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Russia: A New Imperialist Power?

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ABSTRACT

The authors employ modern Marxist methodology and theory to analyse imperialism and so-called "empires," making it possible to reveal the mechanisms through which the capital and states of the countries that make up the "centre" ensure the economic, political and ideological manipulation of the "periphery." On this basis, it is shown that the capital and state machines of the countries of the semi-periphery in general, and of Russia in particular, are primarily objects of imperialist subordination and manipulation. Only in a few cases are such countries and their capital capable of being the subjects of imperialist policy. An analysis is provided of the contradictions affecting relations between the Russia, Ukraine and the West. A system of politico-economic, geopolitical and other arguments is also advanced with the aim of showing that the Russia does not as a rule act as a subject of imperialist policy, and that only in particular cases (in which, for the most part, it relies on the Soviet heritage) is it capable of resisting the "rules of the game" dictated by the imperialist powers. Ironically these instances of resistance prompt accusations of "Russian imperialism."

KEYWORDS

Russia; imperialism; Marxism; Ukraine; geopolitics

As recently as 10 or 15 years ago the question posed in the title of this article would have appeared absurd to the majority of sensible scholars. But when Crimea, after 60 years, once again became Russian territory in 2014, the question of Russia as a new imperialist aggressor was placed virtually at the centre of geopolitical discussions.

The controversial nature of this issue has provoked many writers, close to a majority in fact, to adopt stances that are somewhat premature, and that are of a polemical nature rather than representing analytical approaches to resolving the question.

Our view, however, is that a passionate heart should not prevent one from showing a cool head. Consequently, we devote a good deal of space in this text to addressing the methodological and theoretical aspects of the issue involved.

The imperialism of the twenty-first century, methodologies for research

The authors of the present text do not propose to examine this problem from the point of view of legal forms or geopolitical interests. We regard these matters as secondary. Instead, we shall approach the question by analysing the underlying bases that determine both the

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legal forms involved, and the foreign policy interests of the main participants in the conflict. Both the forms and the interests flow primarily from the objective productive relations of modern global capitalism, and from the contradictions inherent in these relations. Through studying these relations, we aim to demonstrate that these and other foreign policies, legal and even military conflicts were not simply the result of chance. Further, we aim to reveal the causes underlying the actions and interests of the main participants in what is not merely an economic-political, but also a military-political and ideological struggle between the various actors involved. To begin with, we shall set out to define who the puppeteers are in these conflicts, and who simply the marionettes.

This methodological and theoretical approach shows quite clearly the adherence of the authors to Marxism. Our choice of this paradigm is no accident. The topic itself—qualitative shifts in economic, social and political processes—requires studying the dynamic of objective social contradictions, that is, applying the theory and methodology of the research direction, which has come to be known as the "Post-Soviet School of Critical Marxism." Over the past decade, this school has been transformed from a self-applied label (Buzgalin and Kolganov 2005) into a current in contemporary Marxism. The results of research carried out by the representatives of this school are published regularly in collective monographs and collections of articles, among which are Buzgalin (2009) and Aitova and Buzgalin (2014), and the school enjoys increasing recognition, and not only in Russia (Lin 2010; Buzgalin and Kolganov 2013). The distinguishing features of the Post-Soviet School of Critical Marxism are, a) the critical inheritance of the achievements of classical Marxism and of its humanistic tendencies, in Russia and abroad, during the second half of the twentieth century; b) a critique of dogmatic Stalinist versions of Marxism, and the review and development of a number of theses on the basis of the experience of recent decades; c) open dialogue with other schools, above all (but not exclusively) with existentialism and other humanistic currents, with classical institutionalism, and so forth; d) a stress on understanding modern reality (in the broad sense of the world, beginning with the twentieth century) as the epoch of qualitative global changes to the very bases of social life, changes that create the preconditions for the genesis not only of post-capitalist but also of post-industrial and post-economic society ("the realm of freedom"), in this sense, we can describe this current as the "Marxism of the post-industrial epoch"; e) a dialectical attitude toward the experience of "real socialism," as a contradictory system that combined a moribund authoritarian bureaucratism with elements of progressive socialist relations. The main principles and achievements of this school are presented in Buzgalin and Kolganov (2016).

This research methodology allows us to draw a conclusion that is as simple as it is important, the chronotopes of imperialism may be different, and even qualitatively diverse.[1] To put it differently, in different periods of history (social time, chronos) and in different parts of the world (social space, topos) types of aggression and types of empire have existed that are or were different in their content. Now too, in the twenty-first century, there exist in different chronotopes socio-political formations of various types that

[1] The concept of the "chronotope" ("temporal expanse") was introduced by Bakhtin (1975), and is used by the authors to designate the unity of social space-time in which a particular phenomenon possesses mutually interconnected spatial and temporal coordinates.

behave as [proto] imperial societies, characterised by a greater or lesser degree of economic, political, cultural-ideological and even military aggression.[2]

Keeping this premise in mind, let us formulate briefly the main features of the global capital of the early twenty-first century; features that result from the transformation of neoliberal globalisation into a proto-imperial condition, and whose totality we may term, somewhat conditionally, the "new imperialism."[3] Further in the article we shall present the main features of the "new imperialism."

First, this capital breaks out of the framework of state borders due to the overdevelopment of national capitalism and the chronic internal over-accumulation of capital.

Second, it enters the world arena as (1) capital on a massive scale, that has reached dimensions comparable with small national states, and (2) capital that has the ability to enact a policy of manipulating other actors in the world economy. We stress that imperialist capital is not simply large corporations, but the subject of aggressive manipulation (of producers, of consumers and of the state institutions of the countries of the periphery). We emphasise that here we are not speaking of ministries or ministers, but of the "rules of the game." A more detailed treatment of this point will be provided later in this article.

Third, these aggregations of capital, with help from the state and international institutions of the "centre" that ultimately serve them, set the "rules of the game" that are binding on all other actors in world economic and political processes. These rules (for example, the rules of the World Trade Organization, or the rules the International Monetary Fund imposes on creditor countries) have the appearance of "universal, civilised" norms of the free market, but in reality they are institutions that ensure the dominance of vast transnational corporations, and of the states and alliances that are their "homelands" (Toussaint and Millet 2010; Zhdanovskaya 2015). Meanwhile, capital, as it carries out its imperialist expansion, ensures through economic, political and also military means that these rules are obeyed, acting as "world cop."

Fourth, the "new imperialism" is something more than the export of capital. The global capital of the twenty-first century, as it carries out its expansion, not only exports assets, but subordinates the economies of other countries to its rule, imposing and maintaining control over the techniques, management and finances of these national systems (it should be noted that the "new imperialism" is not always successful).

Fifth, this capital, as one of the participants cooperating and competing within world finance capital, controls the world financial system. It achieves this through its control over the system of international payments, and over the institutions (the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and others) that regulate world financial processes.

Finally, this capital through the exercise of all its above-noted properties has the ability to appropriate a special, "imperialist" rent (Amin 2010, 110–11, 127, 128, 134).

Returning to questions of the foreign economic and political expansion of various national states, we may conclude that under the present-day conditions described above for establishing proto-empires (we use the term "proto-empires" for those countries where the process of formation of empires has started but not completed), the only states that become the subjects of imperialist policy in the proper sense are those that ensure for

[2] See Veltmeyer and Petras (2015), for example, on "extractivist imperialism."

[3] A detailed study, drawing out the main characteristics of the "new imperialism," is presented in a two-volume work of Buzgalin and Kolganov (2015) that rests on a broad range of earlier research such as Amin (2004), Harvey (2003) and Mészáros (1995).

"their own" global capital the possibility of realising at least the main attributes of global hegemony as listed earlier.

If we "translate" the above into socio-philosophical language, a modern proto-empire can be understood as an economic-political chronotope, a systemic quality of which is the presence within its defining capitals of the main attributes of global hegemony. Simplifying this socio-philosophical and at the same time political-economic definition, we can say that the subject of modern imperialism—the proto-empire—is a social space (the topos signifies a super-country, such as the United States; a group of countries, such as the core of the European Union; or a global network of large-scale financial capitals), which at the present time (chronos) employs global actors (transnational corporations and so forth) as the institutional framework (in particular, possessing juridical, political, ideological and military mechanisms) for manipulating and ultimately subordinating others. In particular, a nation state may be proto-imperial if it employs transnational corporations based within it as a mechanism for the political (in extreme cases, military) subordination of foreign socio-economic systems. The latter in this case act as the periphery of the global politico-economic space whose "centre" consists of proto-empires.

In this case, the transnational corporations of an imperialist country acquire not only politico-military defence for their economic expansion, but also the opportunity to pursue this expansion according to rules that allow them to actively manipulate the economic players of peripheral countries. These rules include economic institutions in the proper sense (formal freedom of trade and investment etc.), and also the military (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, abbreviated as NATO below), legal (the priority of the system of international law which the corporations have themselves devised, and of the international courts which they themselves, in the final reckoning, have set up), ideological (the priority of the so-called "European" values, which in their content are bourgeois politico-ideological institutions), cultural (the expansion of globalised mass culture and of so-called "elite" culture), educational (the "Bologna system") and other means required to enforce them.

Created on this basis are the foundations for the economic, political and ideological subordination of peripheral countries (their economies, political systems, and even the worldviews of their citizens), and as a result, for the systematic extraction of imperialist rent.

To the degree to which a country that is the object of imperialist pressure is able to withstand these economic, political and other strictures, it becomes part of the semi-periphery. Some of the semi-peripheral countries, and Russia in particular, try to make use of mechanisms analogous to those of imperialism to exert pressure on their weaker neighbours to achieve standard imperialist goals and/or to establish "defensive alliances." Despite superficial similarities between various economic, political and even military mechanisms employed in these cases and those of the "new imperialism," the mechanisms employed by semi-peripheral countries differ substantially from imperialist subordination in the proper sense. This does not, of course, signify in any way that the policies of semi-peripheral countries become more progressive as a result.

We shall return to this topic in the concluding part of our text, and here will make just one additional remark. The foreign influences exerted by actors of the "central" countries do not always amount to impulses of imperialist aggression. In some instances, countries of the centre, or organisations based in them (socially-oriented NGOs, movements, and so forth) may also exert a progressive influence on the outside milieu (Abramson et al. 2011). In the case of states, this is somewhat of an exception. Moreover, in most cases, these

positive practices by imperialist states are part and parcel of the states' expansion, and are subject ultimately to the basic goals of manipulation and of extracting imperialist rent.

The capitalism of post-Soviet Russia, geopolitical economy (the nature of the foreign economic and political goals of the Russian capital and the Russian state)

What, then, characterises the Russian state as imperialist, in the view of many foreign and some Russian authors? If we leave aside invective and pure rhetoric, we are left with a number of arguments, which deserve to be paid very close attention, and which, moreover, contain a measure of truth.

The first argument adduced in order to show that Russia is a subject of the "new imperialism" is of a politico-economic character, and is linked to the fact that the country's economy is based to an important degree on production concentrated in the hands of large corporations. Moreover, many of these corporations have subsidiaries outside the Russian Federation, and invest money in projects abroad. At first glance, this would seem to confirm the presence in Russia of the economic basis for imperialist policies.

Later, we shall attempt to show that this "basis for imperialism" is no more than a mirage. For the present, let us stress that the appearance is not accidental. Within the Russian economy the level of concentration is indeed sufficient for the largest corporations to be regarded on this basis as monopolies (according to Lenin's definition). These firms undermine free competition, and thus display a feature specific to imperialism. But the economy of the present decade, unlike that of a hundred years ago, is global, and Russian corporations in their overwhelming majority cannot lay claim to the role of global transnationals. There are some exceptions, and hence some of the preconditions exist for the formation in Russia, not as rare exceptions but as the rule, of the kind of corporations that might serve as agents of imperialist expansion. We should recall these reservations, "as a rule," "in most cases," and so forth. We shall return to them later, since they are not fortuitous, and reflect the contradictory, transitional (from the Soviet system to the future system, that is not clear yet) nature of Russia's geoeconomic position. Moreover, some of the behaviour even of today's Russian transnational corporations recalls that of imperialist aggressors. But for the present, in the majority of cases, we are confronted almost exclusively with "normal" expansion (typical for the capitalist countries in the early and classical stages of capitalism), characteristic of any capital that has attained a scale large enough for it to enter world markets.

Imperialist aggression in the proper sense begins at the point where truly massive transnational capital that has been over-accumulated within the framework of the national economic system enters the world market as a subject of the manipulation of various segments of world economic processes.

Russian corporate capital does not at present belong to this category, and for this there are a number of reasons.

In the first place, Russia is not marked by an over-accumulation of capital. This is shown by the permanent shortage of investment within the country, a shortage that results less from the export of capital than from capital flight. For example, in 2014 the outflow of capital, at $153 billion, reached the highest level seen in the entire period for which the Russian Central Bank has collected statistics (Bank of Russia 2016). There are alternative

calculations for the outflow of capital, which argue that the official data are overstated by a factor of at least two (Osipov 2012). But even in this alternative calculation, the order of magnitude of the figures—tens of billions of dollars—remains unchanged.

It is important to note that in most cases, capital exports from the Russian Federation do not amount to long-term productive investments aimed at winning control over the periphery, but represent the flight of capital from taxes and instability. The sums concerned finish up in offshore zones[4] or as savings, in investments in property and other sources of stable, guaranteed profits in the countries of the "centre." This is a strategy that is typical of peripheral capital. Russian transnational corporations engage in very few merger deals and takeovers in which the assets acquired represent long-term investments aimed at international expansion. Moreover, these deals are oriented mainly towards developed countries.

The facts thus show that Russian capital exhibits par excellence the type of capital movement that is typical of peripheral countries subject to imperialist control. The sale of raw materials (or as a variant, of products created using cheap labour) yields revenues in freely convertible currency, and these funds are then invested in reliable assets in the countries of the "centre" or in offshore zones. As a consequence, the elements of Russian capital that are directed actively toward foreign economic operations are in most cases not merely non-imperialist, but have a straightforward comprador character.

Second, it is hard to consider Russian corporations as imperialist actors for the simple reason that they are mostly concerned with the extraction of raw materials. In addition, and unlike, say, the oil transnationals of the West, they do not export capital from their country with the aim of exploiting the raw materials resources of peripheral countries (we would say that they want such expansion, but are unable to carry it out), but export raw materials with the goal of obtaining the maximum profits, which they then invest in shares, securities, property and so forth in the countries of the "centre." Only a few of these raw materials corporations have made very timid attempts to compete with leading global transnationals, and the results have proved even worse than for many countries of the semi-periphery. Hence, only one Russian transnational corporation (and that with a resource profile) figured in the 2014 list of international merger and takeover deals involving sums greater than $3 billion. Meanwhile, this list featured non-resource corporations from such countries of the semi-periphery as South Korea, Chile and Brazil (United Nations 2015, A15).

Third, an important reason why Russian capital cannot be considered a fully-fledged participant in the "new imperialism" is the weakness of Russian financial corporations. The largest Russian banks are only about one-tenth the size of the world's largest financial transnationals,[5] and their goals and the nature of their operations bear little resemblance to aggressive imperialist capital.

The second argument adduced by supporters of the position that Russia can be considered an imperialist power addresses the military aspect of the question, and involves pointing to the presence in Russia of weapons of mass destruction and of a strong

[4] Statistics show that in the medium term the funds exported in the form of direct investments in offshore zones almost all return to Russia (Osipov 2012).

[5] According to the data of 2015, the share value of Sberbank, Russia's largest financial corporation, amounted to $378 billion (Expert RA 2015), and the share value of the world's largest bank, the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, was $3,317 billion (*Financial Times* 2015).

military-industrial complex, developed to the point where the Russian Federation is a large-scale arms exporter. Russia's military production further rests on a relatively developed scientific and technical apparatus, which has not been completely destroyed.

Here too, there are numerous counter-arguments.

In the first place, Russia's weapons of mass destruction (unlike those of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, abbreviated as USSR below) are now able to serve exclusively in the role of a deterrent, since most of them date from Soviet times, that is, they are more than a quarter-century old. New models exist, but judging from the resources allotted to the military-industrial complex and the fact that the United States is less than alarmed, these new weapons are still few. The development and production of strategic armaments in the present-day Russian Federation is not even remotely comparable to the analogous process in the USSR half a century ago (Podvig 1998, 116).

Most important, however, is the fact that possession of such weapons is not in itself a distinguishing mark of an imperialist power. China in the years from 1960 to 1980 had nuclear weapons, but could not lay claim even remotely to the role of an imperialist power. The real question is different: for what reason, and how, might the Russian authorities be prepared to use weapons of mass destruction? So far as the authors of these lines are concerned, there is only one reasonable answer: the weapons concerned are, for the present, and we hope will remain, solely a factor of deterrence. This applies not only to Russia, but also to China, the countries of the European Union, and even the United States. We have not the slightest doubt that American capital is imperialist, but the reason for this is not that the United States has nuclear weapons.

Second, the sale of weapons is not in itself a distinguishing mark of an imperialist power. Armaments are also sold by small countries, and by countries of the periphery. The important point lies in the fact that Russia is one of the largest weapons exporters. According to data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI 2015), Russia has consistently held second place in the world after the United States for its arms exports, increasing its share in the world market from 22% in 2005–9 to 27% in 2010–14, while the US shares during these periods were 29% and 31% respectively. Here, we see a definite potential for the Russian Federation to become a subject of the "new imperialism." But for this potential to become reality, a mere trifle is needed; the transformation of Russian capital into a real agent manipulating particular enclaves of the world market, and exporting capital with the aim of subjugating particular socio-economic expanses. Russia has none of this, or does not have for the present.

Third, it should be noted that the earlier-mentioned presence in Russia's real economy of a number of advanced sectors—science, education and several areas of high technology (the nuclear, space and metallurgical industries)—whose level is close to that of advanced countries, is only rarely mentioned as proof of the country's "imperial" character.

A third argument advanced by writers who consider Russia an imperialist power is of a politico-ideological nature. Not only "great-power" moods, but also imperial ones, are indeed strong in Russia (it should be emphasised that in addition to such public moods as pride for achievements of the country and nostalgia for the lost power, the presence of imperial moods should also be recognised as the essential component of public moods in modern Russia). As a rule, these sentiments are not voiced directly by leading state figures, but they are supported and cultivated within the Russian Federation. In our view this phenomenon is profoundly reactionary, but the question must be asked,

are we dealing here with a feature of the contemporary model of imperialism, typical of the twenty-first century?

The present authors would answer this in the negative. In today's Russia, the aim of restoring an imperial model of organisation of the former Soviet space, an aim that involves a chronotope of the Russian Empire, is put forward quite actively. But this goal, late-feudal in many of its respects, enjoys only the most limited popularity.

In the first place this imperative, while it might display an imperial form, for most Russian citizens represents in its content a yearning for the restoration of the best features of the Soviet system of relations, and in particular, of the phenomenon of the friendship of peoples. This imperative is not imperial in its content, as needs to be kept in mind when we consider the plans for integration in the post-Soviet space.

Second, Russia's actual politico-economic system of rule, which is fused with oligarchic capital, makes use of imperial slogans mainly as a tool for domestic political manipulation, aimed at creating a patriotic camouflage for the increasingly obvious social and economic contradictions that afflict Russian capitalism. The imperial trend cannot become a real foreign policy doctrine for the reasons we noted earlier, the comprador nature of the most powerful Russian capital, and the weakness of the Russian economy, which is dependent on the state of world raw materials and money markets.

Our answer to the third argument may be supplemented by some lines about internal political situation in Russia, which influences its geoeconomic and geostrategic behaviour. In many ways, the internal policies of the Russian state diverge from the line it pursues in its foreign policy. As noted earlier, Russia's socio-economic system is based on a combination of a semi-peripheral model of late capitalism with feudal and ex-Soviet elements. This pattern is also reflected to a large degree in internal policy. In formal terms, Russia's political system has the features of a standard bourgeois presidential republic. The president is elected by a direct vote, with competition between candidates from different parties. Multiple parties are represented in parliament. Mass media organs that directly criticise the line followed by the president (notable cases are the radio station Ekho Moskvy, the newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* and various internet publications), operate openly. In real terms, however, the Russian political scene is dominated by a single party, United Russia, whose hold is reinforced by the broad informal powers of the presidential administration. The central mass media, and especially the central television, unswervingly support official policies.

Politico-ideological trends in Russia are relatively diffuse, involving a contradictory combination of neoliberal economic and social ideas with an orientation toward strengthening the state and with conservatism in internal policy and ideology. The thesis is advanced actively of a need to combine the achievements of the Russian Empire and of the Stalinist model of the USSR with the goal of enhancing the present state authority.

It is important to stress that the social base of the present government is also contradictory. The obscure conflict between forces of "comprador" and "patriotic" orientation within the milieu of the bourgeoisie finds its expression less in inter-party struggles than in attempts to enlist support at top levels of the government and of the presidential administration. Most ordinary citizens of Russia support the foreign policy of the president, but at the same time take a critical attitude to the government's economic and social policies. It should be emphasised that the myth of a conflict between a patriotic, state-oriented president and a neoliberal government is widespread in the country.

Reinforced by the advance of NATO to the borders of Russia, Western sanctions and anti-Russian propaganda—not to say hysteria—in the mass media of the United States and European Union have created an impulse within the country to consolidate all social forces so as to ensure national security and avoid a new world war. This has the effect of camouflaging profound socio-economic contradictions, and acts to counter the activity of socially and democratically oriented forces. It is paradoxical but true that the anti-Russian actions of global capital are reinforcing the influence and increasing the popularity of the present Russian authorities, and are helping to strengthen pro-imperial tendencies and moods.

At the same time, Russia is home to a democratic, socially oriented intelligentsia that has considerable intellectual influence, and that works in dialogue with modest-sized but active independent trade unions and social movements. This trend is represented by dozens of popular websites, by a number of journals (including the quarterly *Alternatives*), and by the regular appearance of prominent figures from the above current on several television channels and radio stations. An interesting example here has been Aleksandr Buzgalin's weekly hour-long programme "The Living Marx," broadcast for six months on the federal radio station Komsomolskaya Pravda.

A fourth argument used by supporters of characterising Russia as an imperialist power is of a politico-economic nature, and in our view has somewhat greater weight than those dealt with previously. Its opponents maintain that Russia plays the role of an imperialist hegemon, if not on a world scale, then at least within the post-Soviet space.

Within the post-Soviet chronotope, the Russian Federation is indeed the largest and one of the most successful formations. Among the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) countries, it holds the top place for GDP per capita. Concentrated in Russia are the largest corporations. The Forbes rating of the world's 2000 largest corporations (Forbes 2015) includes only 11 firms from the CIS countries, 10 from Russia, and one from Kazakhstan, including banks (RIA Rating 2014). Moreover, Russia exports capital, including in the form of direct investments, to the countries of the CIS.

Here, however, the situation is far from straightforward. First of all, it should be noted that there is a contradiction between the need to support the integration and efficiency of economic exchange on the one hand, and the expansionist imperialist ambitions on the other.

In the first place, the overall volumes of the transactions in this area are extremely small. Comparing Russia's exports of capital to the countries of the CIS with those to the countries of the "centre," plus offshore zones, shows that Russia's "imperialist" activity in the CIS has been extremely weak. The CIS countries do not make it even into the top 10 destinations for Russian capital exports. The data for the average annual flows of Russian FDI (Foreign Direct Investment) to the countries of the world show Belarus in 11th place and Ukraine in 14th, with a large gap separating the absolute indices for these countries from those for the first 10 (Kuznetsov 2011, 19). The more significant relations are with countries on approximately the same level of economic (and primarily, industrial) development—Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine.

Second, and this is of fundamental importance, Russia's relations with a number of CIS countries are ambivalent and contradictory. With Ukraine, for example, Russia until 2014 had an extremely ambiguous relationship; Russian oligarchs sought actively to penetrate the Ukrainian economic space (Vasilyev, Golovin, and Sedakov 2014), and Ukrainian

oligarchs that of Russia (Romanova 2016). The same may be said of the interaction of the Russian Federation with Kazakhstan, Belarus and Azerbaijan.

Finally, it is wrong to suppose that any and all movement of goods and capital in the post-Soviet space has to be regarded as resulting from imperialist aggression on the part of one country or another. The world of late capitalism features not only the hegemonic relations of corporate capital (including those that take the form of the "new imperialism"), but also objectively indispensable, positive processes of integration and cooperation, that become established in the interrelationships between various actors in the world socio-economic space.

In the post-Soviet expanse, these integrative tendencies are even stronger. We have written repeatedly that restoring these bonds of integration between our countries would be progressive from the technological, economic, social and cultural points of view. Meanwhile, the politico-economic form that these (still extremely weak) integrative processes assume in the post-Soviet space consists mainly of relations of a late-capitalist peripheral and semi-peripheral type.

The most important, and perhaps also the strongest argument advanced by all those who consider Russia an imperialist aggressor is the fifth**.** This argument is geopolitical in nature. Its essence consists in the "annexation" (from their point of view of Russia's opponents, without the inverted commas) and the "aggression" (again from their point of view, without the inverted commas) perpetrated by Russia against Ukraine in the Donbass.

We have already devoted a number of texts to the multipolar contradictions of space and time displayed by these conflicts (Bulavka-Buzgalina 2014; Kolganov 2014; Buzgalin 2015). Without repeating what is said there, we shall now permit ourselves to make use of some of the conclusions put forward in those articles.

We shall begin by noting that a breach of the "rules of the game" established by global capital is not necessarily an act of imperialist aggression. In certain circumstances it may be more progressive (that is, accord better with the interests of citizens) than observing those rules. Consequently, the question of how to characterise the actions of the Russian Federation in Crimea and the Donbass does not consist in whether a breach occurred of rules drawn up within the framework of so-called "international law," but in whether or not this violation was progressive from the point of view of the interests of the citizens of Crimea and the Donbass.

Here, however, there are important "nuances."

It is true that the Russian Federation in 2014 acted as a direct opponent of NATO, and this set an important precedent. Moreover, these steps by Russia posed a question that is both theoretical and practical: what can be considered more progressive (that is, conducive to peace, to eco-socio-humanitarian development, to democracy and to respect for human rights),

(1) a world in which NATO, as in essence the sole global hyper-cop, supports the world order imposed by the countries of the Centre, or
(2) a multi-polar world in which other countries too can actively (and moreover, by force of arms) defend their right to a piece of the pie of global hegemony?

It is possible to reject this question, declaring that neither alternative is acceptable and that what is needed is either worldwide peace, to be attained through the non-violent actions of pacifist NGOs and other peaceful forces, or else world socialist revolution.

Speaking frankly, we would be delighted if either of these variants could be realised in the near historical perspective.

But as the experience of the war in south-eastern Ukraine shows, we are forced to choose between two devils, not between two angels.

In the case of Crimea, Russia did not bring with it to the peninsula a socially oriented democracy and a rebirth of Soviet traditions (the latter was the dream of a significant section, let us say, of the residents of Sevastopol), but merely the familiar Russian "Jurassic capitalism." At least in Crimea there has not been a war, unlike the case in the Donbass, and the 90% of the Crimean population who are Russian speakers will not be compelled to use the Ukrainian language. Nor will the remaining 10% be forced to use Russian. As was shown in our earlier-cited publications, the actions of the Russian authorities, despite a diverse range of adverse outcomes, brought the citizens of the peninsula more pluses than minuses. This is the unmistakable feeling of the Crimean population, as we have repeatedly found cause to be convinced, both during repeated visits to Crimea, and through the analysis of a large volume of materials.

Still more important is the fact that the Russian authorities, while providing humanitarian and ideological support for the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics (the DPR and LPR), in many instances have followed policies there as well that counteract the positive, socially oriented goals that the citizens of this region began to initiate. But again, and for all the negative features of the Russian intervention in the affairs of the new republics (but not of a war against Ukraine, which Russia is not waging), the participation by volunteers from Russia in support of the struggle conducted by the militias is a progressive phenomenon. This contradiction is not something absolutely new; history knows more than a few examples of progressive foreign policy acts by states whose internal policies are reactionary (examples include the shift to neighbourly relations with the USSR carried out by the semi-feudal rulers of a number of Asian countries in the 1920s and 1930s).

By the same token, we would argue that violating the "rules of the game" imposed by global capital may be either progressive or regressive, depending on who carries out such an action, to what ends and with what result. If the vector of this action is toward even a partial alleviation of the social alienation that prevails in the world, then it deserves support.

In the particular circumstances we are discussing, this means that the return of Crimea to Russia after 60 years and the defence by the citizens of the Donbass of their rights to self-determination, along with the support for these actions by the citizens and the authorities of the Russian Federation, make up a phenomenon that is profoundly contradictory but in the final analysis, relatively positive.

The stress we place on the relative quality of this judgment is not fortuitous. Behind this conflict stood not only questions of language, of regional rights and so forth, but also a struggle between two internally contradictory groupings of oligarchic clans—on the one hand, the more or less pro-Western capital holdings of the centre and west of Ukraine, and on the other, the more Russian-aligned capital of the south-east. The story here has been one of alternating fortunes; Kuchma and Yushchenko, Yanukovych and Poroshenko

have all acted on behalf of oligarchic groups that have achieved a temporary ascendancy in this struggle. In one way or another, all of them have exploited the discontent felt by the broad masses with the whole class of oligarchs and with the rules the oligarchs have set in place. None of the oligarchic groups is more progressive, or less so; they are no more (though equally, no less) than corporate clans of the sort that are typical of the semi-peripheral countries, one of which is Ukraine and another, Russia. Both sides here are equally reactionary.

The only things that are relatively progressive here are the actions of various people involved, including those who came onto the Maidan calling for the departure of the larcenous Yanukovych group; those who voted in the Crimean referendum to make clear that for all the drawbacks of Russian capitalism, they regarded a return to Russia as better for them; and those in the Donbass who took up arms when their homes and schools began to be bombed and shelled by the forces that had ridden to power on the wave of the Kiev Maidan.

What we see playing out here is a dialectic that is impossible to fit into the cliché of an imperialist Russia and a Ukraine that is defending itself against an aggressor.

Returning to geopolitical and economic theory, we are able to state that whether the Russian actions surrounding Crimea and the Donbass are regarded positively or negatively, these actions bear the stamp of the "commonplace" external conflicts that are typical of relations between peripheral and semi-peripheral countries. From a theoretical point of view, these conflicts differ little from many other clashes between countries of Asia, Latin America and Africa. Again from the theoretical point of view, a very interesting and little-researched question opens up here, involving the nature of the aggression displayed by the capitals and states of peripheral and semi-peripheral countries in their conflicts with one another. The question concerns how and most importantly, why these conflicts regularly arise, and who brings them about (the in-depth research of the global processes which are forming the modern international order from the positions of geopolitical economy is presented by Desai [2013]).

From the point of view of practice, and of the interests of the people who in their thousands and tens of thousands lose their homes and lives, this question takes on a far more rigorous character, how do we stop these conflicts from endlessly being repeated, or escalated?

Formally speaking, neither of these questions is part of the topic of this text, but we shall comment briefly on them in the conclusion.

Can a country of the semi-periphery be an imperialist aggressor?

This question has already become the topic of lively discussions (Bond and Garcia 2015). In our view such a thing is possible, but only in certain respects, and only in part. Let us be more specific. Proceeding from what has been said above, we may define as the "centre" those economic and political expanses (countries, their alliances, networks of global players) that are the subjects of hegemony (in particular, of the manipulation of other economic and political actors).

On the basis of this we are able to state that the opposite side, the "periphery," cannot possess this quality. In other words, to the degree to which a country does not possess the qualities of the imperialist "centre," and is unable to exercise hegemony, it can be

considered part of the periphery. As such, it cannot be an imperialist aggressor. This is not to deny that countries of the periphery may be the subjects of other, non-imperialist, acts of local aggression, and even of wars; they have carried out these acts in the past, and more than likely will continue to do so.

Accordingly, the question of whether a particular politico-economic space has a semi-peripheral status is determined by the degree to which the actors that are part of it (countries, their alliances and so forth) are able to carry out local manipulative actions, extending to particular limited areas of the world chronotope.

To the degree to which Russia, together with its corporate capital, is able, in part and in various spheres within the post-Soviet space, to exercise a manipulative influence on other players, it can be considered a semi-peripheral country whose capital and state have expansionist urges (like capital in general, and twenty-first century corporate capital in particular).

Here, however, there are several crucially important "nuances," which we cannot fail to note as we conclude our analysis.

First, and as was shown earlier, the state and the transnational corporations in Russia are quite comparable in many respects with those of other large CIS countries (above all, Ukraine prior to 2014, Belarus and Kazakhstan). All four of these countries can be described as "semi-peripheral."

Second, it should be recalled that through the study conducted earlier we showed that the main aim of Russian capital and of the Russian state is to enter the global expanse of the movement of goods and capitals, of corporate and geopolitical manipulations, of ideological and cultural pressures, on terms at least relatively close to those enjoyed by the countries and capitals of the "centre." This Russian goal, however, is being realised only to a very weak degree. Further, Russia is not a "centre," able to manipulate its partners, even within the framework of the Eurasian Economic Community (and its successor the Eurasian Economic Union).

In other words, the capital and state of the Russian Federation are predators (like all capitals and all capitalist states), but predators of the "second rank." The Russian actors (the state, corporations and so forth) do not at present have the ability to manipulate other participants in world economic and political processes and impose their "rules of the game" on the rest of the world. They are able "merely" (1) to occupy niches that have temporarily become vacant in the process of competition among the main global players; (2) to divide up the "leftovers" of the world geo-economic and geopolitical pie, in competition with similar "second-rank" predators; (3) at times, to resist aggression and excessively flagrant manipulation on the part of predators of the "first rank"; and (4) to strive for hegemony in relation to certain other countries only in cases where they enjoy powerful support within these countries from forces that have a stake in allying themselves with Russia, even if this alliance is not on an equal basis.

The last point here, almost the only one that distinguishes the Russian Federation from other semi-peripheral countries, is not the result of actions by modern Russian actors so much as it represents the Soviet heritage.

The military-industrial complex that we inherited from the USSR, the nostalgia of many actors in the global politico-ideological "drama" for the era of friendship with the Soviet Union, and various other factors have allowed the Russian Federation in a number of cases during 2014 and 2015 (those of Crimea and to some degree, the Donbass and

Syria) to act in the style of the former Soviet power. The politicians and the peoples of Crimea, the Donbass, Syria and elsewhere have seen the Russian Federation as constituting not so much the oligarchs and corrupt bureaucrats (that is, the actual rulers of our country) as the heir of the USSR.

Hopes of a return of the Soviet power (not empire!), of the restoration of at least some features of a bipolar world and of a limitation on the undivided dominance of capital and of the states of the "centre" are what basically lies behind the successes of the Russian Federation in the new geopolitics.[6] These are the sources of the support, which the citizens and politicians of many countries around the world, and also the majority of Russian citizens, have given to the geopolitical moves by the Russian president. The Russian Federation has permitted itself (though on a very limited scale) to do what only the world socialist system could earlier permit itself—to defy the rules set down by the "first-rank predators."

This latter has become effectively the main reason impelling supporters of the power of the "centre" (to be more blunt, of the power of global corporate capital) to launch an active campaign criticising the Russian Federation as an imperialist aggressor. This aspect is stressed in a book published by a group of US scholars (Lendman 2014). As the key to the position of most of the authors of this work on the question concerned, we may take the phrase of John McMurtry, who reiterated what the authors of these lines (Buzgalin and Kolganov) have stated repeatedly in Russia and abroad, "For the first time in the past 25 years Russia has forced a halt to the expansion, directed by the United States, of the transnational machine and NATO" (Lendman 2014, 245). Consequently, it is no accident either that virtually all those who in earlier times sought to unmask the USSR as the "evil empire" (these ranged from ultra-right-wing conservatives, through liberals to various "leftists") have now emerged as critics of Russian "imperialist aggression."

Here, the saddest aspect is not simply that the positions adopted by the leadership of post-Soviet Russia, even in the area of foreign policy, are substantially different from the strategies of the Soviet leaders. Still worse is the fact that the domestic line of today's Russian leadership (this applies above all to social and economic policy) is basically subordinated to the interests of oligarchic capital. As a result, Russia is prevented from initiating any fundamentally new model of the world order, and this has the effect of quickly alienating from Russia billions of potential friends in the countries both of the "centre" and of the "periphery." These are people who are waiting for strong leaders of a qualitatively new world politics, capable at least of limiting the hegemony of global capital.

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[6] Metaphorically speaking, we can say that Russia was the first and so far the only country that has given a public slap in the face of NATO, in the first place—in the issue of the Crimea. Russia's successes in the new geopolitics consist in the return of the Crimea and increasing influence on the formation of independent states, as well as recognition of Russia as a "soft power" even by foreign analysts. The main success lies in the fact that Russia was able to directly counteract the interests of Washington and Brussels and impede the implementation of their geopolitical ambitions.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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