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Patrimonial Imperialism: A Taxonomy of the Causes of the Russo-Ukrainian War

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ABSTRACT

Explanations of the causes of the Russo-Ukrainian war tend to drift towards one of two lines of argument. These are the 'NATO expansion' argument, chiefly focusing on the structure of the international system and the possibility of the acceptance of Ukraine into NATO, and the 'Putin's war' argument, which attempts to place the bulk of blame for the war on the actions and agency of Putin himself. Both arguments might better be considered as focused on *processes* rather than structures, and this leads to explanations operating at the level of actual manifestation of causes rather than real and underlying structures. Critical realism cannot tell us what structures are the right ones to study, but a plausible explanation might lie in the notion of the patrimonial imperialism of Russian state–society relations. To address the issue of an alternative to these arguments, one overly structural and the other overly agential, this article proposes a framework referred to as patrimonial imperialism. It will attempt to show how an imperialist state structure can come to perpetuate and ingrain itself and thereby induce actors to behave in certain ways consistent with the state structure. The above framework will be integrated into a model of stratified reality and will situate the constituent arguments surrounding the causes of the war into an ontological framework that will allow greater clarity and coherence of thought when attempting to grapple with the causes of the Russo-Ukrainian war.

1 | Introduction

The Russo-Ukrainian war that fully escalated in February of 2022 has brought back large-scale conventional war to European soil. The war, although unquestionably initiated by Russia (insofar as it physically invaded a neighbouring sovereign state), has generated a great deal of controversy regarding the reasons for its initiation.

Within the discipline of international relations (IR), some realist scholars, such as J. Mearsheimer (2022), argue that the structure of the international system was the chief cause of war, with the material and structural make-up of the system forcing Russia's hand. However, others believe the cause of the war lies with a singular person possessing a near-absolute level of power in Russia—Vladimir Putin. To be charitable, these are clear and

parsimonious explanations of the type favoured by many IR scholars. However, they do not do justice to some of the more sociological understandings of causal analysis that have enriched recent IR (Kurki 2008, 2007; Suganami 1996; Wight 2006).

This article endeavours to establish a taxonomy that can better account for the causes of the war. Its main aim is the development of the concept of patrimonial imperialism and to showcase its utility as a conceptual framework with regard to prominent aspects of Russian behaviour. It will further structure the various perspectives and arguments involved (NATO expansion, Putin's war, patrimonial imperialism) into a model of stratified reality, emergent social features and the relationship between conscious acts and unconscious and unintentional social reproduction of dominant structures, based on the ontology found within the metatheoretical framework of critical realism

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(Bhaskar 1989a, 1989b; Joseph and Wight 2010). The use of critical realism not as an alternative IR theory but as an underlabouring metatheory (Bhaskar 1989b) will help in clarifying the analytical framework of patrimonial imperialism. This will be used to synthesise and reconcile the reasons for the commencement of the war and further to provide a language that can be used to accurately name and analyse the events that took place.

The existing literature on the causes of the Russo-Ukrainian war possesses a set of limitations, the addressing of which shall be the aim of this work. There exists a lack of structural analyses accounting for the causes of the war outside of IR structural realism. To overcome this, we propose a solution based on an internally emergent structural framework. The agency/structure binary is often employed when analysing the causes of war, with authors either attributing this to Putin's volition or to NATO expansion threatening Russia's sphere of influence (Götz and Ekman 2024; Mann 2024; Edinger 2023; J. Mearsheimer 2022). This misses out on much of the so-called structure-agency debate both in IR and the wider social sciences (Wight 2006; Wendt 1987; Hollis and Smith 1991). The previously developed concepts of Russian imperialism fail to adequately account for the perpetuation of imperial state practices across time and largely attribute its causes as arising out of either NATO expansion, Putin's war or post-1990 systemic arguments.

In "Offensive ideas: structural realism, classical realism and Putin's war on Ukraine", Harald Edinger (2023: 1891) attempts to defend J. J. Mearsheimer's (2014b) perspective by advocating that structure does not explain everything. By doing so, he asserts that the cause of the war is likely to be found within a mix of structural factors and Putin's aggressive tendencies. We attempt to go beyond this distinction by applying the concept of patrimonial imperialism to the analysis of the causes of the war, as well as to integrate the structural and agential aspects into it by placing them in a critical realist framework of stratified reality. Imperialist themes are already identified within Russian behaviour, and they escape conventional Western notions of how a state should behave (Gomza 2022).

The article by Götz and Ekman (2024) employs a multicausal explanation of the war focused on deep, intermediate and proximate causes. It posits three general themes: (1) the focus on Putin's worldview and imperial ambitions; (2) domestic Russian factors concerned with regime security and (3) external pressures related to NATO's expansion. Our article employs ideal-type arguments related to themes (1) and (3) but then goes beyond these explanations by introducing the patrimonial imperialism framework and employing an in-depth structure-agency analysis grounded in critical realism.

Mann (2024) presents the Ukraine conflict as a combination of Russian fear caused by NATO expansion, amplified by Putin's own agency fused with a sense of cultural destiny and contempt for Ukrainian resistance. Our study reflects elements of the insights found in Mann's article (particularly the NATO expansion and Putin's war arguments) but attempts to distil them into a framework which, along with patrimonial imperialism, can better provide the language for accounting for the causes of the war.

The literature on statehood and nationalism underscores that sovereignty is historically contingent and socially constructed (Biersteker et al. 1996). National power and legitimacy are said to be created and maintained through shared narratives, institutions and everyday practices that reproduce a sense of nationhood in a national body (Billig 1995). Certain states embed imperial or hegemonic impulses into their basic governance frameworks, resulting in durable 'patrimonial' authority structures that can persist through radical regime changes (Breuilly 1993; Dunlop 1983). Russia has shifted from an explicitly multiethnic empire under the tsars, through Soviet universalism, to renewed great-power nationalism (Dunlop 1983; Tuminez 2000). Ukraine's nationalism crystallised around independence struggles and self-determination, sharpened by former Soviet dominion and subsequent reforms (Furtado 1994; Kuzio 2002, 2010). Scholars show that such changes cannot be reduced to short-term events but instead reflect deeper, historically embedded patterns of statecraft and identity-building (Laruelle 2004; Molchanov 2000; Sakwa 2016).

Forsberg and Patomäki's book (Forsberg and Patomäki 2022) notes how discussion of the likely causes of war has reflected IR's traditional three levels of analysis—international, domestic and individual: (1) the development of the European security order and the role of NATO expansion within it; (2) the failure of democratisation in Russia; (3) Putin as a person and leader of Russia (Forsberg and Patomäki: 7). They then go on to provide arguments underpinned by critical realist metatheory and consider possible counterfactual outcomes to the three above causes. It is accepted that the extent to which these developments might have been malleable is an open question and whether these structural factors might have been countered (Forsberg and Patomäki: 18). Although this is the right approach to take, it all depends on what we consider to be structural factors. Arguments such as NATO expansion, the failure of democratisation in Russia and Putin's own political trajectory might better be considered as focused on *processes* rather than structures as such, and for this reason, we go on to describe such (actualist) explanations as operating at the level of actual manifestation of causes rather than real and underlying structures. Critical realism cannot tell us what structures are actually the right ones to study, but we suggest here that a plausible explanation lies in the notion of the patrimonial imperialism of Russian state–society relations.

The following argument accepts the international, systemic and individual explanations but uses the framework of patrimonial imperialism at the state level. Patrimonial imperialism is considered a state form but emerges out of intersocial relations which have remained relatively constant throughout regime changes. It thereby expands the insights found in the book to shed a light on embedded patterns of social relations to produce a more complete explanation of the war.

The concept of patrimonial imperialism expands upon the literature shown through adopting an internal structural approach to the issue. It strives to go beyond the idea that states (in this case, Russia) shift from an explicitly multiethnic empire to renewed great-power nationalism (Dunlop 1983; Tuminez 2000) by showing how an inherited form of imperialism (patrimonial imperialism) can anchor itself in the internal

structure of the state. Through the wiring of patrimonial imperialism into the structure of the state, patrimonial imperialism enforces compliance among elites and citizens, shapes policy choices (in this case, contributing to the commencement of the Russo-Ukrainian war) and perpetuates itself across regime changes.

There is, however, a pressing need for a greater conceptualisation of these causal distinctions, and in the following, we seek to:

1. Understand structure-agency dynamics present in the causes of the war (this will be accomplished through ideal-type explanations).
2. Use critical realism in an underlabouring capacity to better situate the above-mentioned 'deep, intermediate and immediate causes'.
3. Deploy the concept of patrimonial imperialism for conceptual analysis of the underlying causes of the war.

In so doing, this article strives to go beyond the boundaries of prior scholarship to present a theoretically coherent and practically useful account of the causes of the war. The methodology employed mostly involves the textual analysis of theories, narratives and the arguments surrounding them. The underlabouring means of doing this will be the use of critical realist ontology concerned with structure, stratification and emergence. In other words, critical realism, as a metatheoretical framework, will be put to work on three conceptual frameworks (patrimonial imperialism, structural realism, constructivism) in order to better analyse the causes of the war.

2 | Patrimonial Imperialism

Patrimonial imperialism is an approach to statehood that integrates internal imperial structures into the organisation of the state. It is not imperialism understood in the traditional sense, whereupon a people or a state subjugate diverse other peoples in a bid to expand their power and influence and set up an imperial state. The traditional form of imperialism is directed outwards or externally (Wright 1967, 668); the proposed direction of patrimonial imperialism is a form of an established internal state structure that does not necessarily need to exist alongside an empire in the traditional sense but influences the organisation of the state, its laws, mindset and government, as well as its actions.

The word patrimony means an estate or a piece of property inherited from one's father or ancestor (Merriam-Webster 2019a), and imperialism means the policy, practice or advocacy of extending the power and dominion of a nation, especially by direct territorial acquisitions or by gaining indirect control over the political or economic life of other areas—broadly, the extension or imposition of power, authority or influence (Merriam-Webster 2019b). The phrase 'patrimonial imperialism' would then denote an inherited form of imperialism as a state structure and, by extension, style of governance. It is, therefore, an inherited imperialism wired into the structure of the state that perpetuates itself with each generation and

iteration of the state. The crucial difference between patrimonial imperialism and imperialism in the more widely understood sense is that nations that do not possess patrimonial imperialist state structures can engage in traditional imperialism, but nations that have an internal state structure based on a patrimonial imperialist core pressure state actors to do so.

Although patrimonial imperialism is an explanation of a particular type of state structure, the origins are deeper than this and reside in the dynamics by which a population or a set of populations (the core population) becomes attached to a state as an extension of a wider nation. In this sense, the patrimonial state is an emergent social feature, and the concept captures the way that a core population becomes attached to an imperialist state that perpetuates internal imperial structures. It becomes socially embedded to the point where the ruling groups or the wider masses think that the only manner in which their state could exist is through the pursuit of patrimonial imperialist norms and practices, and it is perpetuated unconsciously, as no matter what particular type of state subsequently develops, its basis remains imperial with regard to its internal structure. Although this approach clearly takes the state level as its main focus, it should be emphasised that this is an emergent conception of the state that does not make a sharp distinction between levels of analysis but sees the character of patrimonial imperialism as borne out of state–society relations. Indeed, it could be argued that although a focus on patrimonial imperialism draws us to focus on the state form, its basis might be found in a wider state–society relationship based on the distinctive geopolitical characteristics to be found in Russia. Although we will not develop this point here, we might suggest that a fruitful research programme might look at these geopolitical characteristics according to the notion of uneven and combined development as found in Trotsky's characterisation of Russia and taken up in much recent IR research, particularly that initiated by Rosenberg (2006). This is in line with Patomaki's argument that 'Russia's development is intertwined with much vaster global processes' (Forsberg and Patomaki: 21). If these characteristics of uneven and combined and intersocietal development are characteristic of the Russian case, then we might be able to find characteristics of patrimonial imperialism in similar geopolitical cases such as Türkiye and perhaps China.

The concept of patrimonial imperialism does not pertain to a full and overarching explanation of the causes of the Russo-Ukrainian war. It ought to be considered a starting point for analysis that seeks to first determine whether patrimonial imperialism is generating certain causal mechanisms or imposing any major internal structural constraints upon actors within Russia. When considering the Russian population and state, it could be said that patrimonial imperialism was likely perpetuated unintentionally through the regime changes that occurred during the last century, as the acceptance of the patrimonial imperialist definition of the state does not necessitate a conscious awareness of it.

In the case of the war, patrimonial imperialism can be considered one of the driving factors behind Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It also allows for an analysis of the daily practices of Russians living in the Russian core, who, in theory, through their actions, perpetuate the order in place (constructivism).

Patrimonial imperialism can show that the everyday life of a person already reproduces a form of obedience towards the imperialist state, as the internal state structure in which an actor finds themselves conditions a certain obedience to the order in place or else faces dire material consequences. Historically, patrimonial imperialism in the Russian case was most likely brought about by weaving the fundamental tenets of empire into the core understanding of the Russian conception of state. Over time, this internal structural fabric of the state, becomes widespread among the population while state leaders are incentivised to embrace the ideas of patrimonial imperialism and seek to ingrain them deeper within the state structure, as well as act in accordance with it. At a certain point in time, patrimonial imperialism becomes a core element of the fabric of the state, and when that happens, it conditions the actions of state actors to follow its logic.

Because of the conception of the Russian state as patrimonial imperialist, the agents within it establish and reproduce state structures that naturally lend themselves to the perpetuation of patrimonial imperialism, which is enabled by the attachment of the core population to the state structure. This might partly explain why post-USSR Russia never abandoned the imperial conception of state. When considering the Russian population and state, it could be said that patrimonial imperialism was likely perpetuated unintentionally through the regime changes that occurred during the last century, as the acceptance of the patrimonial imperialist definition of the state does not necessitate a conscious awareness of it, even regarding the actions of the agents weaving its framework into the fabric of the state.

Historically, the approach used to extend to all peoples under Russian rule in the XIX century was due to the state being strictly imperial (Lieven 1998, 266). Tsarist Russia annexed outright its constituent nations and peoples and held them in direct subjugation. In the Soviet Union, there was the notion of the Soviet citizen that, on its own terms, pertained to the idea of a universal identity (Wojnowski 2012, 3). In practice, however, the main language of the state was Russian, and the various SSRs (Soviet Socialist Republics) were held in check by the Russian core. This was, however, an advance from outright denial of the existence of other nations. Currently, the notion of Russia is, in theory, more nationalist than universal, albeit that Russia still views itself as a hegemonic imperial culture. The main change is that the Russian Federation seeks to keep Belarus and Ukraine within its sphere of influence (Suslov 2018). That means that it no longer aspires to form a singular uniform state with the constituent populations in subjugation; rather, it seeks to simply hold the nations in subjugation without them being a part of Russia (Aubin 2024). The following dynamics show that core tenets of patrimonial imperialist structures perpetuate themselves irrespective of regime changes with each iteration of state bringing about a different form.

In the next section, we will elaborate on how this fits with critical realist understandings of explanation, causality and social structure. We can conclude this section's account of patrimonial imperialism by noting how it fits with critical realism's account of the structure–agency relationship, Roy Bhaskar's transformational model of social activity (TMSA) and Margaret Archer's account of structural and cultural morphogenesis.

According to the critical realist account, social structures have a real existence (a view that stands in opposition to positivist and constructivist IR) but are dependent on being reproduced or transformed by individual or collective actions. Their perpetuation or transformation can be made either by intentional or unintentional social action. In the Russian case, the country has historically tended to reproduce and reinforce imperialist states; however, given the significant causal power of social structures, this is normally done unconsciously or as an unintended consequence of intentional actions. The employment of patrimonial imperialism was perpetuated through/despite two radical regime changes—the establishment of the communist USSR and the capitalist Russian Federation (Lieven 1995, 608). The patrimonial imperialist structure and practices survived the regime changes and were likely unintentionally perpetuated by the elites in power both during the regimes and during the transitional periods. This is due to the patrimonial aspects of state structure being more deeply rooted than the particular regimes in place. Patrimonial imperialism is the outcome of deep-rooted state–society relations and a particular geopolitical environment. It has ingrained itself into the internal Russian state structure and has in recent years begun to influence a great many of the decisions undertaken by the Russian Federation, including the commencement of the Russo-Ukrainian war.

The concept-dependence of social structures (in contrast to natural structures) is another key element of critical realism. In contrast to natural structures, social structures only exist by virtue of the various activities they govern and the beliefs, awareness or conceptions that agents have of these activities (Bhaskar 1989a, 38). However, this is rarely on the terms understood by the actors themselves, not least because people do not create these structures; they always pre-exist actors and are a necessary condition for their ideas and activity (Bhaskar 1989a, 36). Therefore, as Bhaskar says, 'people, in their conscious activity, for the most part unconsciously reproduce (and occasionally transform) the structures governing their substantive activities' (Bhaskar 1989a, 35). This gives social structures a degree of ontological primacy (but not full determination) over agents. As Archer argues, rather than accepting the constructivist argument that structures and agency are 'mutually constitutive', the social-cultural system logically pre-dates the socio-cultural actions that transform it, whereas social-cultural elaboration (development) post-dates interaction (Archer 1996: xxv). Archer's morphogenetic approach, which has the advantage over Bhaskar of greater temporality, runs social-cultural conditioning → social-cultural interaction → social-cultural elaboration (Archer 1996, 144).

In the case of Russia, the elites in power often believe that they are perpetuating and protecting the state and nation when acting in a patrimonial imperialist manner. That is because the structural effects of Russia's patrimonial imperialist understanding mean that any form of nationalism is tied in with a vision of Russia as the nation forming the imperial core. Current Russian nationalism could be said to have strong ties to Russian imperialism insofar as the Russian nation is not so much conceived as a national state but rather as an imperial state that derives its identity and structure from the act of subjugating other nations.

3 | Critical Realism

Much like structural realism in IR, the proposed framework referred to as patrimonial imperialism assumes the onset of the war was largely caused by structural factors. However, rather than pinning this solely on the structural make-up of the international system, it turns attention to Russia's internal imperialist state structure, which, in turn, is the emergent outcome of underlying social relations. This is not to say that the two structural explanations are mutually exclusive, but by looking at the causes of the war through a patrimonial imperialist lens, one might be better positioned to see that the social, cultural and institutional forms at the heart of the Russian state played a major role in the events that unfolded. We might also add that the framework of structural realists actually has a vague, even asocial conception of international structure, lacking any emergent social aspect and doing little to help explain complex causal processes. Hence, we argue that the patrimonial imperialism conceptual framework is best understood and used if based on a critical realist ontology that can relate Russian state behaviour to the social, cultural and historical conditions present before the commencement of the war as well as the wider geopolitical context within which it takes place.

Critical realism's starting point can be described as a combination of ontological realism, epistemic relativism and judgemental rationalism (Bhaskar 1989a, 57). Ontological realism assumes that the outside world exists independently of our knowledge of it. Epistemic relativism states that because of the independence of reality combined with knowledge being transient and socially produced, there is no guarantee that our knowledge of things corresponds to the way things are (Bhaskar 1989a, 57). Judgemental rationalism states that there are nonetheless still rational grounds for preferring some explanations over others (Bhaskar 1989a, 58). This is therefore an open approach that evaluates explanations based on how well they explain reality (ontological) rather than their adherence to a particular theoretical framework or set of methodological tools (epistemological). This is important, as utilising a critical realist metatheory can help avoid some of the pitfalls found within positivism and post-positivism alike (Patomaki and Wight 2000, 235).

Within critical realism, causality is a fundamental defining concept that assumes every event and occurrence has a cause in another and cannot arise out of nowhere (Kurki 2007, 364). Because the focus of critical realism is ontological, it is committed in a fundamental way to analysing causality by means of describing the properties of real things and processes. It further assumes that a great many causes are largely unobservable but nonetheless real, which results in the need for conceptual enquiry to get at these underlying causes rather than relying on strict empirical observation of causal manifestations as events (Kurki 2007, 365). Thus, conceptual enquiry requires the postulation of various mechanisms which, if they existed, could account for the phenomena in question but the reality of which must be subjected to empirical scrutiny (Bhaskar 1989a, 12). However, in contrast to positivist social science (and structural realism in IR), there is an 'ontological gap' between causal laws and their empirical grounds (Bhaskar 1989a, 1). A process of conceptual

abstraction is necessary because causes form complex combinations with many interacting, counteracting and influencing one another (Benton and Craib 2011, 124). Social causes are of an open nature, meaning that they are not the kind of things that can easily be replicated under experimental conditions (or observed through the constant conjunction of events) given their origin in such things as discourses, norms and reasons, as well as more material social structures such as economic relations (Kurki 2007, 373).

One of the primary elements of critical realism is the understanding of enquiry based on a distinction between the 'real' structures, mechanisms and systems of relations and the 'actual' or manifest patterns of events that they generate (Bhaskar 1989b). Explanations that remain primarily focused on the actual manifestation of events without seeking underlying causes can be described as 'actualism' (Bhaskar 1989b, 15–16). The 'empirical' then refers to those manifest events that are observed (Bhaskar 1989b). To focus purely on observed events and outcomes without recourse to analysing the structures and mechanisms that produce these can be termed 'empiricism'. However, this is not particularly relevant to the following discussion. Instead, the NATO expansion and Putin's war arguments could best be described as actualist representations of the empirical data coming from current events, seeking to describe isolated sequences of events. In line with their underpinning philosophies of positivism and constructivism, neither explanation is either able or willing to provide an account of deeper, less observable or manifest causes (note also similarities to Galtung's distinction between manifest violence and structural violence) (Galtung 1969).

The concept of patrimonial imperialism seeks to show events from the perspective of the real underlying causes and generative mechanisms. It, therefore, attempts to analyse not singular events or their sequences but tries to provide an adequate lens for analysis of the possible causes of the war which, in line with critical realist thinking on causality, are real regardless of whether or not they are actualised or manifested. It thus draws attention to an imperialist state structure that causes the largely unintentional perpetuation of past imperial patterns of behaviour. Although analysis at the empirical level would limit their study to individual events and elements of the war and an 'actualist' account would describe patterns of events and manifested outcomes, the patrimonial imperialism framework represents a lens of analysis for identifying some of the root causes of the war, thereby pertaining to the real underlying structures and causal processes.

Here, we will consider the commencement of the war not as an event but rather as the emergent object or process under investigation. To talk of emergence is to talk of how the existence of higher layers is dependent upon, but not reducible to, the existence of lower layers (Elder-Vass 2005, 9). If the commencement of the war is considered an emergent feature, then the observable events should be understood as feeding back into the real to ensure the reproduction of a more complex structural ensemble. Likewise, patrimonial imperialism is situated not as a separate entity, but as an intimately connected part of the greater whole, producing emergent causal effects of a socially and historically specific character.

4 | NATO Expansion

The following section will seek to evaluate the NATO expansion argument which we have located at the level of the actual. First, we will describe the main forms of structural realism and connect them to the argument, then proceed to evaluate, critique and integrate it further into the model of social stratification and emergence. There are two main forms of structural realism in IR (defensive and offensive), both of which can provide explanations of the war albeit in different ways. Both assume the world of international relations to be anarchic, with it being inhabited by self-interested state entities that strive to maximise their security to increase their chances of survival (Korab-Karpowicz 2018). Defensive realism, as put forward by Waltz (1979), 112), assumes that states maximise their security by setting up spheres of influence, thereby dividing their power to prevent the hegemony of a singular state entity (NATO and the Warsaw Pact or the XIX-century concert of powers, for example) (Little 2014, 194). Offensive realism, as advocated by J. J. Mearsheimer (2014a, 21), rejects Waltz's notion of security derived from spheres of influence. He puts forward the notion that states can never truly be secure and must engage in constant attempts to maximise their power. The striving for hegemony, therefore, defines Mearsheimer's theory, and the lust for power will push states towards the maximisation of power and influence.

In the case of Russia, the application of structural realist theory has taken the form of what could be described as the 'NATO expansion' argument. The argument exists in two versions, the strong and the weak, both of which retain the same core argument that causally attributes the war to the expansion of NATO, which, in turn, poses either a real or perceived threat to Russia. The strong variety of the argument assumes that NATO expanded its imperial influence beyond Germany towards the East and is now seeking to rid Russia of its sphere of influence (Carpenter 2022). It further assumes that NATO poses an active nuclear threat to Russia and seeks to have Ukraine join NATO to place nuclear warheads as close to the Russian heartland as possible in order to put Russia in a position of weakness and provide NATO with an edge in case of a nuclear confrontation or growing Russian strength. The process of expansion began with NATO assimilating nations to the east of Germany and the process continues in the case of Ukraine and possibly Georgia. The strong variety of the argument is more in line with offensive structural realism, as it assumes that Ukraine would become a NATO member and for NATO or the United States to strong-arm Russia into subservience and compliance. It further assumes that NATO seeks to expand into Ukraine to broaden its power and influence on the international stage.

The weak version of the NATO expansion argument assumes that Russia tends to be either an irrational actor or a threat to the stability of the world order if provoked (Adams 2014). Its expansion into Ukraine is presented as understandable given that the nation wishes to retain its historical sphere of influence or to maintain a buffer zone against NATO (Steele 2022). The weak argument does not necessarily state that the expansion of NATO beyond Germany is a direct threat to Russia but rather

seeks not to upset the post-Soviet spheres of influence drawn up after the Cold War and before the Georgian war in 2008. It chiefly centres around 'don't poke the bear' arguments, which in general aim at each nation residing in their respective spheres of influence, in the interest of keeping world peace. NATO, by offering Ukraine the possibility to become a member and further by supporting its pro-Western democratic factions, upset the Russian sphere of influence, resulting in the Russo-Ukrainian war.

The two structural realist frameworks and their respective connection to the strong and weak versions of the NATO expansion argument raise some issues. Firstly, they assume NATO to be the main agent undertaking action directly aimed at provocation and the expansion of its sphere of influence into the Russian core. The element is common to both versions of the argument and does not necessarily consider Russia to be the active side, but rather it is reacting to actions undertaken by others. Against this, it must be said that Russia decided on its own to undertake the invasion, and even if we accept the tenets of structural realism, it must be said that the active/reactive distinction is not necessarily fruitful when attempting to deduce the causes of the war, as it either shifts the focus to the side of NATO or to Russia. Secondly, it largely overlooks the fact that neither the admission of Ukraine into NATO nor nuclear sharing on its soil were on the cards before the Russian invasion. If we analyse Article 5 of the 'North Atlantic Treaty', it can be seen that 'an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all' (NATO 1949). Article 5 could be triggered if Ukraine were to be admitted to the rank of a NATO member state, because it was actively engaged in a civil war with the breakaway Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics. Although it must be said that Russia was not officially co-belligerent in the internal war in Ukraine, the fact of Ukraine being able to activate Article 4, 'The Parties will consult together whenever, in the opinion of any of them, the territorial integrity, political independence or security of any of the Parties is threatened' (NATO 1949), nonetheless remained a distinct possibility and would, before the war, have hindered Ukraine's accession process. The argument is further connected to Article 10: 'The Parties may, by unanimous agreement, invite any other European State in a position to further the principles of this treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area to accede to this Treaty' (NATO 1949), whereupon a great many constituent member states of NATO were opposed to the admission of Ukraine into NATO. It must further be mentioned that the 'Alliance's Study on Enlargement' (NATO 1995) outlines in Chapter 1.6 that 'States which have ethnic disputes or external territorial disputes, including irredentist claims, or internal jurisdictional disputes must settle those disputes by peaceful means in accordance with OSCE principles' (NATO 1995). In the context of Russia annexing Crimea and Ukraine maintaining its claim to it, along with the internal war waging in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, it was made impossible for Ukraine to fulfil the criteria for accession before the war.

Ukraine could not, therefore, have joined NATO before the war, as seen in the 'Alliance's Study on Enlargement' (NATO 1995)

and the various articles from the 'North Atlantic Treaty' (NATO 1995). Why, in this case, is the NATO expansion argument focused on NATO expanding into Ukraine? The NATO expansion argument should, therefore, be viewed purely from the perspective of the spheres of influence of various states, in this case, the Russian sphere of influence and the aid granted to Ukraine by the West when it sought to separate itself from the post-Soviet order. When applying a patrimonial imperialist lens to the two structural versions of the NATO expansion argument, it can be seen that Russia's conception of itself as a Greater Russian hegemon necessitated some form of a reaction towards the western drift of the so-called Little Russians (Ukrainians) (Oksamytna 2023).

The disruption of the historical sphere of influence not only questioned Russia's power and position in the world order but also showed that a constituent people of Greater Russia (or an East Slavic nation) can move towards a vision of governance that is not strictly patrimonial imperialist. This, in turn, resulted in Russia attempting to regain a foothold in Ukraine while also attempting to challenge NATO imperialism via a perceived proxy war on what it conceived of as its territory (Hughes 2022). NATO, in this case, is not necessarily viewed as an alliance but rather as an institutionalised extension of the US sphere of influence or, further yet, a direct vassal of the United States—ergo, an empire. The view is very much widespread within Russia, and especially amongst its decision-makers (Stemplowska 2022). A strong example of this might be the Russian narrative placing Poland along with the United States as plotting to annex Western Ukraine (Kuvaldin 2022), with Polish troops being deployed as peacekeepers with the help of the United States to reclaim the lands that had, in the interwar period, belonged to Poland. The claim is fundamentally false as, firstly, Poland has not sent and is not planning to send peacekeeping forces to Ukraine (Kuvaldin 2022). Secondly, and of significant importance, Poland has revoked any territorial claims in the East and has, along with the United States and the United Kingdom, been one of the staunchest supporters of Ukraine's independence and war against Russian aggression. A counterargument to this statement might be made that in March 2022, Poland floated around the idea of a peacekeeping mission being sent to Ukraine (Mackenzie 2022). This, however, has firstly been rejected by President Zelensky and has never become an official policy of the government, with Poland fully supporting an independent Ukraine and not laying any claim to its territory (Krzysztozek 2022).

This can be conceptualised through the lens of patrimonial imperialism combined with evidence from some of Putin's speeches as well as those of Vladislav Surkov, the main contemporary Russian ideologue. Russia's reaction to Ukraine's drift towards the West can be seen as a result of the emergent structure of the Russian state, resulting in the visualisation of all states that are not in the Russian fold as rival patrimonial imperialist actors and, by extension, seeing Ukraine's drift as a form of proxy war intended at weakening its Russian rival. The attitude is further combined with denials of a Ukrainian identity and, in some cases, Ukrainian statehood that aim at perpetuating the Russian vision of the state, as the imperial power

unifying all East Slavic peoples. Witness Surkov's interview from 26 February during which he stated, 'there is no Ukraine. There is Ukrainian-ness. That is, a specific disorder of the mind. An astonishing enthusiasm for ethnography, driven to the extreme' (Duben 2020). And further, Putin's remarks from 2008 during the Bucharest summit: 'Ukraine is not even a state! What is Ukraine? A part of its territory is [in] eastern Europe, but another part, a considerable one, was a gift from us!' (Duben 2020) as well as 'Modern Ukraine was entirely and fully created by Russia, more specifically the Bolshevik, Communist Russia'. Then there is his essay 'On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians', showing that the general denial of Ukrainian separateness from the larger Russian identity is seen as fictitious at least by Russian decision-makers (Putin 2021).

If this is connected to patrimonial imperialism, it can be seen that such denials and policy decisions form a core part of Russia's identity as an imperialist power, whereupon state actors are forced to keep up the appearance of a strong Russia that has substantial influence over the nations falling under the Greater Russian identity. When viewed from the perspective of structural realism in combination with patrimonial imperialism, it can be seen that Ukraine's shift towards the West could, rightly or wrongly, be considered a threat to Russia's patrimonial imperialist make-up (de Witte 2022). Structural realist thinking in the case of Russia could best be conducted from the position of patrimonial imperialism, as the internal structural make-up of the Russian state likely had a significant impact on its reaction to the changes in the external structure of the international arena. It could also be said that NATO should have known that Russia would react in such a way given that Ukraine has historically been in its sphere of influence and the speeches made by the ruling elites. The argument is valid, however, the fundamental reason in this case for Russia undertaking the war resides in it accepting the tenets of patrimonial imperialism.

As such, the patrimonial imperialist lens can broaden and deepen the level of understanding of the reasons for the commencement of the war. A strong case might be made for the placement of the NATO expansion argument or various structural realist narratives at the level of the real causal mechanisms; however, it is more akin to a focus on the actual manifestation of events given its focus on conscious actions at the (international) institutional level (Russian state/NATO). The importance of Ukraine drifting into NATO's sphere of influence ought not to be understated; however, as a purely structural realist analysis of the issue, it does not serve to fully explain the underlying causes of the war as it mostly concentrates on how changes in the international system force states to respond in certain ways. It ignores how agents might interpret changes in the international system (note Mearsheimer's failing on this) and whether such pressures to pursue a certain path might be due to different structural factors, notably the internal structure of the Russian state and the emergent social features present in Russian society. Hence, structural realism only considers the 'level' of the international system. The introduction of a more stratified model of reality and the concept of patrimonial imperialism attempts to fill this gap.

The Putin's war argument attributes the reason for the commencement of the war to Putin's individual decision to undertake it (Kirby 2022). It thereby emphasises his agency in the unfolding of the war and identifies this as its chief cause. Because of the singular focus on Putin and his agency, the argument tends to also consider the Russian people as being unable to undertake any significant resistance, as they are either indoctrinated into supporting his regime or the forces of state make it impossible for them to resist the government's actions (Picheta 2023). The general argument could be connected to the stream of ideas present in constructivist theories of international relations which hold that society is collectively constructed by the actions of individual agents (people) by the actions that collectively perpetuate social structures (or more correctly, social practices) on a daily basis (Onuf 2013, 4). In the case of the Putin's war argument, it could be said that Putin, because he grew up in the USSR and because he worked in the KGB, was brought up in an imperialist Russian state that attempted to subjugate the largest minorities to the Russian core (Tuminez 2003, 86). Putin thereby was raised in an imperial, authoritarian and, to an extent, universalist society (with Russia at the universalist core) that was one of the world's two greatest powers. The Russia of today, although different from the USSR, still retains some of the imperial, authoritarian and universalist traits found within the USSR. Putin, because the society he was raised in formed his mental map of the world, actively sought to perpetuate the above-mentioned characteristics. Russia was dealt a bad hand after the fall of the USSR and, according to him, stripped of its rightful place in the region, as well as the wider world (Spohr 2022). Many minorities that were once considered akin to Russians, such as the Ukrainians and Belarusians, were separated from the Russian core and formed independent states. Although Belarus has remained steadfastly behind Russia, the same cannot be said of Ukraine, which has, with time, drifted away from Russia's orbit. If, according to constructivism, society makes the people and people make society, then in the case of Putin in relation to the argument, the cause of the Russo-Ukrainian war was the fact that someone who harkened back to the days of the Soviet Union managed to take the seat of power. The main cause of the war in this case rests upon the agency of Putin, who ultimately undertook the decision to commence the war. Further, the apparatus of power within Russia has not abandoned its imperialist ideals. As such, even if Putin himself were to lose power, it is highly likely that the ruling elites would support a candidate that held much the same ideals with regard to Russia's imperialistic structure (Menon 2022). In short, the language game would remain the same.

The application of a patrimonial imperialist lens of analysis to Putin's war argument might, as in the case of structural realism, alleviate some actualist limitations found within the argument and perspective as applied to Russia. The patrimonial imperialist lens could sustain a focus on the elites of Russian society when it comes to bringing about or 'actualising' the war. However, it would add a substantial structural element that would look at the conditions that enable and constrain these agents and give this an internal state focus.

The patrimonial imperialist structure of the state not only predisposes actors like Putin to accept and act within the tenets of patrimonial imperialism as necessary for taking the reins of power, but also forces the agents to act in particular ways (say, in accordance with offensive realist logic) when faced with various external situations. Putin, doubtless, was the one who made the decision to go to war with Ukraine, but it must be said that he was supported by the Russian state apparatus in this decision. This is not simply because he is the de facto ruler of Russia, but also because the action was largely in line with the philosophy behind the state and the power structures that have been reproduced over a long time period. Such an analysis is in line with critical realist arguments about how subjects are socially situated—Bhaskar talks of a plane extending from transactions with nature through to social relations, intersubjective and intrasubjective relations and the agent's own subjectivity. This four-planar social being is mediated through the enablement and constraints of structures, institutions, place and praxis (Bhaskar 1993). Thus, the decision to go to war was supported and enabled by a series of subject relations, most significantly relations with the state apparatus due to its underlying patrimonial imperialist structure and the perceived need for a Greater Russian empire and/or sphere of influence.

Patrimonial imperialism can therefore be usefully applied to the Putin's war argument as well as constructivism as a lens for analysis. The most useful thing that a critical realist meta-theory and constructivist focus on identity and mentality can bring to this argument is that it reveals that some elements of the current Russian state are woven into the unfolding of current events so that developments are not wholly attributable to the behaviour of certain actors and that even the strongest of these actors must operate within a particular structural context and are partly defined by the social positions they occupy. This latter view means that underlying structural factors not only influence actors to behave in certain ways, but they also select actors that will behave according to the particularities of state structure and wider social relations and further place the patrimonial imperialist identity of state and society on a firm footing.

When situating Putin's war argument within the ontological framework of stratified reality and emergence found within critical realism, one must guard against assigning far more agency to Putin than is likely prudent—giving such agency causal primacy, so to speak. Although it is undeniable that the decision to invade ultimately lay in Putin's hands, situating the explanation at the level of the actions and decisions of a singular agent would be fickle, as, first, the agents' decisions and actions are subject to change and, second, such decisions may not necessarily reflect the general direction in which state or society is moving. When viewed alongside patrimonial imperialism, it can be said that both patrimonial imperialism and Putin's war feed upon each other, because Putin, as an agent, is acting within the accepted patrimonial imperialist state structure which, in turn, is dependent upon such actions for its continued reproduction and, as such, does not hinder the general direction in which the state is heading. In terms of social stratification, however, we can identify patrimonial imperialism more at the

level of underlying causal structures and Putin's war more as an emergent social feature.

6 | Conclusion

This article has introduced the patrimonial imperialism framework and situated it within a theoretically grounded taxonomy on the causes of the Russo-Ukrainian war. The patrimonial imperialist model questions traditional notions of imperialism focused on ideological or strategic considerations by showing how imperialism can become an embedded feature of state structure persistent through regime changes. The broader causal power of the framework has shown why a move away from imperialism in Russia failed after the fall of the Soviet Union and how the feature has, and likely will, persist with subsequent regimes. This leads to the conclusion that for genuine change to take place in states where patrimonial imperialism has taken root, more fundamental transformations would have to occur that go beyond the scope of regime change. This would likely involve a foundational change in society–state relations, which requires further investigation. The patrimonial imperialism framework conceived as a research programme can ground inquiry into embedded aspects of imperialism that can potentially be applied to Russia and other nations such as Türkiye or China. This opens the scope of the programme to be applied to further political, historical and social studies attempting to model structure-agency dynamics.

The taxonomy found within the critical realist model of stratified reality separates the causes into internal structure (patrimonial imperialism), external structure (NATO expansion) and agency (Putin's war) to integrate social and international political perspectives into a unified causal model. It is important to differentiate the underlying causes from the actual manifestation of outcomes. The methodological foundation presented in this article can be applied to further theoretical and empirical studies that can model a wider range of events.

Other tertiary findings revealed within this article include the following:

1. Patrimonial imperialism is perpetuated unintentionally within the Russian state and assumes a different form with each regime change.
2. Ukraine could not have entered NATO before the war; it could only have become a strong part of the western sphere of influence.
3. Russia perceived further Ukrainian integration into the West to be a form of imperial encroachment by rival powers.

This article has also introduced two significant innovations. First, that the patrimonial imperialism framework offers an alternative to conventional imperialist theories. Second, that an applied critical realist methodology combining structure and agency allows an analysis of social and international political dynamics for causal analyses. It is recommended that the two innovations can ground further research concerning the Russo-

Ukrainian war, the investigation of the prevalence of patrimonial imperialism within a broader timeframe or the application of the model of stratified reality to agency-structure debates and other theoretical or empirical studies. That is, however, a further discussion to be had.

Conflicts of Interest

Jonathan Joseph (co-author) is on the editorial board of the Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour.

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