



Gabriel A. Pierzyński

Jonathan Joseph

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Why the Russia-Ukraine war isn't just about NATO and Putin

Most explanations of Russia's invasion of Ukraine focus on NATO expansion or Vladimir Putin's personal ambitions. Yet as Gabriel A. Pierzynski and Jonathan Joseph argue, such accounts miss that Russia's imperial state structure shapes the state's behaviour regardless of who leads it or how the West reacts.

Explanations of the causes of the **Russia-Ukraine war** tend to drift towards one of two lines of argument. These are the "**NATO expansion**" argument, chiefly focusing on the geopolitical rivalries 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 explanations, however, focus on processes rather than structures. We propose a third explanation – **patrimonial imperialism**, arising out of fundamental state-society relations.

Patrimonial imperialism

Patrimonial imperialism integrates imperial structures into the internal organisation of the state. Unlike traditional imperialism, where states subjugate diverse peoples to expand power externally, patrimonial imperialism constitutes an established internal state structure arising out of state-society relations.

This structure influences the organisation of the state, its laws, mindset, government and actions without requiring a formal empire. As both state structure and style of governance, it perpetuates itself with each generation and iteration of the state. The patrimonial state can be seen as an emergent social feature, and the concept captures the way that a core population becomes attached to an imperialist state.

Historically, the approach was characterised by a **strictly imperial state** structure that sought to bring all peoples under Russian rule. 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**. In practice, however, the main language of the state was Russian and the various 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 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**.

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**. The following dynamics show that core tenets of patrimonial imperialist structures perpetuate themselves irrespective of regime changes, with each iteration of the state bringing about a different form.

NATO and Putin

Patrimonial imperialism ought to be seen as a part of a larger causal model that separates the causes of the Russia-Ukraine war into internal state-society structure (**patrimonial imperialism**), geopolitical rivalries (**NATO expansion**) and state agency (**Putin's war**).

The "**NATO expansion**" and "Putin's war" arguments could best be described as representations of processes deduced from sequences of events. These approaches, focused on observable events and individual decisions, cannot account for deeper, less visible causes.

Patrimonial imperialism, on the other hand, identifies the underlying structure that generates these surface manifestations. It questions traditional notions of imperialism **focused on ideological or strategic considerations** by showing how imperialism can become an embedded feature of state structure that is 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 can ground inquiry into embedded aspects of imperialism that can be applied beyond Russia to other nations such as Türkiye or China. The consequences of

our research are directly relevant to academic and policy circles as they highlight the need to reconsider how relations with states where patrimonial imperialism is present ought to be conducted.

Given that the perpetuation of imperial structures remains constant throughout regime change, future research and policy approaches must develop strategies that engage with such structural continuities rather than regime-level dynamics.

*For more information, see the authors' accompanying paper in the **Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour**.*

*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: **Joey Sussman** / **Shutterstock.com***



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About the author



Gabriel A. Pierzyński

Gabriel A. Pierzynski is a Research Assistant at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His research focuses on IR theory and Computational Social Science.

Jonathan Joseph

Jonathan Joseph is a Professor in Politics and International Relations at the University of Bristol. His research focuses on IR, social theory and resilience.

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