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## ON THE PERIPHERAL CHARACTER OF RUSSIA

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**Abstract:** This article argues that space is one of the formative elements in the construction of Russianness and explores how the occupation of the territory shaped the development of the country. Drawing on examples, I argue that 1. Russia can be presented as a conglomerate of marginalities – a centre and a periphery in itself. 2. Russian peripheries are not just plural, but also orientated towards different directions. The core deploys therefore a centripetal force. 3. The poly-periphery that constitutes Russia produces an extended liminality. 4. The Russian territory is not just conceptualised as vast, but also as infinite and contradictory. 5. There is a persistence of imperial logic in Russian politics. As a result, we can observe a continuous comeback of spatial elements in the configuration of cultural discourses and in the articulation of power; also the impossibility of full incorporation into the world system.

**Keywords:** Russian empire, space and liminality, peripheral colonisation, geographical culture.

### INTRODUCTION

Britain had an empire, but Russia was an empire  
Geoffrey Hosking (1997: 41)

This article presents the occupation of the territory in Russia as a unifying experience that depends, paradoxically, upon a great heterogeneity and fantastic extension. In this sense, Russia can be understood as an empire composed of margins, being a centre and an edge itself – hence a peripheral heartland, a centre out there (Turner, 1973). Periphery and empire are spatial and political categories that describe a geographical position and a form of power. These terms are therefore relational, referring to a dynamic process of contestation and crystallisation.

Here Russia is presented as a poly-logical country that combines core and periphery, centre and marginality, horizontality and verticality. I'll argue that this is to a

great extent provoked by the geopolitical position of the country and by its colonisation process. The history of Russia is the story of repeated policies willing to create "imperial space". The construction of an Empire has become the *raison d'être* of the Russian government for centuries. Furthermore, assuming that "imperial space" is one of the formative elements in the construction of Russianness and that the occupation of the territory shaped the social development of the country, I put forward that:

1. Space is a symbolic natural resource; as precious and addictive for the Russian government as the gas and oil endowment for the economy.

2. Russian peripheries are not just plural and heterogeneous, but also orientated towards different directions. The core, the capital of the Empire, deploys therefore a centripetal force.

3. The difficulty of controlling fragmentary peripheral regions has been used as a justification for repressive measures and consolidation of power. This resulted in perpetual problems of governance.

4. The poly-periphery that constitutes the Russian Federation produces an extended liminality. This extended threshold experience is not self-generated, but internalized (within social dynamics and individual mindsets) from historical and geographical circumstances.

5. The formation of the Russian empire was determined by loops in development, contra-reactions and repairing needs (remonts). Furthermore, the maintenance of the Empire can be understood as a social dilemma, since it constraints the future (the sustainable development) of the Russian society while enabling (a fragile) strength in the present.

6. The Russian territory is not just conceptualised as vast, but also as infinite, superimposed and contradictory, manifesting fantastic dimensions and qualities beyond geography, culture or governance. In Russian culture, land has not limits ('neobyatny prostor'), being consequently a source of fantasies and phobias.

7. There is a persistence of imperial logic in Russian politics. As a result, we can observe a repeated comeback of spatial elements in the configuration of cultural discourses and in the articulation of power, as well as the impossibility of full incorporation into the world system.

The text is composed in the form of intellectual 'bricolage', as a construction made from a diverse range of things and as the result of a process of tinkering. This artistic style might reduce the academic accuracy of the piece, improving instead the transdisciplinary, inclusive and experimenting character of the work. As described by Lévi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind* (1962), the notion of 'bricolage' helps to understand

the patterns of mythological thought, as a re-use of available materials in order to solve new problems.

## PROBLEMATIC PROPERTIES

They have their Hamlets, but we still have our Karamazovs!

Fyodor M. Dostoevsky (2002: 1034)<sup>1</sup>

In a recent lecture, Mihhail Lotman remarked that the Russian space has a liminal character *par excellence*, functioning as intermediary, membrane, isolator and black-hole.<sup>2</sup> As such, it is an *ensamblage*; a poly-periphery constituted by broad regions and a plethora of disparate communities and cultures; a collage of scraps, voids, dwellings and natural wealth depredated from an inaccessible core. Sergei Medvedev describes it as a conglomerate of peripheries (1999), a physical and mental borderland that includes cultures so diverse (and dispersed) as the Mediterranean, Islamic, Buddhist, Mongol, Turkic, Chinese, Ugro-finnic or Circassian (to name but a few).

Medvedev defines as 'problematic properties' the features that helped the Russians to widen the area of settlement but generated a complex occupation and prevented authorities from mastering the space. Among them, Medvedev enlists the lack of evident natural barriers, uneven distribution of population, bad communications, traditionally oppressive institutions and bureaucracy, savage nature, marginality, one-dimensional factor (stretching west to east in a 10,000 km strip), geographical contradictions (rigid monocentric culture coexists with distant territories and disproportion in the level of development), and culture lacking a spatial sense (Medvedev, 1999: 16-19).

In Medvedev's view, distances are too great and natural boundaries are not sufficiently delineated, which would reconcile Russians with the centralized government that ignores historical-cultural regions and imposes administrative divisions. The consequence is that any political action in Russia has a spatial meaning (*ibidem*: 21). In his novel *Petersburg* (1913), Andrey Bely describes the Russian space as organized in the form of concentric circles, with the capital of the empire at its centre. Russia is a collection of states, territories and regions, a conglomerate of peripheries that are not just plural and culturally different, but also orientated towards different directions. The core, the capital of the Empire, deploys therefore a centripetal force that imposes discursive relations of dependence. In this sense, the relatively

<sup>1</sup> Dostoevsky, Fiódor M. (2002), *Los hermanos Karamázov*. Madrid: Cátedra.

<sup>2</sup> Lecture "Russian Space. Blessing or Curse?" given in the Tallinn University Winter School, January 2014.

frequent motion of the centre (the translocation of the capital of the empire), has necessarily reshaped both the forces mastering the system of dependence as well as the discourse through which the power is practiced.

Overall, the geographical immensity, abundance of natural resources, vertical way of ruling, and irrational conceptualisation of the space have determined the social development of Russia, favouring a depredator economic model and concentration of wealth in the hands of a minuscule elite, distancing citizens and authorities in a sort of castle/ borderland of feudal logic. The vertical power still describes the way of ruling in a country in which, symptomatically, the borderland extends almost to the infinite.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the opportunity to escape to 'new lands' led to paradoxical outcomes that include limited civic responsibility and radical separation between people and rulers.<sup>4</sup>

For Medvedev, such interplay between authority, territory and people dates back to the mid-sixteenth century, when Ivan IV conquered the Tatar capital of Kazan. Such historical event had political and geographical implications that determined the evolution of the country: the original Rus' extended beyond its confines; the Metropolitan of Moscow became Patriarch; the Moscow Prince became Tsar; state authority over the territory became more complex (vast and heterogeneous); and central power was obliged to allocate more resources to defend borders and combat enemies – the state became a key economic actor, favouring mono-production and distribution in kind to the detriment of exchange relations and entrepreneurship (Medvedev, 1999: 20-21).

From as far back as the Kievan Rus, the 'Russkaya Zemlya' (Russian territory) has been conceived as a space rather than as state;<sup>5</sup> foreign travellers called Kievan Rus the 'land of cities'; and for centuries Russia was just a commercial route between the Baltic and the Black and Caspian Seas.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, the majority of people in Western Russia had their movements controlled by landlords, giving birth to the popularity of mobile figures such as the pilgrim or the wanderer in this culture (Polouektova, 2009: 117) and justifying the interpretation of territory as a spiritual refuge and alternative view of reality.

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<sup>3</sup> Caroline Humphrey points out that the overall structure of power relations in Russia appears as "a series of equivalent positions in nesting hierarchies, such that a similar domination may be exercised at each level" (Humphrey, 1994: 24).

<sup>4</sup> We can recognise certain patterns of nomadism with the creation of Potemkin villages and collective tendencies to runaway when troubled. According to George Nivat (2007), the prevailing nomadism of Russian culture has become an archetype of instability.

<sup>5</sup> It was Peter I who began to say 'Russia' instead of *Russ* (See Meyer, 2007: 14).

<sup>6</sup> The Scandinavian name for Rus, Gardarika, means 'land of fortresses', or 'land of towns'. See A. Grishin-Almazov (1998: 73).

Both Sergei Solov'ev and Vasily Kliuchevsky present the development of Russia as conditioned by the process of spreading and stopping over the population. According to Soloviev, it has happened as a social pattern; in Kliuchevsky's opinion, it rather occurred as succession of historical periods.<sup>7</sup> An important socio-cultural reason for moving to new territories was people's aspiration to escape from authorities and from the state, to embody an ideal of freedom, to move to distant 'free lands' and to begin an ideal life represented and cultivated in national Utopias. This aspiration secured the preservation of pre-state culture, its development into an anti-statist culture, the formation of groups that fluctuated between state service and revolt, weakness of responsibility for the state's day-to-day activity, and a gap between the authorities and the people. People reacted to their discontent with authority not by trying to change it, improve it, or take responsibility for it, but by moving *en masse* as a way to preserve and activate pre-state archaic values in all spheres of human activity (Akhiezer, 2004: 11). For certain periods of history, this attitude to state authorities should be treated as the primary factor driving colonization. In response, the authorities from which people were trying to escape reacted by enslaving peasants, or the entire population of the country, and also by the use of mass terror (*ibidem*). Likewise, distance has been traditionally applied in Russia as a punishment (i.e. sending prisoners to Siberia). A separation from the core meant not just a negation of any opportunity of personal development, but also a human degradation. All this gave rise to a specific attitude toward space, linking it with the value of will, with the possibility of irresponsible existence, with the promise of opportunity to escape from problems into a mythological, problem-free condition (*ibidem*).

A good metaphor for Russia's unique spatial formation was given by Yuri Slezkine, who proposed to view the ethno-political structure of the Soviet Union as a communal apartment with separate rooms for certain nations (Slezkine, 2006). By the light of this metaphor, study of Russia's spatial formation demands consideration of the need to escape from this *komunalka*, alongside consideration of the abundance of territory to which to flee. Elena Hellberg-Hirn suggests that home and homeland might be understood in Russia as a set of concentric circles, employing two kinds of centrality: individual and collective (Hellberg-Hirn, 1999: 63). An example of this is the rhetoric of the Russian election campaign of 1996, when the then Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin launched the slogan *Nash dom Rossiia* (Russia Our Home), assuming a meta-belonging that is territorial rather than civic, national or ethnic.

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<sup>7</sup> See Sergei Soloviev, 1962 and Vasily Kliuchevsky, 1956c.

Hellberg-Hirn describes the dynamics within the Russian space as arising from the opposition between the inwards and oppressive home and the limitless and open homeland; a home and an anti-home, in a way. According to Yuri Lotman, home is a place which is one's own, a place of safety, culture and divine protection. Conversely, the anti-home is the centre of the abnormal world, an alien area connected to death (Lotman, 1990: 185-190). Lotman illustrates how both psychological and physical aspects of daily life are inseparable in Russian culture, traditionally created around life-places and liminal digressions.

Several Russian speakers whom I met in the last years described themselves as living "in an aquarium" or "in Lilliput". Such statement came from people residing in the Baltic region, which lacks, in the view of my interlocutors, a proper extension and is over-bounded. Contrarily, there is in Russia a tradition of grandiosity and monumentality, according to which 'big is good, big is strong' (Stites, 1999: 259-263). The paradox here is that the spatial grandiosity of Russia has to be confirmed, however, by a high concentration in a core, manifested sometimes in oppressive and inhuman forms. We can find this, for example, in the juxtaposition of empty unused expanses with tiny and crowded work or living spaces in most of Russian cities.

In her study of love and sexual stories in communal apartments, Anna Rotkirch (1999) describes how journeys in the Soviet Union were motivated by a lack for private space – a need to escape that was both physical and psychological, owing to how everyday urban life was circumscribed by social conventions as much as by the crowded living spaces. Work travels (Komandirovki), thus provided the scarce commodity of private alternative *physical space* (Rotkirch, 1999: 131-134). Overall, in Soviet Russia journeys seemed to provide an especially important possibility for escaping but also as a rite of initiation, as we can read in stories of vacations to the South (*ibidem*: 136).<sup>8</sup> The extensive space out there became, therefore, an intimate home, a refuge where to escape from everyday relations, a lover that never says 'no'.

## EMPIRE OF PERIPHERIES

The history of Russia is the history of a country that colonizes itself.

Vasili Kliuchevsky (*apud* Pipe, 1974: 14)<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> "With a family of two or three generations in the same room, sharing the kitchen and bathroom with the neighbours, sexual encounters required careful organization and spatial innovation in the form of self-made walls, secret places and borrowed apartments. The shame and frustration created by the constant lack of private space is, not surprisingly, a leitmotif in collected autobiographies about love and sexuality from Leningrad / St. Petersburg". (Rotkirch, 1999: 132)

<sup>9</sup> Pipes, Richard (1974), *Russia under the Old Regime*. New York: Scribner.

In this article, I explore the persistence of imperial logic in Russian politics and what the recent manifestations of this pattern are. Spatial elements perennially come back in the organisation of the Russian society. For instance, Lenin described communism as Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country. Moreover, the emergence of Russia as a state has not depended upon a founding political act, economic strategy or national will, but rather on spatial occupation. Originally, Russia appeared as an abstract conglomerate of lands, 'accidentally' Christianised and politicised. Hence, the understanding of nation, people and empire, and the evolution of these notions, occurred in Russia not only later but all in one. Here I argue that this process was accidental, dependent on historical contingencies and geographical circumstances, rather than following a gradual development. As Medvedev asserts, "the Russian Empire was the consequence and a hostage of its geography". He explains it as a symbolic assimilation and simulation that has Moscow as a generative model of this hyper-reality (Medvedev, 1999: 27).

At the Paris *Exposition Universelle* of 1900, the tsarist pavilion included a section devoted to the empire's peripheries (as later done in the Soviet VDNKh). Indeed, Prime Minister Petr Stolypin assigned at the time a central place to this in his program of reforms (Masoero, 2013: 59). Both the Russian state and society developed an addiction to peripheries, compelled to fall into that dependence on account of spatial and historical conditions, instead of being planned or self-generated. This suggestion is inspired by what Alexander Etkind (2011: 6-7) describes as 'internal colonization', a notion that focuses on the particular cognitive framework created in Russia (becoming both the subject and object of Orientalism) and how the mode of domination applied to the colonies was 'brought home' in different periods and aspects (Ross, 1996: 7). Such a boomerang effect was partially voluntary partially aberrant and unexpected. The identification with and idealization of the effect of the boomerang was used and abused by the core, but also reproduced and enjoyed by the population in an act of mimicry. This pattern appeared accidentally, based on situational reactions, yet soon generated its own hybridity.

A considerable number of scholars has already observed that both the government's and the people's perception of the Russian state were affected by the timing of the creation, the patterns of expansion and the geography of the Russian empire. For instance, Geoffrey Hosking states that the position of an imperial identity impeded the formation of a Russian ethnic and civic nation, and that the cost of empire forced the Russian peasantry into serfdom. In Russia, conceptions of state, peoples, and nations have intermingled, making it impossible to separate them analytically



(Hosking, 1997: 19-21).<sup>10</sup> Moreover, Russians became simultaneously ‘imperial people’ – proud of their conquests – and enslaved populations, colonialized through the core (Kagarlitsky, 2008: 127).

As Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper remind us, the Ottoman, Romanov, and Habsburg empires “were not Turkish, Russian, and Germanic peoples ruling ‘others,’ even if there were people within these empires who advocated Turkifying, Russifying, or Germanizing policies” (Burbank and Cooper, 2010: 368). “Where, actually, was the center of this colonial power?” asks cultural critic Boris Buden – “There is no answer to this question... the center is empty”, continuous, adding that “the Russian people, those were alleged subject, they experienced themselves the Soviet communism as a colonial power” (Buden, 2009: 66).<sup>11</sup> Several accounts have also noted the vague constitution of the centre of the Empire. Tony Judt, for instance, finds it to be: “poorer and more backward than its subjugated periphery” (Judt, 2006: 167). Along similar lines, George Bataille states that: “the Soviet Union... is a framework in which any nation can be inserted: It could later incorporate a Chilean Republic in the same way as a Ukrainian Republic is already incorporated” (Bataille, 1991: 151).

Discussing Soviet Russia, Irina Sandomirskaia points out three objections to subsuming the post-socialist territories under the colonial paradigm. Firstly, postcolonial scholars tend not to include Soviet and post-Soviet cultures into their academic agendas, primarily as a result of a basic lack of competence (and though this deficiency has been considerably addressed in recent years, the work remains inconclusive and the immense diversity of post-Soviet locations and contexts are yet to be accounted for). Secondly, Sandomirskaia argues that colonialism and colonisation originate in West European modernity and that colonialism is an intervention from the West – not from the East. Thirdly, she draws attention to the fact that the Soviet state did attempt to balance economic development (unsuccessfully) and engaged with campaigns against illiteracy, the modernization of everyday life, ideological education and other measures against the population’s ‘cultural retardedness’ (Sandomirskaia, 2008: 8).

To Sandomirskaia’s objection, we could add a fourth: that the form of domination in Russia was continental, unpredictable, with people on the periphery better off than those in the central provinces. Dominic Lieven (2004), for instance notes that many of

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<sup>10</sup> When the Bolsheviks came to power in October 1917, their initial vision of the state was very different from that of the majority of Russian intellectuals, claiming then that the Russian empire had been created by brute force. However, once the consolidation of the Soviet state became Stalin’s main priority, the Soviet textbooks began to claim that virtually all the non-Russians had come under Moscow/Petersburg’s control voluntarily.

<sup>11</sup> Translations done by the author.

Russia's peripheral areas were wealthier and culturally more sophisticated than the imperial centre. Likewise, the Tsarist court co-opted ethnic elites in order to better incorporate territories and attracted and settled foreigners by giving them privileges over Russians. Hence, even if we do consider the conceptual and relational approach in the post-colonial model to be a useful one (Morozov, 2013), it is important to acknowledge the limitations of such a comparison; and to avoid drawing up direct parallels. Rather, we should differentiate not only the Russian and the Soviet experience, but due to profound political, ethical, and aesthetic differences between these projects, also the socialist and colonialist projects (Yurchak, 2006: 9).

Drawing on Alexander Etkind's concept of 'internal colonization' (2011), and Sergei Medvedev's understanding of 'conglomerate of peripheries' (1999), I move forward by presenting Russia as a 'poly-peripheral' empire, simultaneously marginal and central in its inner and international dimension. Russia is, as such, understood as a meta-territoriality, manifested as a habit of thought, a frame of reference, and an arrangement of power (Burbank, Hagen and Remnev, 2007). The consequences of such a formation might include an irrational conceptualisation of the space and a looping and fragmented way of development.

## SPACE AS A SOCIAL FACT

In Russian culture, East and West are not directions or spatial categories, but concrete places.

Mihhail Lotman<sup>12</sup>

Along these lines, it is proposed that the Russian spatial regime can be understood as a formation (not just a framework) that affects the way society is constituted. For Georg Simmel, "space in general is only an activity of the mind" and "the emphasis on the spatial meanings of things and processes is not unjustified" (Simmel, 1997: 138). Any spatial regime includes elements that are prior to perception, i.e. conceptualisations that are amended generation after generation yet nonetheless reproduced. The poly-peripheral empire, therefore, possesses an obduracy, a tendency to persist independently of Revolutions, wars, margins lost or margins acquired; that is owed to a spatial arrangement that has been institutionalized and socially embedded – crossing the boundaries of change in spite of huge social disruptions.

As recounted in numerous Soviet accounts, Lenin arrived to the heart of the Bolshevik revolution by train, appearing in the Finland Railway station of Petrograd the

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<sup>12</sup> Lecture "Russian Space. Blessing or Curse?" given in the Tallinn University Winter School, January 2014.

3<sup>rd</sup> of April of 1917.<sup>13</sup> Nine years later, Walter Benjamin was taking notes in his diary about a map hanging nearby the Moscow Kremlin. On that map, dozens of lights showed all the cities in which Lenin put his feet. The mausoleum that hosts his embalmed corpse was already built in the new heart of the new empire; nonetheless, the Soviet leader had still to be immortalised on the whole Soviet space.

Spatiality occurs as an integral part of a larger concern; it is being the arena wherein social processes and interactions are actualised. Furthermore, no spatial regime can be displaced in a simple motion, evolving as an embedded condition of existence (which accounts for their continuity and obduracy). A spatial regime is not just a mirror of a given society, but also a drive that shapes everyday life enhancing notions of reality (knowledge), evidencing power relations and producing discursive coherence.

I have chosen three songs and four movies as examples of how space is taken in Russian culture. The first song is *Moi address soviet sky soyuz* ('My address is Soviet Union'), which praises the Soviet territory as an absolute and abstract construction ('If you want to know where I live, don't expect any street, or building, just write down Soviet Union'). The second is *Doragoj dlinnyu* ('Long is the road/Those were the days'), which refers to the enormous distances in Russia and the singular experience that it is to travel there, and here is taken as a metaphor of life itself. The third is *Shiroka strana moia rodnaia* ('Vast is my native land'), which presents the geographical extension of the homeland as a feature to be proud of, enabling the coexistence of different communities, whilst also conceding a sense of identity uniqueness ('Vast is also my soul').

The first film is Dziga Vertov's *A sixth part of the world* ('*Shestaya Chast Mira*', 1926), an anthropological travelogue that urges the viewer to acknowledge and integrate peripheral diversities, and documents the cultural tolerance and historical propensity to socially merge that the Russians have displayed over centuries. In the second selected film, *Storm over Asia* ('*Potomok Chingiz Khana*', 1928), the Mongolian population appears exploited by American and British occupants. As the film unfurls, the Soviets propagandistically help the main character (the heir of Chingiz Khan) in his attempts to drive the imperialist occupiers out of his country. Vsevolod Pudovkin's master piece (with a magnificent visual hardness and impressive landscape of steppe, mountains and forest), represents a common assumption among Russians ('we supported colonised countries, helping to liberate from imperialism'); but ignores, the

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<sup>13</sup> Russia had 30,000 km of railway tracks by 1890, and doubled by 1914 (Meyer, 2007: 28).

fact that integration of communities into their empire was not a choice of these communities part. As historian Patricia Seed remarked:

Histories of the independence of the formerly colonized were similarly narrated as straight forward stories of liberation in which the formerly colonial powers were unproblematically villainous and the formerly colonized were equally evidently virtuous. Such studies narrowly constrained what could be said about both colonized and colonizer. In particular these resistance and accommodation stories failed to achieve a vision of the emergence of a hybrid society formed by various accommodations and remittances among both conquerors and subjugated. (Seed, 1993: 10-11)

The third movie is *The Russian Ark* ('Russkij Kavchek', 2002), a provocative retort to the Soviet montage tradition in which Alexander Sokurov evokes a certain continuity within historical disruptions and, during a promenade through the Hermitage, exposes the troubled identification of Russians with Europe. The Europeanising endeavour of Peter I, paradoxically favoured the geographical extension of the country to the Pacific. Hence, what was supposed to evolve as a European metropolis with few colonies, became a total Eurasian empire with an inaccessible centre.

As peripheral Europe, Russia belongs to the continent in a contested and open way, not only as a result of discursive matters on identity and religion, but also because of the way in which Russia was integrated into the geopolitical system and the capitalist world. Drawing on the classic theories that describe a world system divided in cores and peripheries depending on levels of production, innovation and organised dependency (Friedmann, 1973; Wallerstein, 1974), Boris Kagarlitsky argues that Russia has always been integrated as periphery, what generated itself a different variant of governance and social organisation: "different speeds of development inevitably gave rise to different economic and socio-political structures, and this in turn altered the character of the processes that were occurring" (Kagarlitsky, 2008: 219). Furthermore, Russian development has been excessively exposed to geopolitical circumstances and demonstrates a fragile internal order, features that are due to its peripheral condition: "For two centuries Russia had played a substantial role in the development of European capitalism; as a supplier of raw materials, as a market, as an importer of 'free' capital, and as a debtor country" (*ibidem*: 183). It is not surprising, therefore, that the Bolshevik revolution was a reaction against both St. Petersburg (Tsarist rule) and world system (capitalist ideology and geopolitics).

The fourth movie is *Siberia MonAmour* ('Sibir Monamur', 2011). In a majestic yet terrifying and dystopian landscape, Slava Ross presents a harsh Siberia wherein humans can behave like wild dogs for survival. Russian colonization was a "complicated process of transforming Siberia and the Far East into Russia" (Remnev, 2003). Indeed, the Russian Empire did not practice territorial expansion as the "permanent and supreme aim of politics" that characterized European imperialism (Arendt, 1958: 125), but rather as a popular reaction to institutional oppressions and as a patrimonial spatial rhetoric (Masoero, 2013). From the core, both people and authorities have viewed the Russian extension of the territory as superior to the historical experience of Western colonialism, not merely as a 'civilizing' strategy but also as a mean of integrating the peripheries. As Sergei Oushakine notes, however, complains from the periphery of "being left in the dark" ('ostavili v temnote') and being "cut from the rest of the world" ('otrezali ot mira') have been relatively common (Oushakine, 2009: 21).

All in all, the tsarist government was aware of its limited ability to rule its remote territories. In *Petersburg*, Bely describes the frustration of Senator Apolon Apolonovich when dispatching orders that do not quite reach the provinces, likening the orders arrows falling down or being broken on the long way to local governors. Indeed, at the time it was easier to get from St. Petersburg to New York than to Vladivostok, and trade routes had not passed through Siberia for centuries. As Kagarlitsky notes: "until the building of the Trans-Siberian Railway, organising successful trade through this region was impossible since suitable river routes were lacking" (2008: 130).

The empire has been also suffering from a basic territory-population imbalance, with most areas suffering from too much land and too few people, whilst other areas suffered from the inverse: too many people and too little land.<sup>14</sup> The geographical extension provoked (an officially acknowledged) impoverishment of the centre, regional unbalances, and fear of peripheral betrayals. This danger prompted the official discourse of "we have no colonies".<sup>15</sup> Otherwise, calling the territories colonies meant implicitly admitting the existence of numerous non-Russians within Russia that were joined to the centre by an artificial bond (Danilevskii, 1991: 485). In *Empire of the Czar. A Journey Through Eternal Russia*, the Marquis de Custine writes:

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<sup>14</sup> In 1775 Catherine approved a territorial reform aiming to readjust this imbalance through state-sponsored colonization and resettlement in the 'open' areas. However, and despite the European influence, in the West, Russia has traditionally met resistance to its expansion, whereas the East was more complacent in 'open-lands'. For instance: the Crimean War 1853-1856; the Treaty of Berlin 1878; the Polish insurrections 1831/1863 and Baltic independences 1919.

<sup>15</sup> See for instance: Tolstoi, Dmitri (1861), "O kolonizatsii", *Vek* 22 (7 July) *apud* Masoero, 2013: 68.

Do you know what it means to travel in Russia? For a superficial mind it means to feed itself on illusions. But for someone perceptive, for someone possessing an independent mind character, it is a difficult, ungrateful task. At every step such a traveller discerns... two nations fighting against each other: one of these nations is Russia *comme elle est*, and the other one is the Russia as it wants to be perceived in Europe. (De Custine, 2007: 134)

From the eighteenth century onwards, comparisons between Russia and the West have been a constant feature in the construction of Russianness. Indeed, any parallel made in the nineteenth century between Russia and other empires – such as the Roman, Ottoman or Habsburg – had to be questioned whether out of the need to imitate or to reject. Moreover, the obvious difference between multi-ethnic Russia and the much more ethnically homogeneous West European nation-states began to be presented as a sign of uniqueness and advantage. From the European perspective, Russia is and has been seen as ‘the other’, traditionally excluded from any possibility of integration despite of playing an active role in the political changes of the continent (Golunov, 2013; Morozov, 2009; Medvedev, 1999).

In order to understand how its peripheral condition has influenced Russia’s development, I draw on several geographical differentiations. The first of these is the differentiation between space and territory made by Sergei Medvedev (1998: 50-52). The second, from Sanna Turoma and Maxim Weldstein (2013: 3), is between ‘empire’ as a category of analysis and space as an experience.<sup>16</sup> Like language, money or religion, space can be perceived, abstractly conceived, and employed as a discursive practice that re-produces a particular culture. The third was established by Henri Lefebvre, who approaches the conception, representation and practice of the space as an inter-dialectic process (1991: 38). The first of these refers to cognitive aspects and expectations related to the territory; the second is dependent on technical descriptions like maps and plans; the third studies models of behaviour, such as routines and tactics.

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<sup>16</sup> They have also noticed a distinctive Russian obsession with space in social practice and in academic research: “Space has meant mobility and expansion, while it has also meant ‘slowness’ of communication, insufficient infrastructure, and deceleration of historical change. Russia’s vast geographical expanses have been regarded as an obstacle to modernization, while they have also been understood, by historical actors and scholars alike, as an asset, a boundless and ceaseless resource of industrial, economic, and technological progress” (Turoma and Weldstein, 2013: 14).



## RUSSIAN SPACE AS A LIMINAL EXPERIENCE

The physical enormity of the country and the paucity of its population, together with its remoteness, conditioned the characteristic features of Russian history and subsequent Russian national life... they conditioned the long duration of the period of movement, a period [during which society was in] an agitated, fluid state, when nothing solid or stable could take shape.

Sergei Solov'ev (*apud* Pavlov-Sil'vanskii, 1924: 20-21)<sup>17</sup>

In the volume *Peopling the Russian Periphery*, Nicholas Breyfogle, Abby Schrader and Willard Sunderland define the Russian process of colonisation as both Russian and international at the same time (2007: 8). For centuries, restrained and expanding waves of settlement succeeded, making this process changing yet continuous. Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov (2003) has pointed out how perennial changes in the state-citizens relation in Russia provoked “a process of continuous displacement”, whereby the system is perpetually built but never finished – thus creating a sense of continuous failure and disorder, as well as keeping people distracted and busy with ungraspable tasks. In his view, disorder emphasises its own temporary character – problems not yet solved, order still unachieved – yet, a display of work in progress takes itself out of linear time (*ibidem*: 136-137). Perennial political ruptures modified and gave shape to Russian colonisation, making the process varied from period to period and region to region. This produced persistent factors, such as ‘permeable frontiers’ and unfinished orders within the state (Breyfogle, Schrader and Sunderland, 2007: 7).<sup>18</sup>

Likewise, in his book *In the Soviet House of Culture: a Century of Perestroikas*, Bruce Grant notes how Siberia has been characterized as “the place one retreats to, takes refuge in, or where one draws spiritual and material resources” (Grant, 1995: 8). According to Grant, Siberia definitively gained a special place in Soviet culture when thousands of women and children were evacuated there during the Nazi invasion in World War II, and still retains its appeal as the destination of those attracted by “a romantic desire to be closer to nature” (Sansone, 1980: 153). Furthermore, Grant describes how Nivkhi communities (living in the Sakhalin Island) looked upon Perestroika more as a source of collapse than for a promise of renewal (1995: 13), accepting the process initiated by Gorbachov as only one in the series of many similar re-building attempts in Russia: “Over the course of six political generations, from Nicholas II to Gorbachev, Nivkh schoolchildren have been taught, in effect, that native

<sup>17</sup> N. P. Pavlov-Sil'vanskii (1924), *Feodalizm v drevnei Rusi*. Petrograd: Priboi [2<sup>nd</sup> ed.].

<sup>18</sup> See: “Russian colonization unfolded with such splendid diversity that it is more accurate to talk of Russian colonizations in the plural than the singular. Ever evolving and multifaceted, Russian borderland settlement was a process in which outsider colonists, native peoples, the natural environment, and the world of the state and its representatives influenced one another in ever shifting combinations. Differences of time and place could and did create different colonizations” (Breyfogle, Schrader and Sunderland, 2007: 7).

life and language was to be forgotten, remembered, forgotten, remembered, forgotten, and now remembered again” (Grant, 1995: xii).

The exigencies of distance minimized the state's influence: the relative independence from central authorities of Russian peasants across Siberia acknowledged in the maxim 'God is high in the sky and the tsar is far away' (*ibidem*: 5). On the other hand, official accounts<sup>19</sup> depicted Siberia as 'a deep net' into which Russia could cast its social sins (Bassin, 1988: 16). Repeatedly Siberia has been envisioned as symbolizing nature and traditions, in contrast to the Russian centre as symbolizing culture and civilisation. This conception is, however, a social configuration rather than a spatial fact, resting as it does on unequal power relations and leading to an uneven development, here reified through 'natural' representations of the territory (Fischer-Tahir and Naumann, 2010: 303; Kühn and Bernt, 2010: 303).

In its inner centre-periphery configuration, the Pacific Ocean was the realisation of the open frontier and the loop from a national to transnational scale. Russian expansion towards the East blurred the distinction between Europe and Asia. It also prompted the Russian frontier's discourses of territorial civilization, already favoured by the cultural Messianism of the society (which combines both Orthodox exceptionalism and Mongol universalism). Otherwise, the process of border formation was not accomplished but assumed as transitory, as always suitable to be extended. Simultaneously, and as Katri Pynnöniemi (2008) asserts, Russia is a country characterised by transits, not just because of transport corridors, connecting Asia and Europe, but also because of the liminality of the spatial experience, changing tempos and rhythms in a liturgical and epistemological way.

Indeed, a trip within Russia unfolds as a radical experience rather than a touristic transit; in this sense, to travel there is somewhat pre-discursive, akin to exploring the very building of movement. As evidenced in Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope, Platonov's novel *Chevangur* and Pasternak's *Dr. Zhivago*, travel is seen in Russia as a quest for truth and justice (there is no country where *Don Quixote* is more popular than in Russia). Popular culture offers plenty of witty sayings that employ the idiom of travel; for instance: 'there are no roads in Russia, only directions' and 'Russia has two kinds of handicaps: idiots and roads'.

But the liminality of the Russian space is not only physical, or geographical, but also discursive and political. Maria Mälksoo argues that peripherality in relation to the West has created a curious case of 'nested liminalities' in Eastern Europe: "since its introduction in the era of Enlightenment, 'Eastern Europe' as such has been the

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<sup>19</sup> As for instance the count Nesslerode, Nikolai I's Foreign Affairs minister.



embodiment of liminality, of the state 'betwixt and between' in Europe's self-image" (Mälksoo, 2009: 65). Juri Lotman presents these societies as borderline Europeans, translating and interpreting Russia to Europe (Lotman, 2005).

Kliuchevsky wrote that everything that the Russian traveller sees around himself in Europe "persistently imposes on him a sense of border, limit, of definite certainty, of strict distinctness, and of continuous and ubiquitous human presence with the impressive signs of resolute and unremitting labor. The traveller's attention is constantly captured and enthused"; in Russia, however, "there is no sign of human dwelling anywhere and the observer is taken over by a terrifying feeling of the never-interrupted tranquillity, of heavy slumber and bareness, of isolation that invites abstract gloomy contemplation devoid of concrete and clear thought" (Kliuchevsky, 1956a: 69-72).

Liminality is an in-between stage between two stable orders, in and out of time and social structure, a defiance of categories (Turner, 1969: 83). Moreover, the liminal space generates a sense of fragility and vulnerability, but also a zone of heightened semiotic activity (Lotman, 2005). Liminal spaces create a situation of great ambiguity, producing a sense of not being 'neither here nor there' (Turner, 1969: 81). As I argue in this article, Russia can be defined as a peripheral heartland, a 'centre out there' (Turner, 1973) that requires a 'journey' and provides the vulnerability and freedom proper of the margin.

## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXTUALIZATION

The state swelled up, the people grew lean.  
Vasili Kliuchevsky (1937: 11)<sup>20</sup>

There are a number of Russian views that praise the crucial role of territory in their culture. For instance, philosopher Aleksandr Herzen (1956) claimed that Russia is more a subject of geography than historical entity; poet Aleksandr Blok (1960) wrote that Russian spaces are fated to play an elemental role in history; and painter Isaak Levitan asserted that real landscape art can only exist in Russia.<sup>21</sup> In the opinion of George Vernadsky, "history provides no clearer example of the profound influence of geography upon a culture than in the historical development of the Russian people" (1949: 6). Whilst, Sergei Solov'ev (1850) objected that the simple factor of size was an inadequate criterion upon which to draw conclusions about the character of a state.

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<sup>20</sup> Kliuchevsky, Vassili O. (1937), *Kurs russkoi Istorii*. Moscow. Gosudarstvennoe Sotsialno-Ekonomicheskoe Izdatelstvo. Vol. III.

<sup>21</sup> See for instance A. A. Fedorov-Davydov (1966a), *Isaak Il'ich Levitan: Zhizn' i tvorchestvo*. Moscow: Knebel; and A. A. Fedorov-Davydov (1966b), *Isaak Il'ich Levitan: Dokulmenty, Materialy, Bibliografiia*. Moscow: Knebel.

The critical point rather is the manner in which the state had attained its dimensions historically.

This last is well represented by the exponential growth of the Empire between the 15th and 18th centuries; with Ivan III, Prince of Moscow, controlling 460,000 m<sup>2</sup> in 1462; Ivan IV, 2,8 millions of m<sup>2</sup> in 1533; Boris Godunov 5,4 million at the end of the sixteenth century; in 1700, after the first explorations of Siberia, the empire included 15 millions of square meters (Meyer, 2007: 17). As further example, conquest of Amur in 1857-1860 confirmed the hopes of greatness among the Russian society (Bassin, 1999), but these were to be questioned in the aftermath of the Soviet Union. And indeed, current Russian borders are pre-imperial, similar to the boundaries of the tsardom of Muscovy around 1650, just before the conquest of Ukraine and the Baltic region.

Russian space originally developed through colonization and a unifying language, but to the point that the scales and duration can be treated “as the major feature of the country’s history” (Akhiezer, 2004: 10). Additionally, Vasily Kliuchevsky considers colonisation as the basic fact of Russian history. Through colonisation, society had the opportunity to solve its problems by migration, periodically changing where it lived in a historically developed way of life that linked together with a mobile form of agriculture (1956b: 309-310). The colonization of and migration to Siberia went ahead in a severe, wild country that was almost desert. Siberia was mainly infertile, with rare and poorly populated settlements imposing a new burden on the country and evidencing that colonization was not based on economic foundations. The migrants were not the poorest peasants, or short of land, so poverty and the shortage of land could not explain this process (Akhiezer, 2004: 10). In the early middle ages, the population density of Russia was around 25 percent of that in the West. In the sixteenth century, population density in European Russia was one tenth that of Germany, and one twentieth that of France (Treivish, 1995: 9). In that context, colonization cannot be explained solely by land shortage, adverse conditions for agriculture and the enormous amounts of territory unsuited to agriculture; we must also pay attention to a social pattern of resolving all problems by extensive decisions (Akhiezer, 2004: 10).

Along these lines, Konstantin Khudoley, Chief of the European Studies Department of the St. Petersburg University, stated: “Perhaps, the historical error of Russia was to come up to the Pacific Ocean”.<sup>22</sup> We can recognise this paradox in Valentin Kataev’s novel ‘Time, Forward!’ (1995 [1932]), which argues that modernisation will be achieved when ending the geographic in-betweenness of Russia, transforming even Siberia into

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<sup>22</sup> Statement made (when I was his student) during the course on International Relations programmed at the St. Petersburg State University in the Winter semester of 2007.

a European land. In the opinion of the main character of the novel, once the Bolshevik Revolution has been accomplished, Russia cannot be in Asia.

Curse or blessing, the consequences of such spatial regime are ambivalent; as Medvedev reckons:

Space is generally considered to be a major Russian asset, but isn't it also a major pain in the neck? ... Its vastness... repeated by many for over a century as an ultimate justification for everything that happens in that country. But it is the same space that has prevented Russia from developing civil institutions, civic society and the rule of law (Rechtsstaat) – in fact from developing the entire concept of civility, from *civitas* as a specific Western way of development by urbanization. In Russia, there has been little need to settle down and work on a plot of land (Medvedev, 1999: 15).

In 1830 the minister of education of the empire, Count Sergey Suvarov, introduced the new official concept of nation depending upon 'Orthodoxy, Autocracy and Popular character (*narodnost'*)', a principle that generated a new form of peasantization in the empire, hence reproducing a new-old spatial hierarchy. In reaction, Petr Chaadaev published his 'Philosophical Letter' (1991 [1830]) exposing Russia lack of belonging to neither West nor East, and claiming that Russia had not contributed anything important to the history of mankind. Chaadaev's letter fanned the flames of debate over Russia's relation to the West, and this debate eventually led to the emergence of two opposing groups of thinkers – Slavophiles and Westernisers – both influenced by the German idealism. Historians such as Nikolai Karamzin, Sergei Solov'ev or Vasili Kliuchevsky were among the first to argue that the natural borders of the state were Russia's manifest destiny, a sort of Byzantine legacy impelling the empire to civilise Asia. Russian singularity seemed to be instantaneously legitimised by looking at a map and by the representation of the space that was both mystical and messianic.

Both the government's and the people's perception of distance and the territory were historically affected by the timing of the creation, the patterns of expansion and the geographical consistency of the Russian empire. Going back to the earliest Rus', we can notice how it appeared literally boundless, conceived as a sphere of influence rather than as a territory with borders, with a north-south axis formed by the river-roads between the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea. The then advocated '*ruskaya zemlya*' (Russian land) remained very much in a process of becoming. Indeed, the posterior regional growth of the Russian lands generated dynastic problems and the emergence of competing principates. In the sixteenth century, the conquering of Novgorod, Tver,

Kazan or Astrakhan was seen in Moscow as the gathering of the indigenous 'russkaya zemlya', beginning the formation of the empire even before the awareness of national distinctions had emerged.

The rulers of seventeenth-century Muscovy inventoried and managed their territorial resources for physical and military purposes, but they did not have a ruling ideology that predisposed a strong arrangement of the territory. Beginning with the European-inspired reforms of the Petrine period, this situation changed dramatically and the Russian ruling establishment acquired a spatial view of government that was rational and modern. Moreover, they developed a diverse range of tools and practices that allowed the rulers to deepen their conceptual and physical grip on the territory of the state.<sup>23</sup>

If Russia were to be a genuine European power, as Peter intended to make it, then it should also be geographically part of Europe. Hence, the historian Vasily Tatishchev intended to construct a new geographical image of the Russian state. In his book *Russia or as it is called now: Rossja*, he identified the Ural chain as the proper natural-geographical frontier between the continents, moving the boundary from the 'fictional' stretch of the Tanais River (Don) to the Mountains. However, the posterior reclamation of the Russian place within Asian geography was in sharp contrast to the geopolitical vision of Peter I. The common West European colonialism originally prompted by the so call 'foreign Tsar', derived firstly into claims to create 'our Peru', 'our Mexico', a 'Russian Brazil', and 'our little India';<sup>24</sup> and later into amorphous and expansive borderlands, forays of modernization, a fuzzy constellation of peripheries and a pileup of unfinished projects and disrepairs.

Emma Widdis maintains that images of a boundless territory have been a powerful symbol of identity in Russia (2004: 33). The eighteenth-century elite's preoccupation with identity produced a related impulse to define both the national territory and the territory of the empire simultaneously. In effect, eighteenth-century philosophers dissolved the nation into the empire and the empire into the nation. Panegyrics to the tsars also started to mention the vastness of the Russian land as the country's most distinctive feature – always in comparison with the West. The territorial immensity has been lauded by the Russian writers since the Petrine era, but in the late 1700s it became a point of obsession that clearly reflected the elite's heightened national

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<sup>23</sup> Maps anticipate empires. Russian surveyors and missionaries marched alongside soldiers, initially mapping for reconnaissance, then for general information, and eventually as a tool of pacification, civilisation, spreading of the Orthodox religion, and exploitation of the defined colonies.

<sup>24</sup> See Marc Bassin (1991), "Inventing Siberia: Visions of the Russian East in the Early Nineteenth Century", AHR, 96(3), p. 770.

sentiment, emphasizing Russia's huge size as one of the formative elements of the national character and as a source of a national pride.<sup>25</sup>

Russia's imperial space is a contiguous territory, with an obscure spatial differentiation between metropolis and colony. Furthermore, the interaction of cultures on the frontier affected the society's definition of identity and the official language, introducing concepts as 'Manifest destiny', 'Open areas' and 'Natural borders' (Sunderland, 2000: 212-213). In this line of thought, Marc Bassin has coined the concept of 'Social Imperialism' (1999), describing the connection between the drives for reform on the one hand and the political territorial expansion on the other.

Otherwise, the size of the country and the subsequent tasks of maintaining the state and patrolling the borders favoured the inability of Russia to develop as a classical nation state. In addition, Russia has been dependent on natural resources throughout its history, and its geography has always been closely connected to the economic state policy. All of these factors have helped the Russians to widen the area of their settlement but at the same time have prevented them from mastering it. In fact, this is the basic dilemma faced by any expanding civilization: the more you expand, the less you control. A heterogeneous, diversified space has been, and remains, a major challenge for the authorities. It is not just centre against periphery; it is order against anarchy, cosmos against chaos, liberty against control, structure against entropy... (Medvedev, 1999: 18-19). We can observe through Russian history an urge to symbolically subdue land, an identification of modernity with horizontality and domination of the space. These are visible from the establishment of communal housing to the spatial programme undertaken by the Soviet state to conquer Outer Space. It is not a coincidence that the Soviets invested such vast resources into the exploration of the Cosmos, as well as serving up Yuri Gagarin and the other cosmonauts as the ultimate symbols of the superiority of the communist system, inspiring admiration and unity from the soviet population.

Summing up, Russia was originally a peripheral colonizer of the periphery. However, the way in which its geographical extension was achieved, how this was interpreted and what it brought with it (disparate cultures, natural resources, few internal physical barriers...), distorted its evolution as a modern Western country, and,

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<sup>25</sup> See for instance XIX century historian Mikhail P. Pogodin (*apud* Riasanovsky, 1993: 3): "Russia! what a marvellous phenomenon on the world scene! Russia - a distance of ten thousand versts in length on a straight line from the virtually central European river, across all of Asia and the Eastern Ocean, down to the remote American lands! A distance of five thousand versts in width from Persia, one of the southern Asiatic states, to the end of the inhabited world - to the North Pole. What state can equal it? Its half? How many states can match its twentieth, its fiftieth part? ... Russia - a state which contains all types of soil, from the warmest to the coldest, from the burning environs of Erivan to icy Lapland; which abounds in all the products required for the needs, comforts, and pleasures of life, in accordance with its present state of development - a whole world, self-sufficient, independent, absolute".

hence, postponed its democratisation process, merged the national (Russian) identity into an imperial conception of the space, and favoured a conceptual dichotomy of (minuscule) core / (huge) borderland, oasis / desert. Some manifestations of this logic can be still recognised in the belief of the right to empire, in a terminal syndrome spread among the Russian society after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and in the common use of terms like 'sphere of influence', 'near abroad' or 'Russian speaking space' to refer to former territories of the Tsarist empire.

### THE CAPITAL DOES NOT BELONG TO RUSSIA BUT TO THE EMPIRE

Moscow is the planet that has taken off and left Russia behind. Moscow has entered the 21st century, while beyond it, the vast country cannot keep up and is perhaps falling back into the 19th century.

Karl Schlögel (2007)<sup>26</sup>

Comparing the empire with a troika that absorbs space at a heedless speed, Nikolai Gogol rhetorically asks in *Dead Souls*: Russia, where are you hurtling to? The notion of empire presupposes vastness and diversity, but also inequality and relations of dependency.

In Russia, the notion of the border comes to the gates of Moscow, or more specifically to its suburbs. Beyond Moscow there are just borderlands, ruled as buffer areas that provide natural resources and occupied by aliens. The liminal charge of borderlands depends always upon a core, which is an extremely reduced one in Russia (particularly if compared with the extension of the borderlands). Supposedly, the buffer area functions as safety zone to the core, yet the infinite character of this borderland produces a continuous feeling of failure and need of repair.

In *Petersburg*, Bely presents the imperial capital as belonging not to Russia, but to the kingdom of dreams. Petersburg seemingly appears as just a point on the immensity, but it is a point that adds a fourth dimension to the map – mythical, irrational and nonetheless symbolically effective as a source of power (Bely, 1981: 256). Geographer Vladimir Kaganskii argues that power and space are particularly hierarchical in Russia: "the whole space: place and position, relations and connections, distances, directions – are differentiated according to [specific] status. Place in the space is status in the state" (Kaganskii, 2001: 137). In his view, "faraway was close-at-hand, whereas nearby was distant. Distances in the landscape were not linked with the distances in physical space but were tied to the status or position in the power structure" (*ibidem*: 153). The practical consequence, observed by Kaganskii, was that

<sup>26</sup> Schlögel, Karl (2007). "Archipelago Europe", *Eurozine* (Originally in German, *Osteuropa* 8, 2005). Accessed on 30.09.2014, at <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2007-10-12-schlogel-en.html>.



vertical, hierarchical and administrative relations subordinated horizontal, territorial and everyday practices, even to the point of creating them (i.e. The Trans-Siberian railroad, GULAG towns...).

The greatest example of the Russian goal to dominate the space was the foundation of St. Petersburg in a rough land facing the Gulf of Finland. Thereupon, the Petrine establishment explicitly regarded territorial space as (1) a resource to be studied, managed, and exploited; (2) a terrain to be shaped and moulded as the physical expression of state power; and (3) a symbol of national pride and a basis for national identity. More than a city, St. Petersburg was a symbol of 'Europeanisation', 'order' and 'enlightenment', fixing the vast empire as a Western power. The capital of Peter I had to play a major instrumental function in his reforms:

- As a window by which Russia could notice what took place at the neighbouring countries;
- As an ark of entrance in Russia by which the tsar intended to penetrate in modernity;
- As a named ideal, to show to the rest of Europe that Russia was part of European civilisation.

For Pertti Joenniemi (2001), the naming of St Petersburg itself demonstrated some degree of mental openness – with Dutch and German, rather than Russian connotations. The choice was very much in line with the overall endeavour of breaking the isolation caused by Russia's somewhat peripheral location in view of the rest of Europe. The name 'Petrograd', used for a short period following the First World War, represented a different logic. 'Burg' was translated into Russian 'grad' and the religious connotations were dropped. Leningrad, the name assumed in 1924 five days after Lenin's death, strengthened the political enclosure even further. Abandoning in September 1991 the Soviet-time name of Leningrad implied a repositioning of the city in both temporal and spatial terms.

St Petersburg is, as such, a reminder of that it was once possible to adopt a posture that contained an identity sufficiently unique and yet open for the more general. It constituted a site where it was possible to be simultaneously Russian and European. (Joenniemi, 2001: 18)

According to art critic Boris Groys, the 'authentic Russian history' begins with the construction of St. Petersburg. Groys remarks, however, that Petrine reforms accomplished not only modernist aspirations, but also "a unique act of self-colonization... the eternal sign of the cultural colonization and psychological destruction

of Russian people” (Groys, 1993: 358). Petersburg appeared in Russia as a sort of self-negation, breaking with tradition and with the rest of the country already with its name: “*Sankt! – Piter! – Burg!*” The ambiguity and openness of St. Petersburg also depends upon its situation, as pointed out by Sergei Smirnov: “Built not only on the edge of the country, but on the fracture of cultures, Petersburg has never been able to boast with Moscow’s complex of great-Russian full-bloodedness, neither have the Petersburgers ever felt themselves genuine Europeans. Hence – the constant desire to find themselves through the close observation of others. St. Petersburg... immediately became encrusted with the epithets characteristic of a city uncertain of its own identity and young – ‘the Northern Venice’, ‘the Northern Palmira’, ‘the Northern Amsterdam’... A clone city, it seems an illusion and an ambiguity exactly because it represents a quaint combination of different and other images, calls for a dialogue with them” (Smirnov, 2000: 7-8).<sup>27</sup> In this sense, St. Petersburg shows both confidence and constraint towards Europe. Additionally, the Russian capital has suffered historical vacillations (Kiev, Novgorod, Vladimir-Suzdal, Moscow, St. Petersburg and finally back again to Moscow), each of these changes entailing strong social connotations as well as geopolitical choices and civilizational affiliations (Sorokin, 2002: 127).

Eventually, the periphery not only expanded but it also became multiple,<sup>28</sup> shaping back the centre and the way Russia participates in the global system. Russia’s multi-peripherality and the looping and fragmentary nature of its modernization immersed the country in civilizational discourses and never-ending comparisons with the West. These debates evolved in “an almost mythical manner” (Makarychev and Morozov, 2013: 344), claiming that “no adequate names can be imagined” for Russia (Pivovarov and Fursov, 1999: 180), or that Russia is an island, a continent, or a distinct and unique world in itself (Tsymburskiy, 1993; Spasskiy, 2011).

The consequences are ambivalent, combining a sense of greatness with a choice between isolation or dependence from the West that prevents Russia from developing a global agenda and pursuing structural changes in the world system (Martyanov and Fishman, 2006: 86-87). In this sense, Russia appears ‘not just as a colonizer but also as a subaltern actor’; a ‘subaltern empire’ (Morozov, 2013: 16) constituted of a mix of definition of greatness, internal fragmentation and in-between ambiguous position vis-à-vis the West. In the ‘subaltern empire’, centre and periphery become irreversibly blurred keeping, nonetheless, a liminal quality (normative superiority but co-constitutive relation) and a depredator approach.

<sup>27</sup> For more on the topic see: Morozov, Viatcheslav (2002), “The Discourses of St. Petersburg and the Shaping of a Wider Europe: Territory, Space and Post-Sovereign Politics”, *COPRI Working Paper* 13.

<sup>28</sup> Eastwards into Siberia and the Far East; westwards into the Baltic, Poland, Ukraine; southwards into the Crimea, Caucasus, and Central Asia.



## OBLOMOV EMPIRE

Russia is a gas station masquerading as a country.  
John McCain (*apud* Sherfinski, 2014)<sup>29</sup>

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and acknowledging the radical changes that brought it about, the question of how to hold together the empire gained a new relevance. Mykola Riabchuk (2007) regrets:

Local elites in post-Soviet republics inherited dysfunctional pieces of a dysfunctional empire. They had two options: to build new state institutions based on the rule of law, democratic procedures, and civic mobilization; or to re-animate the dysfunctional quasi-institutions of the Leninist state by other informal methods and semi-legal bodies. Only the Baltic republics opted clearly for the first way. All the other post-Soviet states took the second option.

Obviously, Russia has been and is still an empire, but one prone to swallow peripheries, accumulate historical misfortunes and suffer unbalanced developments. In short, the notion of empire still functions as a concept to describe the Russian regime of knowledge and domination, yet in a stretching form and with an Oblomov attitude (referring to the main character of the Ivan Goncharov's classic novel, Iliya Ilyich Oblomov – irresponsible, weak-willed, lazy and living from rents).<sup>30</sup>

Nowadays, Russia is a country with a large amount of territory, relatively small population, huge social inequalities, low life standards overall, and an economy highly dependent upon rich petroleum and natural resource endowment. Moreover, consumer rights of the Russian society have been increased under Putin's rule, but not political alternatives; the Kremlin has offered elections but not plurality, and prompted state sovereignty, but not popular control of power. Putin's sovereign democracy model has succeeded in securing political stability, but it has failed to create a system that is socially inclusive. In the early twenty-first century, as in the previous ones, Russia is both a rising global power and a weak state with repressive, corrupt and inefficient institutions. This has been here presented as an example of peripheral development, determined by historical contingences and geographic circumstances and manifested in the maintenance of imperial logics of power and conception of space in spite of political changes and historical ruptures.

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<sup>29</sup> Sherfinski, David (2014), "McCain: 'Russia is a Gas Station Masquerading as a Country'", *The Washington Post*. Accessed on 13.06.2014, at <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/mar/16/mccain-russia-gas-station-masquerading-country/>.

<sup>30</sup> See Medvedev, 1999 for a wider contextualisation of this metaphor.

The former parts of the Russian empire are still seen from Moscow as peripheries, as borderlands; hence, the Kremlin believes it to be vital for their interest to have the right to directly influence the inner affairs of these countries. We can recognise it, for instance, in the use of ethnic Russian populations to militarily intervene in neighbours' territory, as well as in the political attempts to abuse structural relations of dependence such as customs agreements, gas and oil tariffs. Cases such as Crimea, South Ossetia or Transdnistria share many similarities, as well as differences; but common to all of these cases is the spatial logic deployed by the Kremlin towards these regions (nowadays based on Eurasian theories that add even more liminality to the spatial formation).<sup>31</sup>

In this line, Dmitri Trenin notices how the Kremlin has reasserted Russia as a great power, in spite of twenty years of international ambivalence, and unlike all the former borderlands of the Soviet Union, which wholeheartedly embraced integration into the West (Trenin, 2011: 407).<sup>32</sup> "Great powers do not integrate", as the Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov told a senior Ukrainian diplomat in 2002.<sup>33</sup> Power in Russia is still conceived as power over the space, reproducing a pattern that historically prevented civic engagement and political alternatives to emerge, and led to a predator economic model, authoritarian way of ruling and concentration of the wealth in few hands. Tens of thousands of educated people as well as millions of Dollars are currently leaving Russia.<sup>34</sup> What seems to be a de-colonising reaction is in reality a new loop in the peripheral development and logics of dependence.

I conclude that the pattern of peripheral development in Russia is not over yet. We can see it, for instance, in the state's struggles to dominate the Arctic, it's planting a Russian flag on the seabed close to the geographic North Pole, restoring Soviet-era military airfields, and deploying especial forces to patrol the entire far-flung area between Norway and Alaska. "The Arctic, in Putin's vision, looks like a miracle, the place from which prosperity for future Russian generations will flow... It follows, in his

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<sup>31</sup> Eurasianism is a political philosophy first advanced by Russian emigrées in the 1920's. It presents Russia as distinct civilisation neither European nor Asian, arguing for a 'third way' in politics (benevolent empire), economy (between capitalism and communism), and culture (Orthodox messianism). See for instance Lev Gumilev, Alexander Dugin, Sergei Panarin and Vadim Tsymbursky.

<sup>32</sup> After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the Russian society encountered a new post-imperial phase (Trenin, 2001). In the nineties, three humiliating facts coincided to boost Russian nationalism to an unprecedented level: the fall of the USSR, the defeat in Chechnya, and the chaos of Yeltsin's government, meaning loss of territories and decline of his international status, producing a hash financial crisis and a deep decreasing of life standards of the population. This resurgence of nationalism depends also upon the necessity to construct a new communal identity.

<sup>33</sup> Recalled by Olexandr Chaliy, then Ukraine's first deputy foreign minister, in a conversation on February 7, 2010 (*apud* Trenin, 2011).

<sup>34</sup> See for instance: Tétrault-Farber, Gabrielle (2013), "Putin, Facing Sputtering Economy, Declares a Tax Crackdown", *The Moscow Times*, 13 December. Accessed on 18.12.2013, at <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/business/article/putin-facing-sputtering-economy-declares-a-tax-crackdown/491490.html>.

mind, that if we have it, others will want to take it away. So it must be defended”, comments Alexander Golts, editor of the journal *Yezhednevny Zhurnal*.<sup>35</sup>

Simultaneously, the Russian government promotes a new patriotism, limiting the influence of the new urban middle class and preparing the personalist regime for tomorrow (for eventual variations of the price of oil and gas or for a future political succession).<sup>36</sup> The unprecedented resurgence of nationalism and spiritualism in the Russian society can be seen as a symptomatic strategy to reinforce boundaries on the borderland, to establish a fictitious order on a society that has been historically multi-ethnic and formed through migration.

After the Ukrainian conflict, the Kremlin has extended a siege mentality over the Russian society, as well as an open willingness to patronise former territories of the Tsarist Empire. Likewise, the theory of Russia constituting a distinct civilisation is being increasingly channelled by state media. The Kremlin is recovering the Eurasian discourse in order affirm the role of Moscow in a multi-polar world. The consequence, however, is quite the opposite: Russia has reached a level of international isolation unseen since the cold war and can rely on very few partners (not allies) in the world.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, in Russia there has re-emerged a mentality that thinks of the nation's greatness in terms of power and the fear that the neighbours feel. All this accentuates the peripheral condition of Moscow, seen for instance in capital outflow and brain drain.

Eventually, the persistence of imperial logics in Russian politics robs the society of its chance to become a modern country and fully enter into the world system. In this sense, Russian borderlands remain threatened from within the system rather than from the neighbours or other big powers. The risks of further implosions still appear more plausible than foreign interventions due to inner fractures. Otherwise, the pattern that presents the “imperial space” as formative of the nation accentuates the liminal character of the country and makes the state and the organisation of society more secluded, unstable and unsustainable – as an oasis that fights the desert by drawing all the water out from it.

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<sup>35</sup> Weir, F. (2013) “Arctic resource race heats up, as Russia, Canada stake new claims”, *Christian Science Monitor*. (18.12.13): <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/2013/1211/Arctic-resource-race-heats-up-as-Russia-Canada-stake-new-claims-video>

<sup>36</sup> This move back to conservative politics reminds not only of previous passages of Russian history but also finds parallelism with the last years of Franco (Spain) and Marcelo Caetano (Portugal).

<sup>37</sup> See Putin's speech saying that “Russia is fortunately not a member of any alliance. This is also a guarantee of our sovereignty”. Accessed on 30.09.2014. at <http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/22714>.

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