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The Yeltsin Era: Only a Historic Blip in the Continuum of the Russian Empire?

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1. Introduction and summary

The Russian Empire has been in place in varying forms and duration since at least the 16th century. One variant of this empire was the Soviet Union, under the banners of a specific ideology, communism, and a specific form of enforcement – the “dictatorship of the proletariat”. We argue that the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the underlying political ideology that sustained its results was an *exception* to this historical trend, and lasted only a decade or so. Vladimir Putin’s ascent to power in 2000 in the Russian Federation – the core of the Russian Empire lineage – brought back the rebuilding of the empire as a main political objective. This was first sought through “soft methods”: economic and political alliances to re-engage – or re-coerce – former Soviet republics; followed by creating and maintaining the so-called “frozen wars” in several parts of the “near-abroad”, as Russians often label the former Soviet republics that have been independent since the breakup of the Soviet Union. The occupation of Crimea in 2014 and the ongoing brutal war against the whole of Ukraine show that Russia’s leadership has done with the softer methods, shifting to overt military action.

A (re)newed imperial ideology has crystallised in the process, culminating in the stunning speech of Russian President Putin on the eve of Russia’s attack on Ukraine on February 24, 2022. In this address, Putin based Russia’s imperial claim over Ukraine on what he believes to be Russia’s pre-1997 “imperial territorial borders”. Belarus has provided access to its territory in the war against Ukraine and perhaps we have witnessed its “silent Anschluss” by its imperial neighbour. Depending on the

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outcome of the war in Ukraine, Putin will likely try to continue his project of rebuilding what he considers to be Russia's rightful historic empire.

The subject of this paper is *not* the Soviet era's empire or the current aggressive re-emergence of Russia's – Putin's – imperialism. The former has been well researched while the latter is ongoing, and in this paper we will only refer to a few relevant studies. Nor do we want to get into the debate on "who lost Russia". Instead, we investigate what appears to have been an *exceptional period of non-imperial policies* in Russia between the last years of the Soviet empire era under Michael Gorbachev until Vladimir Putin's takeover in 2000 – the Yeltsin era.

Our paper's contribution comes from three main sources: (i) our own investigation and engagement in the last years of the Soviet Empire as Michael Gorbachev was trying to navigate it through bouts of incomplete reforms. This includes our participation in the assessment of Soviet reforms by a temporary Joint Task Force of global financial institutions (the IMF, the World Bank, the OECD and the nascent EBRD) which was created at the request of the Heads of the G7² and worked in 1990-91; (ii) our work directly with high-level Russian and other former republican officials on economic reforms during the first part of the 1990s as members of the IMF and World Bank teams, respectively. One of us published a book³ about this period on which we will draw; and (iii) a series of interviews with reform leaders from the key former Soviet republics that we conducted in person between February and May 1997. From *Russia*, we interviewed Deputy Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar, the architect and implementer of Russia's reforms, including the new policy of non-imperialism, as well as Russian Finance Minister and later President of the Central Bank of Russia Sergey Dubinin; from *Latvia* in the Baltics, Prime Minister Ivars Godmanis; from *Ukraine*, First Vice Prime Minister and Finance Minister Victor Pynzenyk; and finally from *Kazakhstan*, Deputy Prime Minister and later first Governor of the National Bank of Kazakhstan Dualat Sembayev.

Drawing on these records, we posit that what paved the way to the speedy and bloodless collapse of the Soviet Empire and made it possible for the newly created non-Russian former Soviet countries to cement their independence in the following decade was a *unique combination of three historical factors* and their internal dynamics:

² The Group of Seven (G7) is an high level intergovernmental political forum consisting of the largest advanced countries which are lead democracies: Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States. The European Union that altogether represents 27 countries, is a "non-enumerated" member.

³ Nagy-Mohacsi, "The Meltdown of the Russian State" (2000).

1. *USSR leader Michael Gorbachev's illusion that the Soviet political economic system could be reformed and decentralised without risks to its integrity.* Gorbachev was convinced that even though reforms had to include granting more sovereignty to the Soviet republics and more political and economic power to their citizens, he could centrally control the transition to a "socialist market economy". He did not see that reforming the Soviet system would give rise to irreversible centrifugal forces from the 15 republics and lead to the disintegration of the Union. His assumption proved to be wrong and central to the collapse of the Soviet Union's empire. Gorbachev was a "messiah but lost as a politician" lamented his own adviser Anatoly Chernyaev. We call this a most beautiful historical mistake.
2. *The historically unprecedented configuration within an empire under which both the "periphery" republics and the core of the empire, Russia, found themselves on the same side of the political barricade, aiming to dismantle the Soviet imperial political structure.* To be sure, republics from the Baltics to Ukraine, from the Caucasus to the Central Asian republics were all in favour of some form of sovereignty and degree of independence. Preferences in the late 1980s ranged from full political and economic secession (Baltics) to economic independence (Kazakhstan). The surprising yet critical component was that the *core* of the empire, Russia, was also on the side of the secessionists. Yeltsin's leadership quest vis-à-vis USSR President Gorbachev meant that the core of the empire politically sided with the breakaway Republics. In the process the communist system was also destroyed.

Moreover, once in power, Yeltsin installed initially a distinctly *non-imperial nationalist government*. The head of Russia's first government, Yegor Gaidar, did *not* want the republics in their tent. He considered the latter a hindrance to their policy reforms and a potential financial burden for their budget. Russia's reformer elite thought that for economic and political reforms to be fast and effective, they had to be republic-specific and thus locally driven.

Russian reformers in fact personally supported sovereign reform efforts in the new independent republics. The dismantling of the rouble zone after the dissolution of the Soviet Union showed the new Russia's resolve to do away any last relic of the Union. As far as we know, such *aligned*

incentives of the core and periphery for disintegration is unique in the history of empires.

The new government was also very mindful of the ongoing bloody civil war in Yugoslavia and what a similar path might mean in a nuclear superpower – this is a recurrent theme of almost all research and memoirs of the period.

The initial clearly anti-imperialist attitude of the Russian government came under increasing pressure at home from the middle of the 1990s, as the power struggle between the non-imperialist reformers and the pro-Soviet old guard was increasingly tilted in favour of the latter.

3. The *unwillingness of the Soviet military leadership to intervene* in domestic policy and crucial political events that could have prevented the secessions of the republics and the takeover by Russian President Yeltsin from Soviet leader Gorbachev. While several theories on the role of military interference in civilian society would have predicted military intervention to keep together the Soviet Union by force, this did not happen. We investigate this puzzling outcome and point to two main reasons for it: first, the Soviet military's technological competition with the US made the army realise, as early as the 1970s, that the Soviet economic system was no match for that of the US. The technology gap could not be closed, and in fact was widening at an accelerating pace, thanks also to US President Reagan's arms race in the first half of the 1980s. This made the military internalise the urgency of innovation-producing reforms. Second, the Russian military had a deep-rooted organisational culture that gave supremacy to civilian rule and focus on external rather than domestic tasks. These factors kept the army on the side of some reforms and away from resolutely interfering in domestic politics, even when the stakes became the very integrity of the country. The failure of the half-hearted and poorly managed August 1991 coup d'état underlines this point.

The unique period of lack of imperial interference from Russia came to an end after Vladimir Putin took over in 2000. Post-imperial nostalgia naturally existed through the Yeltsin era, with which the Yeltsin presidency increasingly struggled through the 1990s. But imperialism returned in earnest only with Russian President Putin. After an initial period of continuing the Yeltsin era's non-invasive neighbourhood policy and some economic reforms, President Putin changed track. In his April 2005 "state of the union" address, he called the collapse of the Soviet Union "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century." In his 2007 Munich speech he added to his list of

complaints the mantra against the post-1990 NATO expansion. Putin's Ukraine war speech on February 24, 2022 clarified however that Russia's objections to NATO extensions were largely diplomatic distraction and that the real aim is to resurrect the Russian Empire with its 1917 borders.

In sum, there was a short decade under President Yeltsin when Russia's leadership and reformist elite were distinctly non-imperialist. We do not know if this could have lasted without Putin – it would have certainly required some serious soul searching in Russia and an open, national confrontation with its imperial past. But we do know that in the intellectual “end-of-history” haze, Western powers did not fully appreciate how the non-imperialist Yeltsin era presented an opportunity to bury Russian imperialism for good by developing and integrating the country into the world economy faster. It would certainly have required less victory lapses and more strategic focus, as well as providing support and funding to Russia on par with the Marshall Plan that re-modernised and democratised Nazi Germany and Japan following the Second World War. It would have also required an acceptance of competition by removing obstacles to Russia entering certain high-tech markets, not least in the military area such as exports of nuclear, space and related goods and services, and more broadly, treating Russia as an equal diplomatic and commercial partner (Kozyrev, 2010).

The window of opportunity to engage with a novel, non-imperial Russia gradually narrowed in the later years of Yeltsin's presidency and clearly closed after Putin's first presidency. The world is now witness of, and has to deal with, the current Russian leadership's escalating revenge for the collapse of the Soviet Union and its pursuit of rebuilding the tsarist empire. In the rest of the paper, we discuss these trends and conclude with lessons.

2. How a non-imperial Russia was born

Factor 1: Gorbachev's beautiful historic mistake about the consequence of reforms

The tsarist and Soviet heritage

The Soviet Empire was, in many respects, the continuum of the pre-Soviet Russian empire that evolved over several centuries. The policy of “gathering land” – the colonisation of neighbouring nations and tribes – diluted the national element of the state and the tsarist system operated increasingly on a “supranational” basis. It presided over multiple

groups/former countries with a strong, but not overwhelming, ethnocentrism, with Russian being the leading ethnic group.⁴

Following the 1917 revolution, the Bolsheviks developed the Soviet system along the lines of the tsarist regime and reinforced the supranational nature of the state, an aspect which was bolstered by the communist emphasis on internationalism for the working class. Like the tsarist regime, the Soviet state was created and maintained along military lines, with strong centralisation and a direct hierarchical line of command.

Until Gorbachev's reforms, the state was omnipotent. In addition to controlling a strong military, armed with nuclear weapons since the 1950s, it had full ownership of productive assets and direct control over quantities and prices. Its massive redistributive role relied on confiscatory taxation on the one hand, and, on the other, expenditure allocation reaching all aspects of the economy and society.

Serious problems with the Soviet command economy became increasingly obvious from the late 1960s, but earlier reform initiatives were quickly abandoned.⁵ As the system's economic crisis deepened, Gorbachev, who came to power in 1985, promised the benefit of economic reforms (*perestroika*) along with increasing, though still controlled, political freedom (*glasnost*).

Gorbachev's reforms with unintended consequences

Gorbachev's reforms had an asymmetric impact: deeply negative on the economic front, but liberatingly positive on the political front.

Economic reforms (*perestroika*) were overall shambolic and ultimately devastating in their impact on the economy and the Union: there was no initial plan, only several initiatives such as the anti-alcohol or the "quality improvement" campaigns; and what followed were half-way reforms that created more chaos and rent-seeking opportunities rather than economic incentives for higher growth.⁶ In its summary, the report candidly criticised the often chaotic and incoherent nature of the Soviet reform efforts through 1990, and overall, the report presented an alternative, comprehensive, "shock therapy" reform agenda – for the whole of the Soviet Union.⁷

Nonetheless, economic reforms did make a deep dent in the state's omnipotent powers and the centralised command system, allowing decentralised decision-making for enterprises, with a concomitant reduction in enterprise taxation and the central allocation of investment.

⁴ For more, see Burbank and Cooper (2010).

⁵ From the 1960s, several economic reform efforts were mounted, such as the Kosygin reforms (1965) and Andropov (early 1980s), all of which failed. For excellent detailed analysis, see Zubok (2021).

⁶ For an assessment of the reforms and a detailed underlying analysis, see the Joint Task Force report of the IMF, the World Bank, the OECD and EBRD (1991), the members of which included the authors of this paper.

⁷ See also Goldbeiger and McFaul (2003), Kotkin (2001) and Zubok (2021).

The state did not relinquish its monopoly over ownership, yet economic decentralisation resulted in a significant power-shift to the managers of enterprises as well as the republics.

Economic decentralisation undermined the military-based centralised command system, *without* establishing, at the same time, a modern, institutional state.⁸ The weakening of the centre (the supranational state) and a deepening economic crisis allowed other nations within the Soviet Union to increasingly demand state-like powers. They first only claimed economic independence and started to prepare their own budgets; but demands for sovereignty and then for political independence soon followed. The republics approached reforms in different ways, based on their different economic, political and cultural contexts. In other words, the *same* central *perestroika* approach translated into different political-economic processes for each of the diverse 15 republics of the Soviet Union.

Meanwhile, Gorbachev's political reforms (*glasnost*) proved unexpectedly powerful both in terms of decentralisation and individual freedom/human rights. Gorbachev curtailed the omnipotent power of the communist party because he saw many of its members were hostile to reforms. As the communist party's structure was union-wide, a vital union-level enforcement mechanism was weakened as a result.

Gorbachev's personality also mattered: he was overall averse to military action, particularly against the Soviet Union's own people. The historian Vlad Zubok opines that "It was the weakness of the Kremlin [Gorbachev] leadership and not the strength of the Russian opposition that pulled the country apart."⁹

Be it as it may, Gorbachev's reforms delivered poor results on the economic but major breakthroughs on the political front. The interaction between economic and political reforms fuelled further progress on the political front, unleashing individual freedom, with freedom of speech and intellectual debates flourishing in a historically unprecedented fashion, while strong centrifugal forces within the Soviet Union were irreversibly set in motion. Gorbachev himself lamented in his memoirs that he had underestimated the "national question" – i.e., that of the republics.¹⁰

Despite being the leading ethnic group, Russians were not accorded any particular primacy in the disintegrating Soviet system – Russia appeared only as one of the 15 republics that sought independence from the supranational Soviet state and its communist command system. Boris Yeltsin's ingenious strategy was to associate communism with the supranational Soviet state, with which the Russian people, along with the other 14 nation-republics, had "nothing to do", and from which they had to seek "independence". In the process, the Soviet Union would break up and he would rise to power.

⁸ Nagy-Mohacsi (2000).

⁹ Zubok, (2021).

¹⁰ As quoted by McFaul (2003).

Could the Soviet Union have been reformed without disintegration?

From the viewpoint of Russian imperialism, the question is whether it would have been possible to reform the Soviet Union economically and politically while also maintaining its imperial borders and structure. Could the Soviet Union have followed the model of China, which is the only example to date of a – at least notionally – hat successfully managed economic reforms without political freedom, thus avoiding decentralisation and risks to the country’s territory?

In our view the answer is a resounding *no*. Reforms in the European political and cultural context would not have been possible without according some degree of political freedom as well.¹¹ Earlier attempts of economic reform in the Soviet Bloc, including in the Soviet Union itself, were stopped in their tracks – and thus “failed” – because increased economic freedom quickly translated into political empowerment outside the centre, which the communist party did not tolerate. By the mid-1980s, however, the need for reforms was patently obvious. In the context of the vast and multi-nation Soviet Union, restructuring the economy had to coincide with major decentralisation of political authority and responsibility. The centre was set to loose out to the republics – the question was how far this rebalancing would go.

The reformers from the former Soviet republics whom we interviewed in 1997 echoed the view that the reforming Soviet empire was hard to keep together. Ukrainian Finance Minister Pynzenyk considered that “the economic system of the former Soviet Union was not trying to unite the different parts and nations, but to separate them. The system was moving forward to disintegration. As soon as the economic situation deteriorated, centrifugal forces started.”¹² Kazakh Deputy Prime Minister Sembayev thought that the Soviet Union tried to keep together very different countries with different agendas. It was not possible to reform the Baltics the same was as, say, Kazakhstan. He shared Pynzenyk’s view: “It was dictatorship that held us together.”¹³

For the Baltic States, this was never even a question. After a period of independence, they were annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940, and regaining full political independence was on the top of reformer’s agenda.¹⁴ From 1989 on, they were actively working on regaining independence from what they considered Soviet occupiers.

¹¹ See, for example, Gaidar (2007).

¹² Interview Pynzenyk (1997).

¹³ Sembayev noted however that before Gorbachev it was hard to believe, at least for the Kazakh leadership, that the Soviet republics could ever become independent. He recalled a highly classified Soviet document that contained US National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski’s assessment in the late 1970s saying that if the central authorial regime in the USSR were removed, the constituent Soviet republics would become independent states. He could not believe this at the time, and thought the Security Adviser did not know what he was talking about. It was only much later that he recognised that Brzezinski had clearly been right. (Interview Sembayev 1997)

¹⁴ Interview Godmanis (1997).

An interesting aspect is the role of local elites in empires. Empires, in addition to force, also co-opt local elites and Russia was a master of this tactic. Over millennia, empires used various combinations of force and coercion, employing various imperial structures: centralised (China) or decentralised (Great Britain); homogenous rules for the groups they controlled or differentiated ones (Roman and Ottoman empires). The historian Jane Burbank considers that Russia used the co-opting strategy quite effectively, employing differentiated coercion rules across its subordinated groups/nations. Her view is that among empires, Russia tended to tolerate national/ethnic/religious differences more than many others.¹⁵ Starting with the Romanovs, Russia broadly accepted as a given the multiplicity of their fold, and employed a differentiated reward system among the groups they ruled. As Burbank notes, “The Russian way of consolidating imperial power was to leave ... already existing social, religions and cultural relations in place and get local people to carry out many of the state’s essential tasks.” This was necessary as only local entities had the knowledge needed for Moscow to control faraway places. While nurturing loyalty, this strengthened local elites. Among our interviewees from the former Soviet republics, except for the Latvian Prime Minister, all had strong personal and intellectual relations with Russia: they had either studied in Moscow or worked there at some point in their life. Local intelligentsia/elite, the best minds in the republic all looked to Moscow, which provided, by design, the most open and vibrant intellectual environment.

Meanwhile, Western powers increasingly had to consider “whose side” they should be on: that of the Union or of the republics. McFaul (2003) masterfully describes internal debates within the Bush administration about whether to meaningfully open up to Yeltsin and other republic leaders with the ultimate possibility of a breakup of the Soviet Union, or to continue supporting the USSR and its president, Gorbachev. Secretary of Defence Dick Cheney and CIA leadership argued for stronger support to Russian President Yeltsin, because he was more pro-reform and pro-democracy and was an anti-communist, and because they saw net benefits in the Soviet Union’s breakup. In contrast, Secretary of State James Baker, some of the national security advisers, as well as Treasury Secretary Brady trusted Gorbachev more, and believed that the Soviet Union was needed to provide central control over their vast nuclear arsenal and to service the large Soviet debt (sic!). In the end, the latter group won and the Bush administration publicly supported Soviet President Gorbachev and thus the cohesion of the Soviet empire until the very last minute.¹⁶

The US and the G7 publicly sided with the Soviet Union’s President Gorbachev on numerous occasions against Russian President Yeltsin and other independence-seeking republics. This was a repeated take by our interviewees. Latvia’s Prime Minister repeatedly stressed to us: Latvia declared independence in May 1990 (and with the support of Latvia’s sizeable Russian population), but Gorbachev, and consequently Helmut Kohl’s Germany and George Bush’s US refused to recognise it. The latter two said that while their countries had never recognised

¹⁵ Burbank & Cooper (2010).

¹⁶ See also these debates in M.E Sarotte’s recent book through the particular prism of the issue of NATO expansion (2021).

the Baltics' Soviet Annexation in 1940, they refused to go further to recognise their (right to) independence in 1990. They told Godmanis: "You have to improve *perestroika* reforms in the whole of the Soviet Union." Only after Russia went for independence following the failed August 1991 coup did Western powers recognise Latvia.¹⁷ Andrei Kozyrev, Russia's first foreign minister appointed months before the official breakup of the Soviet Union, voiced the Yeltsin team's similar frustration in this regard¹⁸.

A striking example was US President's George Bush's speech in as late as June 1991, just a few months before the Soviet Union collapsed. Bush at that time warned Ukraine against what he called "suicidal nationalism" and supported reforms *within* the confines of the Soviet Union. Overall, the US wished to see a weakened, perhaps humiliated, but not a disintegrated Soviet Union with unforeseeable consequences, in contrast to some claims today.¹⁹

The "West" – the US's – preference for keeping the Soviet Union together was also reflected in the aforementioned Joint Task Force report of the four IFIs. The G7's instruction to the IFIs was to assume the *reformability* of the Soviet system *as a unit*, notwithstanding serious reservations about this by some staff, including ourselves.

The report's axiom was that the Soviet Union remains an integral unit, albeit with a high level of decentralisation on the ground. Based on that assumption, the report called for a "better delineating of responsibilities" between the Union and the republics, underestimating the ensuing risks to the unity of the Soviet state. It argued that even if the republics gained full sovereignty, they would still have an overarching economic interest in keeping the Union's common economic/financial space. This meant having a Union (federal) budget, no internal trade barriers among the republics, free movement of capital and labour, and a common monetary zone with one currency and monetary and exchange rate policy: the "rouble zone". In the ultimate analysis of the Joint Task Force, the integrity of the Soviet Union was *not* at risk from the republics (re)gaining de facto independence and sovereignty – a baffling conclusion just a few months before the unravelling of the USSR.

This was not the view of several of the Joint Task Force's team members, including the authors of this paper, who had previously worked on centrally planned economies and were more familiar with the Soviet Union's political challenges. Despite this internal professional dissent, the Joint Task Force (naturally) took the G 7's political assumption that full-fledged reforms would *not* undermine the unity of Soviet Union. Behind this was the West – the world's – fear of a disorderly dissolution of the Soviet Union (holder of the largest nuclear arsenal in the world), and, to a lesser extent, of the Soviet Union's sizeable external debt that Western creditors expected to be repaid.

¹⁷ Interview Godmanis (1997).

¹⁸ Kozyrev (2009).

¹⁹ We strongly disagree with the notion floating about not only in Russia but also outside it that the West "wanted to break up" the USSR. As most historians have described, along with the high-level policy makers from the former Soviet republics whom we interviewed, this was patently not the case. The fear of nuclear proliferation, the inability to service debt, and the special rapport with USSR President Gorbachev all pushed the West for a reformed but intact Soviet Union until the last minute.

Was China's politically controlled model of reform an option?

We do not believe that Russia could or would have ever chosen China's centrally managed economic reforms. To recall, China's economic reforms had started under Deng Xiaoping's leadership some seven years before Gorbachev came to power. Reforms were gradual and carefully managed. When he visited China in 1989, Gorbachev could witness the country's initial results, which were good, though not yet impressive.

As fate would have it, Gorbachev was visiting China in early June 1989, in the middle of the Tiananmen Square protests. The protesters, already having spent many weeks occupying the square, pleaded directly to him for support and not to leave China, out of fear of a pending crackdown. "Gorbi don't go!", they famously chanted. The subsequent Tiananmen massacre following his departure from Beijing shocked Gorbachev: "I don't want Red Square to look like Tiananmen Square", he was quoted saying. The Chinese model of centrally controlled and militarily enforced reforms was *not* for the Soviet Union.

In sum, Gorbachev's policies of simultaneous political and economic reforms created major power shifts towards the republics, but he never believed that the Union would lose control of the process nor that the republics would secede. His Western partners supported his approach and conviction. This was what we call reformer Gorbachev's beautiful – and in our view, unavoidable – mistake.

Factor 2: Yeltsin aligns Russia's incentives with secessionist republics and presides over era of non-imperialist Russia

Yeltsin's road to power through the republics

Notwithstanding the cracks that the Gorbachev reforms made in the structure of the Soviet system, the rapid collapse of the former Soviet Union was very much the product of the power struggle between Gorbachev and Yeltsin. From early on, Yeltsin pursued a clear strategy of pushing a *nationalistic Russian* line against the supra-nationalist Soviet empire line represented by Gorbachev.

An interview with Yeltsin, as quoted by Dunlop (1993), is revealing in this respect. Yeltsin was interviewed in the fall of 1990 about his metamorphosis into a champion of Russia's interest. Acknowledging that, like most ethnic Russians in the USSR, he thought of himself as a Soviet and not as a Russian, he went on to explain: "Connected with my work as a people's deputy at the Union level... I soon understood that there would be *no* radical reforms [at the union level]. And so I thought to myself: If the reforms cannot be carried out at that level, why not try in Russia?" Yeltsin claims to have been decidedly playing the *Russian card*

for the sake of reforms: in order to radically reform the system, it was necessary to get rid of the Soviet system.

As one of us describes the period leading up to the break-up of the Soviet Union was a virtual *economic war* between the central Union government and the republics, led by the Russian Federation's leadership.²⁰

This war was fought on two fronts. The first front was purely fiscal, related to the revenue sharing arrangements between the Russian republic government and the Soviet Union's central government. In the course of 1991, an increasing number of republics proceeded to withhold tax transfers to the Union government, yet continued to draw resources from that budget and its extra-budgetary funds. To do that, leaders of the Russian republic, specifically President Yeltsin, ordered *banks* on their territories to withhold the tax payments made by enterprises to the Union and encouraged regional administrations to disregard existing (legal) revenue-sharing arrangements and not to transfer their share of taxes to the Union budget. This made the Union budget to plunge into an ever deeper fiscal crisis and ultimately go de facto bankrupt.

President Yeltsin also adopted a strategy of trading tax concessions for political favours across the Russian Federation. To win the support of the regions in Russia over the central Union apparatus, he formally also exempted them from tax payments to central funds, but at the same time encouraged them to try to draw on those funds. In the process, the regions learned quickly how to take advantage of power struggles in Moscow to optimise their financial position.

The second front took the form of fierce competition between the Russian republican government and the Union government for the *ownership of enterprises*. Until 1991, enterprises belonged, as a matter of jurisdiction, either to the Union government or to the lower level Russian republican government. In the chaos of 1991, enterprises could de facto choose to which jurisdiction they would belong. Given their political and economic power, the ownership of enterprises proved crucial to the political power struggle. The Russian government quickly launched an aggressive campaign to win over enterprises that formally – legally – belonged to the Union government, offering them fiscal packages that were more favourable to them than under Union law. Profit taxes were lower, while social benefits and enterprise subsidies were higher than under Union jurisdiction. The plan worked, and many firms shifted from Union to Russian jurisdiction.

The economic warfare against the Union government was in effect a package of populist policies by Russian President Boris Yeltsin to undermine the fiscal position of the Union and strengthen Russia's, and as a by-product, possibly those of other republics as well.

²⁰ Nagy-Mohacsi (2000).

Outside the economic area, Yeltsin masterfully manoeuvred politically to undermine the USSR, co-opting his peers in the other republics. He led the Inter-regional Group of Deputies in the Soviet Congress in 1990, where deputies increasingly demanded radical reforms in contrast to Gorbachev's faltering efforts. Then in the spring of 1990, the "war of laws" erupted between the Soviet and republican – chiefly, but not exclusively Russian – legislatures, each trying to assert its own jurisdiction over laws and the overall legislation process as opposed to Union (federal) legislation. Yeltsin also proceeded in the fall of 1991 to forcefully create his first Cabinet for the Russian Federation with a *foreign affairs* minister (Andrei Kozyrev) even *before* the Soviet Union was dissolved.²¹

This however was *not* only about power. It was about true economic and political transformation. Yeltsin was committed to market-oriented reforms with private ownership, which Gorbachev was not. Yeltsin wanted market capitalism, while Gorbachev envisioned a reformed socialist system. Yeltsin abolished the communist party and advocated a multiparty system with free elections, while Gorbachev allowed elections only with limited competition.²²

Finally, a word on the role of personal contest. Competition between USSR President Gorbachev and Russian President Yeltsin deepened from mid-1990, with a direct bearing on the fate of the Soviet Union. Union head Gorbachev was determined to cling to power and, as he believed, save the Union and the socialist system. Yeltsin was hell-bent on truly transforming both and putting "Russia first" in the process. Yet he did not think of letting the whole territory of the Soviet Union go completely: a variant of an economic confederation was on his mind. Yet the end result was, as historian Kotkin (2003) points out, the demise of the Soviet Union: "In the end, the Russian President proved too spiteful and the Soviet President too vain to embrace each other and save some form of the Union."

Pitting Russia's interest against the centre, President Yeltsin aligned his incentives with those of other republics and spearheaded the dissolution of the Soviet empire – a phenomenon which was, to our knowledge, unparalleled in history.

The Yeltsin era of non-imperialism

Boris Yeltsin was at his core a politician who brilliantly used tactics to achieve his goals: he did get to power by pulling the Soviet rug from under the feet of President Gorbachev. Yet he was also a patriot in the best sense of the word, one who prioritised Russia's interest without threatening others. His choice of government reflected this: he picked the deep thinker and resolute reformer Yegor Gaidar to be first his economic adviser and then head of his first government.

²¹ This is not to say that other republic personalities did not play important and occasionally decisive roles in the dismantling of the Soviet Union. A critical role was accorded to Ukraine and its first president, Leonid Kravchuk, who at several points throughout 1991 acted decisively in favour of his republic's independence, including the final Belovezh Accords, where he stood firmly against any form of "reformed" Soviet Union.

²² McFaul (2003).

Yegor Gaidar, who became known as the architect of Russia's reforms, was a staunch *anti-imperialist*.²³ The leader of the first sovereign Russian government was deeply convinced that Russia's reforms must be Russia's own and Russia should not be bogged down with the issues of the other Soviet republics. He despised nostalgia over Russia's imperialist past. His thinking was influenced, among others, by what he called the tragic collapse of Yugoslavia, where he had spent part of his childhood.

His thinking is well summarised in his book *The Collapse of an Empire: Lessons for Modern Russia* (2007), in which he concluded that the era of empires was over. Russia was better off on its own and without responsibilities for other nations. He was a proud co-author of the *Belovezh Accords* that dissolved the USSR on December 8 1991.²⁴

Dissolving the empire is often an emotionally difficult subject that populist politicians can exploit. Gaidar quotes the like-minded journalist Igor Yakovenko: "In Russia, a responsible political force could not be found that would have dared to declare that, *from the viewpoint of self-preservation and reproduction of the Russian people, the collapse of the USSR was the luckiest event in the past half-century.*"²⁵

Our own discussions and interactions with Acting Prime Minister Gaidar during 1991-94 and then our academic interview in 1997 with him provided ample evidence of his decisive Russia-only approach. A striking example that we ourselves witnessed was with regards to Belarus' requests to reunite with Russia in some form during 1992. By then an independent country but in deep economic crisis, Belarus' government representatives had repeatedly asked the Russian government/President Yeltsin and PM Gaidar for some form of reunification/re-attachment that would secure budget transfers from Russia. The Gaidar government repeatedly refused the request – they had not a drop of imperialism in their blood.²⁶

Another example that can provide evidence of non-imperialism was the issue of the *rouble zone*, which was extensively discussed in our interviews. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the 15 republics gained full political and fiscal independence, but they remained connected through the common currency, the rouble, and its underlying common monetary and exchange rate policy. This constituted the "rouble zone".

²³ Gaidar joined Russian President Yeltsin's cabinet in November 1991 and served in various top level positions though 1994. After leaving office, he remained a much respected author and thought-leader until his untimely death in 2009.

²⁴ The Accords were signed by the presidents of the three countries that were signatories of the original 1922 treaty creating the USSR (Russia, Belarus and Ukraine; the fourth original signatory unit Transcaucasia had been dissolved decades earlier). Kazakh DPM Sembayev told us that Yeltsin tried to persuade Kazakh President Nazarbayev to sign the Accords, but the latter resisted as Kazakhstan was not an original signatory of the 1922 Treaty (Interview Sembayev 1997).

²⁵ 2007, Introduction, italics by authors.

²⁶ This still came as a shock to one of us, originally from Hungary. Non-imperialist Russian attitudes seemed very unlikely in Central Europe that was occupied by Soviet forces between 1945 and 1990.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union happened quite unexpectedly for all. However, the issue of the rouble zone was a subject of *deliberate policy decisions* that affected the still existing common economic sphere of the former Soviet Union.

There were certain economic efficiency arguments in favour of keeping the common monetary zone together, given the close financial and trade links among the former republics. International financial institutions, importantly the IMF for which we worked at the time, was strongly in favour of keeping the rouble zone on technical/economic grounds.

Gaidar and his team were convinced that maintaining the rouble zone was *not* in the interest of Russia. The main reason was what he considered irresponsible money creation by ex-republic central banks, which the Central Bank of Russia was not able to control. “The rouble zone could not be managed, could not be managed.”²⁷

Russian Finance Minister Dubinin’s view was similar: reforms advanced with different speeds in the various republics, but “credit policies of the independent central banks were absolutely uncoordinated... one of the consequences was an acute shortage of cash roubles, so many former Soviet republics began to issue their own currencies and use them as parallel money.”²⁸

Gaidar of course knew that a hastened elimination of the monetary zone would be very disruptive for all involved countries and, importantly, that it was technically not possible. Gaidar also told us that was under a lot of pressure from President Yeltsin, who had been urged by other presidents in 1992 not to dismantle the rouble zone. But Gaidar was determined to do so as soon as it was practical, and did not hesitate to put impossible conditions for continued membership. Kazakhstan, with close historic and ethnic ties to Russia, was the last country to leave the rouble zone. Negotiations on possible rouble zone membership finally failed when the Russian side asked Kazakhstan to give up independence if it *really* wanted to remain in the rouble zone – a request that the Russian side must have known to be impossible to fulfil. Kazakhstan introduced its own currency in November 1993. (Interview Sembayev).

Ukrainian Minister of Finance Pynzenyk recalls the puzzling situation within the Ukrainian authorities with regards to leaving the rouble zone. The Ukrainian government at that point wanted to leave the zone, not least because it made Ukraine dependent on cash (roubles) from Moscow, which was not forthcoming. However, the Ukrainian central bank was against leaving the rouble zone and creating its own currency, which of course carried major challenges as well.²⁹

²⁷ Interview Gaidar (1997).

²⁸ Interview Dubinin (1997).

²⁹ Interview Pynzenyk (1997).

These examples are evidence that sovereign Russia's first government was decisively in favour of a full political and economic separation from the former republics. Russian reformers also worked closely with reformers in other countries such as Kazakhstan after the collapse in the Soviet Union. Yavlinsky was even Kazakh President Nazarbayev's advisor for a while. At that time, there was no hint whatsoever of any old Russian imperialism. The Russian government was building a self-confident, new independent country, and could not look back to old imperial ways.

Could the "*oil weapon*" – i.e., using oil as a political tool – that Russia occasionally used be considered as a tool of imperial assertion? Russia did indeed deploy the "oil weapon" against the Baltics states already in the 1990s.³⁰ As many other oil producing states, Russia has on occasion used the "oil weapon" in an effort to put political pressure on its opponent since its inception. However, the "oil weapon", invented actually by Arab oil producing states in 1973 to put pressure on Israel-friendly nations, has been used by several major oil producing nations and not unique to Russia. As such we don't consider their use in the 1990s as part of an empire-rebuilding effort.

On Russia's *foreign policy*, the first foreign minister of the Russian government, Andrei Kozyrev, describes in his recent memoirs his battles in trying to create the conditions for peaceful political relationships among former Soviet republics, based on mutual respect for sovereignty.³¹ It was not an easy task to go against the long history of inter-ethnic conflicts and wars at quite a few parts of the former Soviet republics: Nagorno-Karabakh (Armenia/Azerbaijan); Transnistria (Moldova/Russia); Crimea and Donbas (Ukraine/Russia); South Ossetia and Abkhazia (Georgia/Russia), and so on. In these disputes, the official Russian line remained that of respect of sovereignty and seeking diplomatic solutions to alleged grievances.

Kozyrev also confirms that the ongoing civil war in Yugoslavia was a major deterrent against aspirations to return to the old empire: "The nightmare scenario of ethnic cleansing and other war crimes in the former Yugoslavia (...) preyed on my mind in connection with the breakup of the Soviet Union."

It is of course not to say that there were no pro-empire voices or tendencies during the Yeltsin era. These surely – perhaps naturally – existed. The "Karaganov doctrine", launched immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, advocated using the case of ethnic Russians living in "near abroad" for political leverage vis-à-vis the former Soviet republics. Its architect, Sergei Karaganov, was adviser to the last Prime Minister of the Yeltsin era, Yevgeni Primakov, and has served as presidential adviser to both President Yeltsin and later President Putin.

³⁰ Collins (2017).

³¹ Kozyrev (2019)

Pro-Soviet empire demands remained however broadly under control during most of the Yeltsin years, albeit with a gradual backsliding into old Soviet thinking in the last years of the Yeltsin period. A key factor may have been fears of the possible disintegration of the Russian Federation itself, see for example the Chechnya wars, where then adviser Putin first distinguished himself. Kozyrev (2019) offers powerful insights into what he calls the “disappointing dynamics” though the Yeltsin’s presidency: “[It] started with a big wave of popular support in the early 1990s; by the middle of the 1990s it had lost energy and had even gone into reverse.”

The opposition in Russia often pressed for (at the time non-binding) decisions with a view to rebuilding the “lost empire”. Chief among their grievances was the “loss” of Crimea to Ukraine in 1954 when USSR President Khrushchev formally transferred it to Ukraine. The Russian Parliament voted on a few occasions in 1992 and 1993 to denounce that transfer as illegal, and also passed a resolution on the “illegality” of the Belovezh Accords codifying the dissolution of the Soviet Union. However, the Yeltsin government opposed and denounced all these legal manoeuvres.

More broadly, the collapse of *territorially integrated* empires typically leads to a complicated period. Ensuing “grievances” can persist for many years – it is easy to keep territorial dreams and claims alive when the “lost” areas are just across the newly established, “artificial” borders. Native speakers maybe left outside the new borders of the now much reduced post-empire sovereign, giving rise to claims of their mistreatment.

Populist politicians can easily turn these sentiments into lethal military force (see Germany and the Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy after WWI). And, as Pauline Grosjean (2022) stresses, former empires can manipulate public opinion not only in their own country – the centre of the former empire – but in the internal politics of former colonies. In former empires, populist rulers often politicise the dream of recreating the old empire borders. “Border regions of former empires are risky places”, she warns.

The hardening relationship between the US and Russia in the late period of the Yeltsin era coincided with, or perhaps paved the way to, a more assertive Russia (Rossetti 2021). Yet the goal of restoring the former Soviet Union, or more precisely the pre-1997 Russian empire, was only elevated to the level of policy under Vladimir Putin’s presidency.

Gaidar himself was growingly concerned about the post-imperial nostalgia and the resurrection of imperialist fantasies that appeared from the mid-2000s. He recognised that “post-imperial syndrome” can occur naturally after the fall of an empire, but also saw that the danger comes when this nostalgia is exploited by populist-nationalists – precisely what happened under President Putin’s Russia. His Cassandra warning rings harrowingly true today: “*Trying to make Russia an empire again means imperilling its existence.*” (2007)

Factor 3: The almighty military does not stop the empire's breakup³²

Perhaps the most baffling aspect of the dissolution of the Soviet Union was that the Soviet Red Army, backed by the biggest nuclear arsenal of the world and supported by the largest conventional army at the time, ultimately abstained from intervening in the collapse of the Soviet Union. Very few dared to hope that this was a possibility, and most of the world feared that the Soviet Union would prevail, if only because of its powerful military capabilities.

This is not to say that the army remained completely apolitical all the way through the transitional period. In fact, it started to play a more assertive political role as the Soviet Empire started to show the sign of cracks from the late 1980s and it participated, together with Union internal security forces, in raids against nationalist protesters in a string of republics: Tbilisi/Georgia (April 1989); Baku/Azerbaijan (January 1990); Vilnius/Lithuania (January 1991). And, most importantly of all, the army did set in motion a brief but failed military coup in Moscow itself (August 1991). Yet in critical moments, the Army leadership did not mount a resolute effort to stop the unfolding centrifugal forces that ultimately broke up the Soviet Union.

This is a puzzle, not only because the army undoubtedly *had* the military capacity to act, but also because two leading theories on the military's intervention in politics would have clearly predicted such intervention (Taylor 2003a). First, the so-called "domestic structure" theory depicts that the military intervenes or takes over when it deems that the political system is too weak to deal with seemingly insurmountable socio-economic problems (Huntington 1968). Second, the "corporate interest" theory considers that the army rationally intervenes when its self-interest (budget, personnel etc.) are at grave risk.

Both theories would have argued *for* the Soviet military's intervention to stop the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the wake of Gorbachev's chaotic reforms. To put it simply, by 1988-89, it was becoming increasingly clear that the Soviet state's territorial integrity could be at risk. As discussed earlier, evidence was growing about the centralised Soviet system's declining political capacity: the central role of the party in the Soviet system was undermined by Gorbachev's introduction of a more democratic parliamentary structure, while the civilian command of the army was moved from the Communist Party and put under the new parliament; the republics enacted their own laws superseding Union ones – the aforementioned "war of laws" – and acted with increased self-confidence and sovereignty; the republics sabotaged the Soviet Army's drafting in their territory; and the Lenin-installed Union Treaty that gave only the semblance of sovereignty to the 15 republics had to be re-

³² This section draws heavily on Brian D. Taylor's excellent research (particularly his paper in 2003a) and the authors' discussion with military security specialist Alessio Vicario (2022).

negotiated to give way to much stronger sovereign powers to the republics. The failed August 1991 military coup was set in motion to prevent the signature of this revised Union Treaty.³³

Moreover, Gorbachev's modernising reforms hit the military's "corporate interest" directly and hard: the military's procurement budget was cut by one third so as to reduce the fiscal burden of the Union;³⁴ its military personnel was reduced by as much as 500,000 (with several key staff replaced with Gorbachev's confidants in the process). The army had to deal also with the particularly challenging troop withdrawals out of East Germany and other former Soviet states in Eastern Europe, and their redeployment at home. Military withdrawals from East Germany were (at least partially) funded by the new government of the re-united Germany, but withdrawals from Eastern Europe remained unfunded. All this deeply hurt the army's interests and contributed to the demoralisation of troops. Yet, except for the above mentioned protests in several republics, the army remained effectively on the sidelines of domestic political forces until the August 1991 coup.

The August 1991 coup was, by all account, a last minute, half-hearted attempt by a selected few Soviet leaders – the "Gang of Eight" – that included the Prime Minister, the Soviet Union's Vice President (Gorbachev's deputy), the Ministers of Defence, Interior, and the head of the KGB. This was an all-powerful list, but what they put in motion was ill-planned, poorly implemented amid a lot of confusion, and quickly collapsed when confronted with the large number of civilian protesters who came to defend the Russian Federation's parliament, or, as it is affectionately called with an eye to Washington, "Russia's White House".

The unfolding of the three-day attempted coup is superbly documented, for example by Dunlop (1993). With the Soviet president on vacation and the Russian president in far-away Kazakhstan, the Gang of Eight issued a state of emergency on the eve of the signature of the newly negotiated Union Treaty, which would have granted increased sovereignty to the republics, and, in the view of the coup-plotters, effectively would have ended the Soviet Union. An arrest was issued for President Yeltsin, and an army battalion and special KGB units were brought to Moscow to storm the Russian White House. But that storming never happened: Russian President Yeltsin, just back from Kazakhstan, rushed to the White House and called for civilian support. In no time, around 100,000 citizens showed up to defend the White House. Military and KGB units' lower ranks refused to fight the ever-growing number of citizens with a predictable bloodshed on the streets of Moscow. This half-hearted military coup with the "passive participation" of the army quickly failed.

The reasons why the all-mighty Soviet army in the end did not decisively interfere with domestic politics and prevent the breakup of the Soviet Union had to do with what the military historian Brian D. Taylor calls the "organisational culture" of the Soviet army and its leaders' traditional beliefs with regards to the army's role in society and politics (2003b).

³³ As discussed, the Union was subsequently dissolved by the Belovezh Accords signed on December 8 1991.

³⁴ This was however from a very high level. The total military budget was estimated to have been at least 9% of GDP in 1990. The defence sector was a huge burden on the budget (Joint Task Force, 1991).

The Soviet army upheld the norm of the supremacy of, and its subordination to, *civilian rule*. In the case of the Soviet Union, for decades until Gorbachev's reforms, this civilian authority was the Communist Party's leadership. The objective of the Soviet army was primarily *external*: the defence of the territorial integrity of the country. Subordination to civilian rule and focus on external rather than domestic objectives made the Soviet's army's organisational motives more akin to those of modern Western militaries, and distinctly dissimilar to those in autocratic societies where the army often interferes with domestic politics (Vicario 2022). A poll among military officers conducted by the *Krasnaya Zvezda* newspaper in 1990 showed that virtually all officers believed that the army's main task was external defence (96%). Only 24% thought that the army should assist with other tasks such as managing natural disasters in the country. Military officers were "categorically against" using the military to maintain social order or perform economic tasks.³⁵

Yet the picture is probably more nuanced. Taylor superbly describes the *split mind of loyalty* of the Soviet military leadership, which our discussions with several reformers from republics confirm (Interviews). On the one hand, as explained earlier, the military did not want to interfere with internal Soviet politics. They had gotten burned in Afghanistan – a terrible escapade initiated against the advice of military leadership – and their reputation suffered subsequently, also due to their involvement in raids against protesters in Tbilisi, Baku and Vilnius. These events reinforced military leaders' conviction that the army had to focus on *external* defence. On the other hand, the integrity of the Soviet state's territory *was* a military concern – the trouble was that the associated risks were coming from *within*, not from outside the country.

In this confusing setting, military leaders leaned towards adopting a "wait-and-see" attitude with regards to whom they should accord their loyalty: to the Soviet leadership/President Gorbachev or to the equally legitimate and upcoming Russian leadership/President Yeltsin. In this predicament, the Soviet army leadership was also guided by their view on the inferiority of the Soviet command system. Sergei Glaziev, Minister for Foreign Economic Relations in Yeltsin's government told to us in 1993 that senior army leaders had been well aware for decades of the serious and potentially lethal problems of the Soviet economic model. The system appeared to be increasingly unable to deliver the technical and military innovation necessary to match the progress of its Western adversaries, particularly the US. Put starkly, the best minds of the military had been long aware that the Soviet economic model had failed and needed urgent reforming to compete with the West.

We can present a striking and hitherto probably unknown evidence in this regard. Our interview with Deputy Prime Minister of Kazakhstan Sembayev confirmed the Soviet military's clear unwillingness to block the takeover of Boris Yeltsin from Gorbachev in the wake of the August 19, 1991 coup attempt. To recall, Russian President Yeltsin was visiting the Soviet Republic of Kazakhstan at the time. Upon hearing about the coup, Yeltsin decided

³⁵ Polyakov, (1990), as quoted in Taylor (2003a).

to rush back to Moscow in an effort to foil the coup. The Kazakh leadership followed the unfolding of events with interest: the Soviet army knew exactly where Yeltsin was, they were aware that his objective to return to Moscow was to defeat the military coup (an attempt by their own leaders), and take over power from Gorbachev. They knew his plane's exact itinerary from Almaty to Moscow. There were multiple occasions to intercept and block, in one way or another, Yeltsin's return to Moscow. The Soviet army took none of these actions, even when an arrest order was issued against President Yeltsin.

In sum, the Soviet military did not to interfere with the breakup of the Soviet Union in any coherent way. It adhered to its long-standing military tradition to subject to civilian rule and serve an external task. Moreover, there were questions about whom they should support: Boris Yeltsin, the legitimate, democratically elected president of Russia or the incumbent (unelected) Soviet President Gorbachev. The army's safe bet was to take a "wait-and-see attitude" on where politics were going. This clearly favoured the upcoming Russian president. The military would in the end not defend the Soviet Union's territorial integrity, and the spectacular defeat of the chaotic August 1991 coup d'état only accelerated the peaceful dissolution of the Soviet empire, which played out over the next few months.

3. Conclusion

Boris Yeltsin's presidency is to date the only period in the history of Russia over the past 500 years or so in which the country's policies were not imperialist. A fortuitous combination of several factors allowed for the fast and bloodless dissolution of the Soviet empire into 15 nations, along with the communist command system. These factors were, first, the unintended consequences of Gorbachev's reforms that strengthened the republics' position and accelerated their secession. Second, Yeltsin's canny use of nationalism (with a dose of populism) to undermine the Union structure, topple its leader Gorbachev, and align Russia's incentives with those of the secessionist republics in the process. And third, the Soviet military's culturally deep-rooted "non-interference" with domestic policies, and its wait-and-see attitude in the final hours of the Union. As well, Yeltsin's first governments were distinctively non-imperialist. The world – the West – may not have appreciated the importance of this unique departure from the country's imperialistic traditions and Putin is now determined to ruthlessly revert Russia back to its historical trend of imperialism.

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- Latvia's Prime Minister Ivars Godmanis (*Interview Godmanis*);
- Kazakhstan's Deputy Prime Minister and first Governor of the National Bank of Kazakhstan Dualet Sembayev (*Interview Sembayev*).

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