Nazarbayev was famously combined with a belittling of Kazakh statehood (Kremlin.ru, 2014b); in the same interview, Putin proceeds to make the link between the liberal and civilizational discourses that form part of contemporary hybrid exceptionalism: ‘Philosophers know where this idea of a Eurasian union came from and how it developed, who supported it in Russia. The Kazakhs picked it up proceeding from the understanding that it is good for their economy, it helps them stay within the so-called “greater Russian world”, which is part of world civilisation, it is good for the development of their industry, of advanced technologies and so forth. I am convinced that this will continue in the same vein for the mid- and long historical term’.

irrational, or portrayed as being under the influence of ‘outside forces’ that threaten their true identity: one that, as before, fits within the Russia’s chosen civilizational projects in the near abroad.

All of the above makes Russia’s ‘hybrid exceptionalism’ hegemonic, backward-looking and tautological. It is *hegemonic* – in the Gramscian sense of the word – through its ability to hide inequalities in power and hierarchical relationships both in the de-facto application of legal norms and in the purportedly politically ‘neutral’ economic links between Russia and the former Soviet republics. It is backward-looking as it does not aim at the building of something new – as in the case of, for instance, the European Union and its Eastward expansion – but a restoration of the old. Finally, it is *tautological* through its reliance on a selective narrative of shared history and culture to justify the perpetuation of hierarchy under Russian leadership. In the words of Russia’s long-time foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov:

After all, it is precisely from the past that we have retained the unique experience of coexistence and cooperation, the intertwining of human destinies, the similarity of lifestyle, of cultural interpenetration, the interdependence of our economies, common transport corridors and a lot more. It is our great competitive advantage, [and] to abandon that in today's globalized world is simply unreasonable (as quoted by Bondarenko, 2006).

Simply put, the former Soviet Union belongs together because it had been together for such a long time; and Russia, as its largest state, has a taken-for-granted right to maintain law and order and structure economic activity within that specific, culturally peculiar space. Hybrid exceptionalism had adapted itself to the 21<sup>st</sup> century; but in its implications, it was quite similar to what had come before, creating and maintaining a remarkable continuity in Moscow’s hierarchical view of the world, placing Russia *apart from* the West and *above* the East.

## Conclusion

All states have their narratives of exceptionalism; in that sense, at least, there is nothing extra-ordinary to the exceptionalism displayed by Russia in its various – Tsarist, Soviet, contemporary Federative –

guises. Some exceptionalisms are more important than others, however, and, as a major power straddling much of the Eurasian landmass, how Russia's elite and society define their place in the world remains of major significance. Russia's geographic and cultural positions between East and West mirror each other almost perfectly, and add to the specificity of its narratives. In a modern and late modern era dominated by Western powers, St. Petersburg and Moscow developed discourses of empire and hierarchy that simultaneously stood apart from, and imitated elements of their Western counterparts; the result is an ambiguity that, even today, colours Russia's relationship with its periphery.

I have decided to call this ambiguous common thread running through the various justifications for hierarchical rule proffered by Russia's various incarnations '*hybrid exceptionalism*' – because of its combination of a Western and Eastern 'gaze', its simultaneous 'orientalisation' of the Russian/Slavic self and a specifically oriental other, usually situated in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Although discourses of imperial hierarchy and Marxist-Leninist civilising missions may now have 'sublimated' into something more conforming to a post-colonial, post-Soviet era – by adopting the quasi-liberal language of economic rationality and international legality – both in discourse and practice, echoes of a not-so-distant Tsarist and Soviet past can still be heard in Moscow's various justifications for the more fundamental *civilizational* separateness of 'its' sphere of privileged interest.

One important consequence flows from this realisation of the long-time centrality of *alterity* and *hierarchy* in Russia's identity. Indeed, if anything, empire-as-hybrid-exceptionalism appears to be a constant in Russia's subsequent narratives – despite of its wildly fluctuating formal political makeup and the changes in international society: it is almost as if Russia is inescapably drawn towards discourses marked by an East/West ambiguity and a tendency towards hierarchical and territorial control - as, incidentally, 'offensive' realists like Mearsheimer (2001) would expect of a continental great power. While one should always be cautious of excessive determinism, this feature appears to be a deep-seated element of Russia's various identities – the world-views of its quite disparate Tsarist, Soviet and post-Soviet elites, almost all of whom maintained (or aimed to maintain) their states' uneasy positioning between East and West, and its hierarchical domination over the Eurasian landmass under various civilising missions. The concept of 'hybrid exceptionalism' not only brings this fact to the

fore; it also provides future researchers and analysts with a conceptual tool by which to measure the deviance of future elites from this narrative. A fundamental change in Russia's foreign policy world-view will *only* occur once it moves away from the various, at times dramatically divergent tropes that reproduce, and keep reproducing this particular form of exceptionalism; and, to be sure, while such a fundamental change does appear to be very far away indeed, concentrating on where Russia places itself, and whether it maintains (formal and informal) hierarchies would allow one to identify such an existential shift should it occur.

Over the past decades, Russia has proved true to its status as the multi-layered enigma once referred to by Churchill. It has certainly defied the optimistic expectations that led some to proclaim its emergence as a 'normal' - i.e. Western - great power during the 1990s. It has, in fact, both culturally and geopolitically remained in a space it has occupied for centuries: between the Orient and the Occident, in a civilisational world in which it sees itself – at some times more explicitly than at others - as reigning supreme. The updated form of 'hybrid exceptionalism' adopted in the post-Soviet era is simply a return to what had been seen as *normalcy* for most of Russian history after a period of confusion and prevarication.

But should states, societies, and elites in the former Soviet Union and beyond accept this element of the Derzhava's identity as a constant, rather than something that could be subject to change? While its longer-term persistence may point to the unchanging nature of Russia's imperial predicament, two potential dangers spring from such a reified view of what remains a socially constructed and discursively reproduced reality: of excessive Russophobia on the one hand, and imperial apologia on the other. A blind acceptance of Russia's imperial condition could lead some to conclude that the emancipation of its subalterns would either require the isolation (or even dismantling) of the Russian state, or a blind acceptance of its hierarchical claims as immutable, and therefore beyond debate. A third way is possible, one that takes a realistic view of the task at hand, but also chips away at the fundamental justifying mechanisms of *hybrid exceptionalism*, not least through the kind of scholarship that continues to speak truth to power against its fundamental denial of human equality, and aims to foster a critical debate – a Gramscian 'war of position' - involving intellectuals and the broader societies in Russia, its imperial subjects and beyond.

Post-colonialism has largely concentrated on the multiple legacies of *Western* empire in today's world, and – in a rather perverse form of Western-centrism - largely ignored the discourses of inequality outside their particular cultural sphere. Students of Russia have also been reluctant to apply the insights of such scholarship to an object of study so uncomfortably lodged between the colonising West and the formerly colonised East/South. But, as the above shows, both empire and orientalism are essential to an understanding of current conditions in Eurasia; and the liminal position of contemporary Russia does not stand in the way of critical, postcolonial scholarship as it relates to such a geopolitically significant part of the world. Quite on the contrary – appropriately adapted, it opens up a whole new research programme by looking at empires and hierarchies that cannot be unequivocally called 'Western': among others, that most ambiguously situated entity called 'Russia'.

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