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*The Russian case: a maximalist empire limited by an
aging demographic structure. An analysis of the
peculiarities of the Russian power and its vision in the
light of the Ukrainian invasion and its effect*

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Introduction

With the end of the Second World War and the following entry into the American sphere of influence, the European populations and their leaders, the latter being the products of their respective communities and not the other way around, believed with certainty that history was over, and that the economy could have been the ultimate antidote to put an end to the rivalry between communities.

February 24, 2022, the date of the beginning of the famous Russian invasion of Ukrainian territory, with the return of war and therefore of history at the gates of Europe, represented a traumatic awakening for European communities, immersed up to that point in a post-historical sleep.

Awakening which risks becoming a nightmare if the European nations do not adapt to the changed geopolitical context.

This is not intended to be an invitation to a militarization of society but to a greater in-depth understanding of the actors, such as Russia, opposed to the US-led international system, within which Italy is placed.

Considering this, being an Italian and European student and citizen, I chose to carry out this research to study the Russian geopolitical actor in-depth and not superficially and therefore understand the reason that led to the famous invasion of 2022, an event which has had and will have a great impact on the future balance of the European continent.

In fact, in addition to having regional and international significance, respectively having a genesis in the fall of the Soviet Union and with NATO support for Ukraine, the importance of this conflict is amplified by the fact that it represents a direct attack on the American-led international system and therefore provides a dangerous example to the “world against”¹, especially for those powers that wish to challenge the US global hegemony². The USA remains the leading power, but in geopolitics perception matters, and if the adversaries perceive that the hegemon can be challenged they try to do so and it is no coincidence that in October 2023 the Iranian attack came through its Hamas agent on the entrusted regional order from the USA to Israel.

¹ Dario Fabbri, “Inganna l’occhio,” *Rivista Domino*, no. 6 (2023), Il mondo contro, p. 5.

² Herfried Munkler, “In Germania la democrazia è in pericolo,” *Limes*, no. 4 (2024), Fine della guerra, p.115.

Therefore, the clash between Russia and Ukraine will determine the future of the post-Soviet space and that of the current global order³.

The analysis on this delicate topic will be carried out in the most realistic way possible and purified from any propaganda or ideology, keeping in mind who the invader and the invaded are, Russia and Ukraine respectively.

As the title indicates, geopolitics and demography will represent the two main vectors on which the study will move. The first is useful for understanding the Russian repositioning and the return to being a great power, the profound impulses of its community which determined and will determine the trajectory of the country and therefore the relationship with the Ukrainian community, what is hidden behind this clash and how it will change the future of Russia as a great power.

The study of the demographic component will be crucial to understand whether this factor had an impact on the Russian government's choice to undertake the "Special military operation" in February 2022 and thus not postpone it over time and whether the advantage of Moscow's human forces over Kyiv can be translated into an announced victory or not is enough to announce it. At the same time to understand whether Russia's demographic gap compared to other powers could undermine Moscow's ambition to be an autonomous great power, or moreover undermine its ambition to replace the US as a world hegemon. Finally, will be analyzed the technological sector, specifically how Russia is modernizing this strategic sector considering the conflict and new contemporary challenges. Also trying to understand if the Russian partnerships with new players in this sector, such as those with China, which replaced those with Western countries after the start of the war, can create a new value chain or are dangerous for the Russian project of being a great power.

³ Fedor Luk'Janov, "la Russia si vuole riferimento della 'maggioranza mondiale,'" *Limes* no. 1 (2024), *Stiamo perdendo la guerra*, p.191.

CHAPTER I

The historical relationship between Russians and Ukrainians: one people or distinct nations?

Premise

Russia is one of the major empires of the contemporary age. Its population, despite aging, remains profoundly historical and maximalist, unlike those of other European nations. “Over the millennia Russia has provided various versions of itself, without changing the substance”⁴: the common thread behind Kyivan Rus, the Grand Duchy of Moscow, the Tsarist Empire, the Soviet Union, and today’s Putinian Russia is Moscow’s ambition for glory and power. Located between Europe and Asia, it has always “oscillated like a pendulum between Westernism and Slavophilism”⁵. On the one hand, the Russians want to be recognized as a great Western power, and on the other, they harbor a visceral hatred towards the West. If the Americans by metonymy embody the world itself, on the contrary, over the centuries, Russia has always placed itself at the service of all humanity by undertaking a salvific mission⁶ to protect the order from external apocalyptic forces⁷: in the past represented by the Mongols, in the twentieth century by capitalism and today traceable in western value degeneration.

Its population’s pulses for greatness have always translated into the need to increase its defensive depth towards Europe and therefore maintain control over the states inhabited by the eastern Slavs, such as Ukraine⁸. Geopolitical necessity accompanied by the narrative of paternalistic protection towards the younger Ukrainian brothers, even today to purify them from contamination with Western values⁹, maximum betrayal in the eyes of Moscow.

For this reason, over the centuries, the push for Ukrainian nationalism has clashed, and then given way, to the Russian imperial desire to control this land.

⁴ Dario Fabbri, *Geopolitica Umana* (Milano: Gribaudo, 2023).

⁵ Andrea Bertazzoni, “Sette parole per capire il russo,” *Rivista Domino*, no.5 (2022).

⁶ Dario Fabbri, “La Russia davanti,” *Rivista Domino*, no. 3 (2024).

⁷ Luca Gori, *La Russia eterna. Origini e costruzioni dell’ideologia post sovietica* (Roma: Luiss University Press, 2021).

⁸ Dario Fabbri, *Atlante storico. Dal Novecento ai giorni nostri* (Milano: Gribaudo, 2024).

⁹ Dario Fabbri, “La Russia davanti,” *Rivista Domino*, no. 3 (2024).

This is a centuries-old tension still perceived today in the ongoing conflict. Not a war of a single leader, but a clash of opposing desires of two communities that transcend the leader.

In the long and detailed article on the history of relations between Russians and Ukrainians published in July 2021 by the president of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin, he defines the two populations as “one people”¹⁰, showing how the geographical and spiritual proximity of the Eastern Slavic populations has produced the same language, religion and culture over the centuries. Thus, relaunching the idea of “a single and triune Russia: the center of gravity of the Russian people. Beating heart of the Russian mir and of which Belarus and Ukraine were an integral part, considered natural, albeit inferior, appendages of the motherland”¹¹.

The historical reconstruction of Putin is consistent with the new post-Soviet Russian imperial mission to establish itself as a universal protector of traditionalism and Christianity which requires control of Ukraine, considered an integral part of the “exceptional Russian civilization”¹², to strengthen this propaganda. Imperial ambitions that clash with national independence ambitions.

There is a grain of truth in this Kremlin narrative because Moscow and Kyiv have a common origin. Still, over the centuries they have had different histories and paths which have increased their diversity.

This chapter aims to investigate the significant events in the history of relations between the two peoples to understand the historical depth of the clash taking place today.

1.1 The arrival of the Slavs

Before delving into the study of Kyivan Rus, a proto-Statel entity that emerged in the 9th century in which many identify the origins of the current states inhabited by Eastern Slavs, it is appropriate to take a step back to understand the origins of these Slavic populations and therefore ask the question who are the Slavs?

¹⁰ Vladimir Putin, On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians, en.kremlin.ru, 12/7/21.

¹¹ Elia Morelli, “Nel cuore e nella mente,” Rivista Domino, no.3 (2024).

¹² Plenary session of the World Russian People’s Council, President of Russia, en.kremlin.ru, 28/11/23

Already during the centuries that preceded the appearance of the Slavic populations, the territories of today's Russia and Ukraine were characterized by a great geopolitical ferment given the passage and therefore the contact of different populations and civilizations. The Greek historian Herodotus writes about the contact starting from the 6th and 7th century B.C. between the Iranian and Greek populations on the northern coast of the Black Sea and he already identified the Dnieper River as the natural frontier of the area¹³, demonstrating how this territory has always represented a border area, confirmed by its name ("U" on the "Kray" border)¹⁴.

The dynamics of this territory had a crucial role in the future of Western Europe: starting from the 4th and 5th centuries A.D. the violent advance of the Huns produced the mass movement of the populations who inhabited these lands, such as the Goths, towards the West, determining that phenomenon remembered as "barbaric invasion", one of the main causes of the collapse of the Western Roman Empire¹⁵, if it is really over¹⁶.

Among these population protagonists of this movement, there was one that did not completely abandon the territory, we are talking about the Slavs¹⁷. Some moved towards central-eastern Europe giving life to Western and Southern Balkans Slavs. The others remained, becoming the Eastern Slavs, the ancestors of the Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians. All these Slavic populations had, although with local differences, the same language, the "proto-Slavic", of Indo-European origin, which identified a space of common language from Novgorod to Prague up to Belgrade passing through Kyiv, helping to underline the distinct identity of these people.

A linguistic element that helps to trace the Indo-European origin of the Slavs also at an ethnic level.

As regards the geographical origin of the original nucleus of the Slavs, although some uncertainties remain, historians tend to identify the lands of origin of this population in

¹³ Aldo Corcella; Silvio Medaglia, *Erodoto, Le storie. Libro IV. La Scizia e la Libia* (Milano: Mondadori, 2007).

¹⁴ Giorgio Cella, *Storia e geopolitica della crisi ucraina. Dalla Rus' di Kiev ad oggi* (Roma: Carocci editore, 2021).

¹⁵ Ivi, p. 44.

¹⁶ Dario Fabbri, "Punto di svolta," *Rivista Domino*, no. 1 (2022).

¹⁷ Giorgio Cella, *Storia e geopolitica della crisi ucraina. Dalla Rus' di Kiev ad oggi* (Roma: Carocci editore, 2021), p.63

the area between the Vistula and Dnepr rivers¹⁸, territory corresponding to present-day western Ukraine.

A theory seems to be confirmed in the studies of the German glottologist Max Vasmer who identified the origin of the Slavic term from the term “skloav” which in turn derives from the Latin terms “cluo” or “acquitrinus”, therefore indicating populations who lived in humid places or close to rivers¹⁹ and consequently the original nucleus of these populations seems to be on the Dnipro river.

1.2 The Kyivan Rus, the first state of the Eastern Slavs, a common homeland?

Starting from the ninth century there was the rise of Kievan Rus, the first state of the Eastern Slavs. A crucial historical moment for the history of these countries but still disputed. Historical narratives have also become part of today’s conflict because they can be the basis for building national pedagogy, through which states forge the nation’s identity to ensure that a community sustains a war. For this reason, even a common element in the history of Russia and Ukraine is the subject of contention and its legacy is disputed, especially after the start of the conflict with the return of the centuries-old tension between imperial ambitions and national feelings: so the Russians interpret Kyivan Rus as the cradle of Russian civilization, the basis for what will then be the imperial evolution and instead the Ukrainians interpret it as the origin of their own nation trajectory, distinct from that of Russia²⁰. Both in the present rework the past to modify their future trajectory.

But behind the propaganda of both in identifying each other as the legitimate heir of the Kyivan Rus “it cannot be neither Russian nor Ukrainian, just as Ceaser’s Rome cannot be neither Italian nor Vatican”.²¹ Moreover. In addition to the proto-Slavs, this entity hosted within it Varangians (Scandinavians) and Balts²².

But at the same time, the importance of this period is underlined by the fact that its key elements such as being the first state (or proto-state) experience of the Eastern Slavs and

¹⁸ Ivi, p. 64

¹⁹ Max Vasmer, *Etimologicheskij Slovar Russkogo Yazika*, 4 voll., AST, 2009

²⁰ Simona Merlo, “Gli usi Ucraini della storia ovvero la Rus’ siamo noi,” *Limes*, no. 5 (2023).

²¹ Lucio Caracciolo, “Storia all’Ucraina,” *Limes*, no. 5, 2023.

²² Dario Fabbri, *Geopolitica Umana. Capire il mondo dalle civiltà antiche alle potenze odierne* (Milano: Gribaudo, 2023).

the adoption of the Orthodox confession are still today relevant aspects²³. Therefore, they can be considered the founding nucleus of the current state and religious organizations in Russia and Ukraine, considering that their legacy is disputed between Moscow and Kyiv since the conflict also touches these fields.

1.2.1 The rise of Kievan Rus

The territory of Kyivan Rus included present-day Belarusian, northern Ukraine, and part of European Russia. It cannot be considered a state in the proper sense but a proto-state entity since it lacked a bureaucracy and a system of clear dynastic succession and appeared to be a network of small towns linked together by commercial and military ties²⁴.

The most important of the few written sources that have come down to us, the *Chronicle of Past Years* attributed to the monk Nestor dating back to the 12th century, confirms how this territory was inhabited not only by Eastern Slavs but also by populations with Baltic, Finno-Ugric and Turkish languages²⁵.

The reconstruction of the chronicle has it that it was these populations in conflict with each other who asked in 862 A.D. to the “great prince” Rjurik of the Viking lineage of Varangians, who had settled in northern Rus for more than a century, to govern the territory²⁶. The Varangians were called “Rus” in the Slavic languages, hence the name Rus was given by extension to the whole region²⁷ since this Rjurikid Viking dynasty began to govern this area having the Dnipro River as a nucleus and inhabited mainly by Slavs. “Rus” from which the current name Russia derives.

Even today we refer to this proto-state organization by the name of “Kyivan Rus” since according to Nestor’s chronicle, the legendary leader Rurik first founded the city of Novgorod and then moved to Kyiv, which became the most important center of the Rus²⁸.

²³ Carolina De Stefano, *Storia del potere in Russia. Dagli zar a Putin* (Brescia: Editrice Morcelliana, 2022) p.8.

²⁴ Ibidem.

²⁵ Giorgio Cella, *Storia e geopolitica della crisi ucraina. Dalla Rus’ di Kiev a oggi* (Roma: Carocci editore, 2021) p.66.

²⁶ Carolina De Stefano, *Storia del potere in Russia. Dagli zar a Putin* (Brescia: Editrice Morcelliana, 2022) p.9.

²⁷ Ibidem.

²⁸ Giorgio Cella, *Storia e geopolitica della crisi ucraina. Dalla Rus’ di Kiev a oggi* (Roma: Carocci editore, 2021) p.67

In fact, between the 9th and 11th centuries, a period which coincided with the golden age of Kyivan Rus, the city of Kyiv was the protagonist of great growth becoming the capital of the Rurikid principality from 912 until its dissolution²⁹ and its “Grand Prince” of the Rjurikid dynasty was recognized as *primus inter pares* among the leaders of the cities of Rus, whose neighbors paid tribute and was able to exercise political influence over the entire region³⁰.

Although the foundation of the city of Kyiv dates to a period before the descent of the Varangians, according to historians it occurred in the 6th century and is attributed to the governor Kyi from whom the name of the city derives³¹, its great growth in importance is due to its strategic position between the Baltic seas towards Constantinople, a crucial commercial route to which the Varangians dedicated a lot of attention also to carry out military incursion towards Byzantium.

The epic of Kyivan Rus can be divided into three phases.

The first coincides with the seizure of power by the Rurikids with the progressive extension of their domination over the Slavic tribes under the leadership of Oleg – ruler of Kyiv from 882 AD- until the open challenge to Constantinople to take control of it and the definitive renunciation of this desire by Svjatoslav after a series of defeats.

It is important to underline how already at the time of the first reign of Rus the strategic position of the Black Sea was clear, the control of which allowed the expansion of expansionist aims towards the Mediterranean to widen the defensive depth towards the south. strategic dictate that will be resumed by Russia in its tsarist and current imperial phase with the annexation of Crimea in 2014³².

The second is the golden period, which was due to its territorial expansion and increased importance in the European context. The kingdom began to be respected and treated equally because it was feared. Feelings still present in the unconscious of the Russian population, which lives on the prestige recognized externally and the terror instilled in

²⁹ Ibidem.

³⁰ Carolina De Stefano, *Storia del potere in Russia. Dagli zar a Putin* (Brescia: Editrice Morcelliana, 2022) p.9.

³¹ Giorgio Cella, *Storia e geopolitica della crisi ucraina. Dalla Rus' di Kiev a oggi* (Roma: Carocci editore, 2021), p.67.

³² Ivi p. 70.

their neighbors³³, and becomes ready for the worst when it realizes that this does not happen, especially if Westerners underestimate its power, as in recent years.

A period in which the crucial event of the conversion to the Orthodox Christianity of the sovereign Vladimir I in 988 took place, also extended to his people, which occurred for purely geopolitical reasons and not due to confessional flashes.

The third period is identified in the progressive dissolution of the kingdom, weakened by the various internal struggles in the moments of dynastic succession with the coup of grace given by the invasion suffered by the largest continental empire of history, the Mongol one which destroyed Kyiv in 1240 leaving a perennial trauma in collective psychology.

1.2.2 The Conversion of Vladimir I

The conversion of Sovereign Vladimir (Volodymyr according to Ukrainian historiography) was the result of the process of approaching the Christian religion by the Kyivan elite³⁴. Some of his processors, like princess Olga, had embraced such confession, but on a personal level and without any conversion of the people of the Rus as in the case of Vladimir.

The gradual slide of Kyivan Rus towards this confessional choice did not occur due to a sudden theological falling in love through the reading of the sacred biblical text by a population that had until then been pagan but occurred for purely geopolitical reasons.

In the tenth century, Kyivan Rus was increasingly the object of the expansionist aims of many neighboring peoples or kingdoms up to the point where under Vladimir it was literally surrounded by rivals: from the Baltic sea other Slavic populations were pressing, which were soon subdued, from the west the Kingdom of Poland with the beginning in this historical moment of a rivalry that continues to this day with the Polish state at the forefront (among those of the continent) in today anti-Russian containment, and from the south-east threatened by Muslim populations.

³³ Dario Fabbri, "Buio e controbuio", *Domino*, no.2 (2023).

³⁴ Giorgio Cella, *Storia e geopolitica della crisi ucraina. Dalla Rus' di Kiev a oggi* (Roma: Carocci editore, 2021), p. 70.

In the grip of several hostile powers, the Kyivan rulers began to turn to the most distant rival to look for an ally to survive, the choice fell on the Eastern Roman Empire with its nerve center in Constantinople and the mass conversion of the Rus in favor of Byzantine religious belief under Vladimir marked the welding of the relationship between Byzantine Empire and the largest kingdom of the Slavs. This preference for the most distant power can be traced back to the geopolitical strategic grammar which shows how an actor for survival will always seek an agreement with the most distant rival because it simply inspires less fear given the distance³⁵. Empires or nations are composed only of human beings and therefore present the same concerns and needs. Strategic dictate that highlights how collective psychology also impacts geopolitics and can explain today's dynamics: Ukraine relies on the USA to break away from Moscow imperialism not because it is in love with liberal democratic values propagated by Washington but for less fear of the US hegemon given its location outside Europe—maximum geographic advantage of the US. These circumstances pushed the reigning Vladimir to make the choice that had a lasting and still present impact on the religious and cultural institutions of the Eastern Slavs. In 988 the “great prince” was baptized in the Crimean town of Kherson and then returned to Kyiv and began the conversion of the Rus communities to Byzantine Christianity on the banks of the Dnipro. Geographical places that return in the current conflict and in today's war, the Russian population is pushing the army to reconquer the city of Kherson and wrest it from Ukrainian control, not only because of its strategic value on the Black Sea but also because of the emotions generated by this place. Russian empire over the centuries controlling these territories through pedagogy sought continuity with Kievan Rus and celebrated the event in Kherson as a founding myth. An idea that has been stratified over time in the collective unconscious, meaning that even today the Russians feel that the city as their own and therefore deserving of being under their jurisdiction and not in foreign hands. Demonstrating how geography has not only an objective but also subjective and irrational value and how even in the old continent where the end of history was sanctioned, in 2024 wars are waged for the control of territories for their strategic but above all emotional value linked to the history that remains in peoples' mind.

³⁵ Dario Fabbri, *Geopolitica Umana. Capire il mondo dalle civiltà antiche alle potenze odierne*. (Milano: Gribaudo, 2023) p. 154.

“As happens with ideology, each community adjusts its religion to its geopolitical needs. Spirituality does not inform its action, it is simply an instrument of it”³⁶. So, the Rus of Kyiv embraced the Christian orthodox faith as a means of establishing an alliance with the eastern Roman Empire and as a potential means of projecting its influence on Constantinople. The alliance with Byzantium sanctioned by the adoption of its creed allowed Rus to have its most distant rival as a partner and to obtain a new religion in its area being circumscribed by Christian Catholic, Jewish, Islamic, and animist powers and at the same time the new religion of Rus could be a tool for projecting territorial ambition on Constantinople and on the territories controlled by it such as the Balkans, inhabited among other things by Slavic populations who for similar reasons had adopted the same religion. The eastern Slavs from this moment began to play on ethnic and religious similarities with the southern Slavs present in the Balkans to extend their defensive profundity to the heart of Europe. The same similarities that Russia still plays on today to project its influence on Serbia (still inhabited by descendants of southern Slavs with orthodox Christianity) and therefore to have access to the warm seas.

This intensification of the relation between Constantinople and the Eastern Slavs, therefore, did not represent a subjugation of the latter vis-a-vis the former but, given the distance, Rus managed to obtain its independence and at the same time achieve the strategic advances with the adoption of orthodox Christianity³⁷. The latter, an element that succeeded in guaranteeing for the first time within the Rus a factor of cultural and institutional cohesion, helping to shape that idea within the society of uniqueness still present in today's Russia achieved also through religion. Indeed, this choice of creed helped to give the kingdom an “identity of its own among the great European powers³⁸: Christian like others, but not subordinate to the Latin church of Rome and having an autonomous organization (first loyal to the patriarchate of Constantinople and after the latter's weakening to that of Moscow from 1448) and culturally less distant from pagan religious. At this precise moment, a kingdom emerged that was similar to other Europeans but simultaneously had different and peculiar characteristics, peculiarities that will

³⁶ Ivi p. 68.

³⁷ Helen C. Evans, William D. Wixom, *The Glory of Byzantium: Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era, AD 843-1261* (The Metropolitan Museum of Art: 1997), p.286.

³⁸ Carolina De Stefano, *Storia del potere in Russia. Dagli zar a Putin* (Brescia: Editrice Morcelliana, 2022), p. 10.

increase with the collapse of Kyivan Rus and the domination of the area by the Mongol empire from the eastern end of the Eurasian landmass.

But it was at this stage of the proto-state entity that, with the conversion to Christianity, the foundations were laid for the typical Russian still present dualism of proximity to European civilization and at the same time distance from it. The oscillation between Europeanism and refusal to look towards the old continent will be a constant in the Russian state experiences first of reign and then empire, right up to the present day, where Russia recognizes itself in European civilization but at the same time feels estranged from the west³⁹ and does not see in it a guide. But at the same time, Moscow offers to morally redeem the West and save it from self-destruction initiated by it. If today, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, relations between Russia and Europe have returned to their lowest point with the threat of direct war, at the same time Russia communicates that it internally upholds European values such as tradition, sovereignty, family, which have been lost from the old continent, communicating that is willing to return them once the conflict is over⁴⁰. In addition to being an example of cultural war for the ideological conquest of European minds, this Russian declaration also hides the natural oscillation of the Russian soul towards saving the West after fighting it on the field.

1.2.3 The collapse of the Kievan Rus

After Vladimir's death, there was the accession to the throne of the ruler Jaroslav and under his reign which lasted three decades the Kievan Rus reached the peak of its splendor before the beginning of its end, which occurred due to internal and external causes.

The increasing growth of the importance of the Rus from military, religious, and cultural points of view under Vladimir, guaranteed it greater respect in the kingdoms of the European continent because it was now more feared. From that moment this will be a constant in the history of relations between Russia and the European nations: over the centuries Russia will be respected when feared after Moscow's shows of strength such as in the case of the victory over Napoleonic France or over the Germans in the second world

³⁹ Pietro Figuera, "La Russia non vuole più salvare l'Occidente," *Domino* no.7 (2024) p 109.

⁴⁰ Andrej Susencov, "La Russia combatterà l'Occidente per tutto il tempo necessario," *Limes*, no. 4 (2024).

war, while the western powers will take advantage of Russian moments of weakness to amplify the destructive scope of internal crisis to try to destroy it, as in the case of the era of troubles (early seventeenth century), of the civil war after the Bolsheviks took power and after the collapse of USSR. This historical legacy has produced in the Russian unconscious the idea that the West recognizes Russia only when it exercises force. An idea also behind the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, with Moscow's action also being linked to the desire of regain the respect of the West showing strength and using force and military success on the ground.

Jaroslav, who succeeded Vladimir in power and ascended the throne in 1019, was able to benefit from the increase in respect of the rulers of the old continent towards the Rus and by managing to integrate more fully into European dynamics also by resorting to dynamics marriage⁴¹, he managed to extend the territorial possession of the Kyivan Rus, which in this phase reached its maximum territorial extension, controlling territories from Baltic sea to the Black sea and with the Carpathians as its territorial borders to the west. It is in this phase of its golden age that the medieval kingdom of Kyivan Rus, ever closer to European civilization through the adoption of Christianity and greater participation in continental dynamics- always maintaining its peculiarities- but at the same time surrounded to the east beyond it by peoples and kingdoms foreign to that civilization, increasingly represented the eastern bastion of Western civilization, thus acting as a protective buffer of European civilization as in the case of the subsequent invasion of the Mongol empire. The kingdom of the Rus despite suffering a defeat prevented the spread of the Turkish-Mongolian empire into Europe and this awareness has remained in the Russian unconscious, giving rise even unconsciously to the idea of the duty to protect Europe, which still returns today, albeit with a great rift between Moscow and the collective west.

A further proof of the full incorporation of the Rus of Kyiv into Western civilization is provided by its mention in the text that made European medieval epics great, such as the Scandinavian sagas and the French chivalric romances of the 11th and 12th centuries such as the *Chanson de Roland* and the *Chanson de gest*. In these texts, the Kievan Kingdom is described as a great and powerful state feared and respected and fully involved in European dynamics, even mentioned with fantastic tones given its remoteness and being

⁴¹ Olena Ponomareva, "C'era una volta la Rus' di Kyiv," Limes, no. 7(2024), p. 89.

the last eastern offshoot of European civilization surrounded by distant and hostile powers.⁴²

But the golden age experienced by the Rus of Kyiv under Jaroslav represented the last moment of its splendor. After this phase, the destruction of this kingdom materialized, due to crises generated by the internal weaknesses amplified by external events, leading the Rus to crumble.

An unresolved problem from the very beginning of the kingdom's creation was the absence of a clear system of dynastic succession, which gradually weakened the centrality of Kyiv's power in the Rus – made up of many principalities aspiring to greater power – further undermined as soon as Constantinople weakened, leading to a crisis in the trade route *from the Varangians to the Greeks*, which in turn weakened the power of Kyiv, which drew power from its strategic position on this route halfway between the Baltic and Black Sea.

In fact, with the death of the sovereign Jaroslav, a new violent dynastic struggle between his sons began, the last of the Kyivan kingdom, which increased the detachment and progressive autonomy of the various principalities at the expense of Kyiv.

The crisis of Kyiv's leadership was accelerated by two events that forever undermined the city's centrality in the kingdom.

The first occurred in the second half of the XII century when Andrej Bogoljubskij became Rus's grand prince and forever moved the kingdom's capital from Kyiv to Vladimir, a city near present-day Moscow, which remained so even during the years of the Mongol invasion⁴³. This Transfer of capital marked the redefinition of power and balance in the reign since the Kyiv area had been weakened by an external event that accelerated its crisis: the IV Crusade of 1204, with the unforeseen invasion and assault of the Crusaders on the city of Constantinople initially directed to Jerusalem. This decision sounded sudden but can be traced back to the common expansionist ambitions of the Venetian Republic and the Franks in the area under the control of the Eastern Roman Empire. More. The pope also supported this action to bring these territories back under the control of the

⁴² Ivi p.88.

⁴³ Joseph. E. Kaufmann; H.W. Kaufmann; Robert M. Jurga, *The Medieval Fortress: Castles, Forts and Walled Cities of the Middle Ages* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2004), p. 149.

Latin church since the church centered in Constantinople had officially seceded from that of Rome with the schism of 1054⁴⁴.

The assault determined the beginning of the decline of Byzantium which in turn determined the loss of importance of the trade route that led from the lands of eastern Slavs to the Bosphorus Straits, with the weakening of Kyiv which had made its position on this route the factor of its importance, giving way to other cities of Rus, such as Vladimir. The transition of power was completed in 1299 with the transfer of the seat of the Kyiv metropolitan with the entire ecclesiastical structure to Vladimir⁴⁵.

The final blow to Kyiv's leadership within the kingdom came from another external event: the invasion of the Mongol empire, the largest continental empire in history founded by Genghis Khan and having a Turkic population – the Mongols – as the dominant group.

An entity that still represents the greatest example of Eurasian power of history.

Precisely the invasion of the lands of ancient Rus was led by the Golden Horde, an autonomous north-western khanate⁴⁶ of the empire, also having a Turkic population as the dominant group –the Tatars – which invaded and conquered the entire territory of the Rus between 1223 and 1240. The destruction of the city of Kyiv by Tatar-Mongolian troops in 1240 can be regarded as the symbolic event of the end of the mythical medieval kingdom of Rus centered on Kyiv. This historical event can be considered a watershed in the history of the eastern Slavs since from this moment on, the various principalities of the Rus will have different fates, between those who will be subject to the control of the Golden Horde and thus losing Europe as a center of gravity⁴⁷ and turning their gaze eastward, and those who will be more under the influence of European powers, therefore generating the rift between that would lead to the formation of different state entities such as the Russian and Ukrainian ones that nevertheless trace their founding myth to the Rus of Kyiv.

By placing the Russian state experience in continuity with that of the Rus of Kyiv, the dynamics of the destruction of the medieval kingdom present characteristics that will

⁴⁴ Roberto Pellizzari, "Quando gli italiani abbandonarono il mare", *Domino*, no. 8 (2023) p.52.

⁴⁵ Giorgio Cella, *Storia e geopolitica della crisi ucraina. Dalla Rus' di Kiev a oggi* (Roma: Carocci editore, 2021) p 82.

⁴⁶ The "Khanate" is a territorial administration derived from Asian tradition, especially Mongolian, under the control of a leader, called Khan

⁴⁷ Olena Ponomareva, "C'era una volta la Rus' di Kiev", *Limes* no. 7 (2024), p. 90

mark the course of Russian history forever, and some of these will be found throughout Russian history.

First, the Mongol invasion left a deep trauma in the Rus collective psyche of a potential danger from the steppes, which would lead the Russians to expand to the east to remove this constant fear in the following years. Action that would lead them to arrive, not encountering large obstacles, in the renamed Vladivostok on the Pacific, a territory still claimed by China beyond apparent friendship⁴⁸, becoming a superpower geographically due to its territorial extension.

Furthermore, this invasion led to the defeat of the populations of the Rus as it occurred in a moment of encirclement which prevented them from centering all their efforts to counter the arrival of the more numerous Tatar-Mongols since the Swedes were also pressing from the north and the Teutonic Knights from the west and therefore the invasion of the Tatar-Mongols left in the populations of the Rus that psychological syndrome of fear of encirclement, of being surrounded by hostile populations, prelude in Russian mind of something not positive.

Syndrome still present in the Russian population since being placed in the Sarmatian Plain in its European part, an immense esplanade from the Carpathians up to the Urals⁴⁹, and therefore not being separated from other European states by orographic reliefs, this geographical condition still generates anxiety and fear of being potentially surrounded by hostile countries. Feelings that have always generated the strategy of expanding its defensive depth, pursued over the centuries by governments with tactics of war and land annexations to control neighboring space and move away the first defensive line, thus having a greater defensive capacity capable also of reassuring the population more.

A dynamic that explains Russia's current desire to maintain control in the former Soviet space, defined not by chance by the Russians as "near abroad"⁵⁰, sought after the collapse of the USSR through the positioning of governments aligned with Moscow's plans, even by force, especially in Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, in order to have protective cushions capable of distancing the first defensive line and to have greater reassurance among the population who would feel less fear of encirclement. A sentiment endangered

⁴⁸ Jacob Shapiro, "Un anno vissuto pericolosamente," *Domino*, no. 2 (2023), p.20

⁴⁹ Dario Fabbri, *Sotto la pelle dei popoli* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2024), p.67

⁵⁰ Alfonso Giordano, Limiti. *Frontiere, confini e la lotta per il territorio* (Roma: LUISS University Press, 2018), p. 160.

according to the Russians by NATO's eastward expansion in recent decades which clashed with the Russian ambition to maintain the exclusive influence in the post-soviet area and rekindled the old feeling of fear of encirclement. A contrast that in the last decade has generated two conflicts: in chronological order in Georgia and in Ukraine, where the expansion of NATO towards these countries combined with their desire for independence from Moscow, following the strategic dictate of preferring the most distant rival. Ambition that produced a harsh Russian reaction, with the greatest friction in the second conflict given the change in the international scenario with the more contested US hegemony and the greater self-confidence of Moscow.

Elements that show how geography, contrary to what some authoritative authors claimed at the end of the 20th century prophesying its end⁵¹, although it is not the only factor that explains the relationship between states, it remains a determining factor in geopolitical issues.

Another element of Kievan Rus disintegration that will be found several times over the centuries in Russian history is the destructive factor of foreign invasion or infiltration amplified by the internal intestinal fights capable of weakening cohesion and thus undermining a prompt reaction capable of defeating the foreigner.

Just As the various internal succession struggles amplified the destructive scope of the Mongol invasion, the same dynamic was to be repeated in the seventeenth century in a period of maximum internal weakness that went down in history as the "turbid period".

When, In the Grand Duchy of Muscovy, the dynastic crisis that followed the death of Ivan the Terrible in 1584 (the penultimate ruler of the Rurikid dynasty) favored the installation on the Russian throne a king from the rivals of the Polish-Lithuanian confederation, ousted later by a rebellion of the Russian people. The election of Michele Romanov as tsar would end this period of crisis and begin the long Romanov dynasty, in power until the revolution of February 1917.

Similarly, at one of the weakest moments of Russian history capable of calling into question its very survival, such as the moment of the civil war that began in 1918, after the disaster of the First World War and the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks in the October revolution, the great internal struggle favored the entry into Russia of European

⁵¹ Ivi p. 170.

and Japanese troops in support of the White army⁵², the anti-Bolshevik troops and eager to restore the tsarist empire. Foreign legions that, in addition to being animated by the objective of stopping the Soviet advance, were also driven by the desire to favor the perennial disintegration of the Russian imperial entity – especially in the English and Japanese government plans –. The perception of foreign interference caused that the masses give their support to the Reds⁵³, decisive for victory and for the maintenance of power that led to the return to the imperial form under communist dress.

The most recent example of this dynamic is also to be found in the 1990s with the fall of the Soviet Union, another period of great fragility and internal divisions that allowed the Americans to penetrate the internal dynamics of Russia by inflicting the liberal economic reforms that were disastrous for Moscow and it is not by chance that Vladimir Putin himself compares this phase to the period of the turbid.

The repetition of these dynamics has produced in the Russian unconscious the idea that at times of internal weakness, foreign powers, having the perception of a weak Russian state, will take advantage of it to attack Russia or to insert themselves in its dynamics to further weaken and benefit from its misfortunes.

The leaders who are the product of a specific collectivity present the same common feelings of the community having inherited from it a secular cultural substratum at birth. For this reason, the same Putin, who Russia created because he was born in what was called Leningrad, presents typically Russian feelings and he knows well that if in this delicate moment of civil war between eastern Slavs his country were to show weakness, the West would take advantage of it by inserting itself in Moscow's internal affairs to amplify divisions, and that is why the Russian political elites are doing everything they can to keep the country cohesive and compact so as to give an external image of strength and not weakness by resorting to the rhetoric of the invasions suffered in the past to make the community understand that it must remain cohesive in the face of the new Western invasion led by the USA. Narration that also serves to justify to the Russian people the land offensive begun in 2022 to avoid demonstrations that could potentially break the unity of the Russian people.

⁵²Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Breve storia dell'Unione Sovietica* (Firenze-Milano: Giunti Editore/ Bompiani, 2023), p. 38.

⁵³Ivi p. 40.

Finally, the representation of the Orthodox Church at the time of the Mongolian invasion as the only anchor of salvation for the population of the old Rus given the crumbling of political institutions is an element that will return in Russian history.

It was precisely at the time that the institution of the Orthodox Church became the very symbol of the survival of Russian civilization when during the destruction carried out by Asian troops it was the only institution to remain standing, and later under Mongol domination no longer having a strong political institution, the Eastern Slavs rallied together around the church in the fight for survival, a union that helped part of Eastern Slavs to regain their sovereignty with the Grand Duchy of Muscovy, a sovereignty never lost from here and still preserved by the Russian Federation.

This explains why the significance for the Russian of Orthodox church goes far beyond a simple confessional issue, but has a strong identity element, a symbol of their exceptionalism, because element of survival.

Fusion in the minds of Russians between the institution and salvific element which takes during the years of the Mongol invasion but will return every time the survival of the Russian people is put in danger, as during the Great Patriotic War when faced with destruction brought by German and Italian invasion the same Stalin who had waged a battle against the church invited his citizens to pray in Orthodox churches in the darkest moments of the war and at the same time in the 1990s faced with the crumbling of the political institutions, the Orthodox Church once again represented the only lifeline for the population to appeal not out of devotion but as symbol of the millenary Russian civilization still standing in the face of chaos.

Even today in the conflict with Ukraine the Russian orthodox church supports the Kremlin in the new struggle for survival in the face of the new invasion from the West.

The Orthodox Church thus represents an element of continuity of the existence of Russian civilization throughout history and the fusion of religious institution and identity symbolism remains strong also today, for Russian it remains fundamental to have fixed points such as the Orthodox Church, even if they will never set foot in it just seeing a church is a reassuring element for the population.

1.3 From the destruction of Kievan Rus to the kingdom of Moscow

The collapse of the Kyivan kingdom with the Mongol invasion was a crucial moment in the history of the Eastern Slavs because from this moment onwards the various principalities that made up the mythical Rus undertook autonomous and distinct paths, with some forming the nucleus of the future Russian empire centered on Moscow while in others historiography traces that of the Ukrainian nation.

Although at first all the realities that made up the Rus came under the indirect control of the Tatar-Mongols in the long term the various principalities took different paths assuming different identities: the principalities located respectively in the north-west and north-east of Kyivan Rus, such as those of Novgorod and Vladimir Suzdal-later the grand duchy of Moscow- for geographical reasons suffered more from Tatar-Mongolian influence remaining longer under the domination of the Golden Horde and experienced less influence from European powers. And precisely these potentates would have represented the “geopolitical incubator”⁵⁴ of the future Russian empire, which would inherit oriental ways of managing power from the Mongol empire. On the contrary, for the same geographical reasons, the principality of Galicia-Volhynia, located in the south-western part of the old Rus and including present-day Ukraine and southern Belarus⁵⁵, gradually came under the control of the neighboring European and Catholic powers of Poland and Lithuania and was less subject to Asian domination, adopting more elements of European tradition.

Kingdom of Galicia-Volhynia, in which Ukrainian historiography traces the element of continuity of the Ukrainian nation after the collapse of Kyivan Rus.⁵⁶

Concerning the rise of the Russian Empire, the element of continuity between the Rus of Kyiv and the rise of the grand duchy of Moscow is to be found in the Novgorod Republic and the figure of its prince Aleksandr Nevskij.

The latter ruled the republic of Novgorod –the north-western principality of the Kyivan kingdom – in the moment of greatest weakness experienced by the Kyivan Rus, that

⁵⁴ Giorgio Cella, *Storia e geopolitica della crisi ucraina. Dalla Rus' di Kiev a oggi* (Roma: Carocci editore, 2021) p 81.

⁵⁵ Serhii Plokhy, *Il ritorno della storia. Il conflitto russo-ucraino* (Milano: Mondadori, 2023), p.22.

⁵⁶ Giorgio Cella, *Storia e geopolitica della crisi ucraina. Dalla Rus' di Kiev a oggi* (Roma: Carocci editore, 2021), p.90

precise temporal phase described above that would lead to its disintegration into the various principalities in which the medieval kingdom was surrounded by the contemporary invasions of the Mongol empire and the pressure from west of the Teutonic Knights and the Swedes.

It was under these circumstances that in the same “annus orribilis” of 1240 when Kyiv was devastated by the Mongols, having found himself with greater autonomy given the fall of Kyiv at the head of a principality located on what had until then been the northernmost limes of the Kyivan kingdom and thus directly threatened by Western troops, Nevskij first succeeded in leading the army of his republic to victory against the Swedes at the battle on the river Neva – the river from which the commander takes his nickname, which flows into today’s St. Peterburg – and two years later again led the troops of the Republic of Novgorod together with those of Vladimir - Suzdal against the Teutonic Knights at the battle of the frozen lake in today’s Estonia.

Victories of vital importance for the eastern Slavs, which earned Nevskij the title of national hero years later, allowing them to stop the German advance to the east that seriously endangered the very identity of the Slavs, heirs of Rus. The same dynamic that was to reappear during the German invasion of Russian territories in the Second World War with Operation Barbarossa, characterized both by the desire for expansion to the East but also by strong anti-Slavic tones. In fact, Teutonic Crusaders were also financed by the Latin church to Christianize and Latinize the northern lands, which in the descent towards East had Christianized the animist population of the Baltic and were now targeting the lands of the old Rus to extend their space and at the same time allowing the ally of the Roman church to latinize the inhabitants of the Orthodox faith⁵⁷.

Their future impact also amplifies the importance of these victories, elements that will later increase Nevskij’s image in the Russian unconscious as the first defender of a Russian state after the fall of the first mythic Rus. This is because it was thanks to these battles that a feeling of common belonging to the civilization of Rus emerged in the Slavic troops and the resulting victory amplified the thought in the soldiers of the northern kingdoms such as Novgorod and Vladimir of having protected this common identity from the invaders. A legacy that will be inherited by the city that a little later emerged as the

⁵⁷ Eric Christiansen, *Le crociate del Nord. Il Baltico e la frontiera cattolica, 1100-1525* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2016)

main center in these northern lands, Moscow, which set itself on the mission of reunifying the lands of the former Kyivan kingdom, a path that led it to become an empire and at the same time to maintain and claim a direct link with the Kyivan kingdom. Victories therefore that can be considered the starting point of the process of Slavic redemption over the invaders carried out by the northern principalities and continued with Moscow. The other element thanks to which Nevskij is still remembered as a national hero of an embryonic Russian state is to be found in his choice, at the moment of maximum difficulty in the grip of hostile powers –Germans, Swedes, Mongols – to fight the European powers militarily with determination and instead prefer a temporary subjugation –which then lasted more than two centuries – to the Mongol- Tatars of the Golden Horde.

A difficult choice, opposed by the majority of the population, but one that proved to be right for the survival of the identity of the Slavic people inhabiting these lands.

Although many have identified an ideological motive behind this alternative of subordination to the Eurasian empire followed by the “Kniaz”⁵⁸ of Novgorod, identifying Nevskij himself as the forerunner of Russian Eurasianism compared to the same contemporary choice of Putin to fight the West and prefer collaboration (submission) to China ⁵⁹, in reality Nevskij’s choice can be traced back to the strategic postulate of preferring an alliance with the most distant enemy.

In addition to the superiority of the Tatar Mongols given their numerical advantage, their indirect method of government pushed Nevskij to swear fidelity to the steppe populations. In fact the Mongolian, governing an immense empire, once they had subjugated their enemies by force, left the administrative and religious institutions intact and then relied on these to govern the new territories, a treatment that would also be repeated for the territories of the Rus given the immense distance from the center Mongol imperial power, while the other European powers that pressed from the west, although numerically inferior and more culturally similar to the populations of the Rus, had the objective of not only conquering territories but also eliminating the Kievan orthodox religious institutions with the catholic ones. In fact, while the troops from the steppes easily conquered territories and returned to their domains leaving the culture and religion they found intact, opposite was the behavior of the Europeans: a slow conquest but each new advance

⁵⁸“*Kniaz*” term for prince in proto-Slavic

⁵⁹ Oxana Pachlovska, “Riedificare l’Ucraina per salvare l’occidente,” in *Limes*, no.7 (2024)

corresponded to a permanent assimilation of the population to the Roman-Germanic (European) cultural canon afferent to the Latin creed⁶⁰.

These were the reasons that led Nevskij after the victory over the Europeans to swear loyalty and submission to the Tatar-Mongols of the Golden Horde, who from this moment on would indirectly control the territories of the old Rus for more than two centuries.

As foreseen by Nevskij, this Tatar domination was limited to the collection of taxes and the demand for political and military loyalty⁶¹, relying on pre-existing Slavic institutions such as the Orthodox Church and the various princes. The central role in this control was played by Nevskij himself, considered by the Asian as the main interlocutor to maintain the hold on the territories of the old Rus' and for this reason the Tatar-Mongols attributed to him the honorary title of "Grand Prince of Kyiv"⁶².

This policy of submission pursued by Nevskij, who, contrary to the common feeling of his people, considered it necessary in this historical phase to submit to Mongol empire⁶³, meant that the territories inhabited by the Eastern Slavs could experience a period of peace, vital for rebuilding and repopulating areas that had experienced three destructive invasions in the same time frame. Another Reason for this great posthumous fame.

For the Eastern Slavs who were most in contact with the Tatar-Mongol domination, this historical period represented a fundamental break in the management of power compared to the previous Kyivan period. In fact, for the first time the Eastern Slavs found themselves in an imperial entity, where however the dominant nucleus was not theirs as today but the Turkish Tatar-Mongol one, and therefore they knew the imperial practices brought by the Mongols for the management of the boundless and multi-ethnic Eurasian empire. Imperial management policies that will be resumed by the Russians of the Muscovite Granduchy when, after emerging from Mongol subjugation, they conquered the steppe territories, becoming the Eurasian power we know today.

Mongolian imperial management policies first impressed the prince of Novgorod himself, when after arriving in the capital of the Golden Horde to pay tribute after victories over

⁶⁰ Nicolas Zernov, *The Russians and Their Church* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1994), p.22

⁶¹ Carolina De Stefano, *Storia del potere in Russia. Dagli zar a Putin* (Brescia: Editrice Morcelliana, 2022), p.11

⁶² Important medieval title comparable to that of "Emperor of the Romans" of which in the same time frame sought by Germanic leaders in Western Europe.

⁶³ Carolina De Stefano, *Storia del potere in Russia. Dagli zar a Putin* (Brescia: Editrice Morcelliana, 2022), p. 12

Europeans he was invited to continue eastward to appear before the supreme leader of all the Tatars in the Mongolian imperial center of Karakorum, a journey that lasted three years.

Nevskij was able to see with his own eyes how the control of such a vast territory full of nations within it was possible thanks to a strong, hard, and centralized power exercised by the Mongols and how the survival of the Eurasiatic empire was possible thanks to the efficient management of the great military machine⁶⁴. Elements from which Russian took inspiration when they found themselves managing the immense Eurasian territory, and in this we can trace the autocratic management of power that continues to this day with Putin's leadership.

The figure of Nevskij, still celebrated by Russian pedagogy for his decisions that allowed the survival of the civilization of Rus, embodies the transition and at the same time the continuity between the experience of Kievan Rus and the affirmation of Moscow. Continuity that also emerges from the dynastic point of view as he, belonging to the Rurikid dynasty, will have a son, Daniil, who will be the first to get the title of Prince of Muscovy, progenitor of the ruling Muscovite dynasty until the end of the 16th century⁶⁵. Moscow, which was the city that experienced its most important growth during the Mongol domination. If in the old Rus' period, the city of Kiev was the center of greatest importance thanks to its crucial position as a commercial hub between the Baltic sea and the Black sea, with the conquest of the Rus by the Mongols and therefore with the consequent redefinition of power in the area that now had the east as a point of reference, Moscow benefited from its position by establishing itself as a nerve center and connection between the Asian steppes and the north-western Slavic principalities, carrying out the function of tax collector⁶⁶ on behalf of the Mongol-Tatars and thus gradually passing from being a city of lesser importance under Vladimir-Suzdal during the Kyivan experience to becoming the most important center in that area of the principalities located in the northern part of what was Kyivan Rus, going to continue the path of Slavic recovery

⁶⁴Nicolas Zernov, *The Russians and Their Church* (New York: St. Vladimir 's Seminary Press,1994), p.23

⁶⁵ Carolina De Stefano, *Storia del potere in Russia. Dagli zar a Putin* (Brescia: Editrice Morcelliana, 2022), p.13

⁶⁶ Ivi p. 12

began with Novgorod under Nevskij's leadership and so leading the Slavic principalities in exiting the Mongol yoke.

An example of this redefinition of power in the area inhabited by the Eastern Slavs is represented by the movement of the seat of the metropolitan and the Orthodox ecclesiastical structures from Kyiv to Vladimir in 1299 and from the latter to Moscow in 1322⁶⁷, a clear testimony of the power achieved by the Moscow center.

Orthodox church that from its establishment in the territory of the eastern Slavs maintained autonomous positions with respect to the Greek-orthodox center in Constantinople. Quest for autonomy that was pursued even with the arrival of the metropolitan in Moscow where orthodoxy continued to be adapted to the Slavic canon and Orthodox Muscovite institution took advantage of the crisis of Constantinople in the 15th century, caused by the Turkish threat, to proclaim the separation from the patriarchate of the Byzantine city, which was not formalized until 1589. An All Russian capulgement when in 1666 the now-Russian Orthodox church in Moscow reformed the liturgy to the Byzantine rite proper to the Greek Orthodox churches to project influence on the Balkan church⁶⁸. Clear example of how religion is used as a tool to convey geopolitical ambitions.⁶⁹

Having had as its first prince a ruler belonging to the Rjirikid dynasty and the arrival of the seat of the metropolitan of Kyiv are configured as the two crucial elements for Moscow to be able to claim, since its rapid rise between 13th and 14th centuries, the direct link with the previous state experiences of Rus of Kiev and the Novgorod Republic, where the former was an experience common to all Eastern Slavs. In contrast, the second symbolized the beginning of a specific path of the Northeastern principalities continued by Moscow from which remained outside the southwestern principalities including Kyiv subjected to different dynamics, and in this can be identified the first break between Moscow and Kyiv.

Moscow's continuation of the path of Slavic redemption started by Novgorod which led it to an imperial dimension was certainly amplified by the arrival of the headquarters of the Orthodox institution of eastern Slavs which gave a great spiritual tone to Moscow's

⁶⁷Giorgio Cella, *Storia e geopolitica della crisi ucraina. Dalla Rus' di Kiev ad oggi* (Roma: Carocci editore, 2021), p. 82.

⁶⁸ Dario Fabbri, "La Russia davanti", *Domino*, no. 3 (2024) p. 7.

⁶⁹ Dario Fabbri, *Geopolitica Umana*. (Milano: Gribaudo, 2023) p. 68.

ambitions. Religious institutions were the only centers of power during the Mongol domination around which the populations of the various principalities of the Rus placed a collective hope for the survival of their civilization. Therefore the movement of this to a city like Moscow which already had an ambition of territorial conquest was also claimed as a spiritual investiture from the main religious power of the eastern Slavs area to the Muscovite mission of conquering the territories of the old Rus and establishing itself as main center. A joint action between the spiritual power of the Orthodox Church and the temporal Muscovite state power immediately began, a cooperation that certainly facilitated the rise of Moscow. A bond which, unlike European countries, has not experienced divorce and is therefore still in force in contemporary Russia, where over the years the spiritual strength of orthodox creed and state military force, both placing themselves in defense of the unity of the state, have ended up merging, giving life to the Russian political religion of defense of the uniqueness of its civilization by defending order from chaos⁷⁰. A struggle therefore for individual salvation of Russia against the chaos generated according to Moscow by a part of the West, the US, which can be useful to the West itself and to the entire world. Political religion becomes the new post-Soviet imperial mission in opposition to American exceptionalism, two equal and contrary universal forces, with the first at the service of the ecumene and the second that metonymically embodies the will of the entire globe⁷¹. Therefore, the Orthodox Church itself ended up configuring itself in the Russian unconscious as a symbol of the exceptional nature of Russian civilization, an element of continuity behind the different state experiences of the Kievan Rus, Novgorod Republic, Granduchy of Moscow and Imperial Russia.

An Institution that, because of its great bearing in the collective psychology of the Eastern Slavs has not been spared in the dispute between Russians and Ukrainians. Dispute that also led to separation in the ecclesiastical sphere with the creation of an autocephalous Ukrainian church, born from separation from the patriarchate of Moscow led by Kiril following the EuroMaidan protest with the formalization of the schism which occurred in 2018 with the support of the Ukrainian state, of the USA and of the Patriarchate of

⁷⁰ Luca Gori, *La Russia Eterna. Origini e costruzione dell'ideologia post-sovietica* (Roma: Luiss University Press, 2021), p. 113.

⁷¹ Dario Fabbri, "la Russia Davanti", *Domino*, no. 3 (2024), p. 6.

Constantinople⁷². Since its birth, the Ukrainian autocephalous Orthodox Church has actively supported the Ukrainian state in its escape from Russian influence which was felt also through the Moscow Orthodox Church. While from the Russian point of view this decision was seen as a further betrayal after the Ukrainian decision to want to gravitate into the American sphere of influence, further putting into crisis the Russkij Mir's project of bringing together population outside the Russian border who speak Russian and pray in orthodox Church⁷³. Further confirmation of the role of religions in conveying national ambitions.

1.4 The rise of Moscow: from the Gran-duchy to the epicenter of the Eurasian Empire

Returning to the rise of Moscow and its role of continuing the process started by Novgorod to lead the Eastern Slavs out of the Mongol yoke, it was discussed above how the parenthesis of the Novgorod Republic represents the element of transition between the Epic of the Rus of Kyiv and the Muscovite rise and how the choices of its prince Nevskij were decisive for the salvation of the civilization of the Eastern Slavs by defeating the Germans who wanted to erase the Orthodox Slavic institutions and by preferring submission to the Mongols knowing that they would not destroy their institutions.

The Victories over the Germans and Swedish gave rise to the awareness among the soldiers of the northern principalities of having saved the identity of the old Rus and therefore of possessing a common destiny beyond the individual state realities. A feeling which was the origin of that desire that gradually became more pressing to regain total independence, since the relative peace brought by swearing loyalty to the Mongols also created a relationship of subordination of the Slavs towards the Asians that lasted centuries.

⁷² Giorgio Livas, "la crociata per l'Ucraina tra Mosca e Costantinopoli", *Domino*, no.2 (2022), p. 55.

⁷³ Pietro Mattonai, "Francesco non vuole scegliere tra Stati Uniti e Russia". *Domino*, no. 2 (2023), p.98.

Feelings that were inherited by the city – Moscow – which gradually emerged in that area, whose authority was also strengthened by the arrival of the Metropolitan of Kyiv.

A turning point in the relations between the Slavs and the Tatar-Mongols can be traced over a century after Nevskij's successes, precisely in 1380, the date of the battle of Kulikovo, when for the first time the Slavs imposed themselves militarily against those who had been until that point the rulers of the steppes, swelled by Poles and Lithuanians⁷⁴. The armies of several Slavic principalities were led to victory under the command of Prince of Vladimir and Moscow Dmitrij Ivanovic Donskoj- the latter nickname deriving from the Don River along which the Battle of Kulikovo took place⁷⁵. Obtaining the name from the river where the winning battle takes place that accumulates Donskoj to Nevskij, both sanctified by the Orthodox Church for having defended the Russian civilization in vital battles⁷⁶. An example of the strong relationship between state and church in Russia and of the political dimension of the Russian orthodox religion.

A crucial victory for the proto-Russians. First of all not taken be granted given the great numerical advantage of the Tatar-Mongol army.

“You are millions. We nugules and nugules of people. Try to fight with us! Yes, we are the Scythians!... we, as obedient servants, acted as a shields between two hostile races, the Mongols and Europe”⁷⁷. Thus commented Aleksandr Blok in his early twentieth-century poem “Scythians”⁷⁸, referring also to the battle of Kulikovo emphasizing not only the numerical inferiority of the Slavs but also showing a sentiment that was forming in proto-Russian unconscious between the 13th and 14th century still present in the current Russian collective psyche, that of being a civilization in itself with some European and some Asian elements but adverse to both.

Emerged this feeling because on the one hand, the break with European civilization was total with the invasion suffered by Germans and Swedes of the 13th century discussed above, yet another incursion from the West but this time not like the others as the first wanted to erase the Slavic civilization and the second were heir to the Vikings those who

⁷⁴ Dario Fabbri, “La Russia davanti”, *Domino*, no. 3 (2024), p.6.

⁷⁵ Giorgio Cella, *Storia e geopolitica della crisi ucraina. Dalla Rus' di Kiev a oggi* (Roma: Carocci editore, 2021), p. 87.

⁷⁶ Luca Gori, *La Russia eterna. Origini e costruzione dell'ideologia post sovietica* (Roma: LUISS University Press, 2021), p. 113.

⁷⁷ Aleksandr Block, *Gli Sciti*, 1918

⁷⁸ The name of the ancient Iranian peoples who inhabited steppes

helped create the civilization of Kyivan Rus and providing it with European traits. So, the victories over them under Nevskij as well as remarking on a feeling of vital survival of their own identity broke what was left of the “Oedipus complex” towards Europe by going to fight and win a part of their original stock, the Vikings, who had provided the populations of the Rus the only unconscious bond with the old continent. On the other hand, the subsequent victory over the Tatar-Mongols under the leadership of the Prince of Moscow “Donskoij” contributed to strengthening a feeling of otherness even compared to those who had invaded and defeated the Slavs from East for centuries, redeeming a fear of military inferiority.

Victories, which occurred in different time phases, over the populations that crushed the Slavs from the west and east who laid to the foundations of the still-living Eurasianist idea that sees Russia as a distinct civilization between Europe and Asia.

In addition to this, the victory of the Slavs in the battle of Kulikovo produced the important consequences of showing how the Tatar-Mongols were not unbeatable and of strengthening Moscow’s leadership over a good part of the Slavic principalities, thus giving considerable impetus to the will to fight to gain complete independence from the Asians. Furthermore, this victory had a notable impact on the balance of power between the Tatar-Mongols and the Proto-Russian, laying the foundations for the overthrow of the hierarchies in the steppes: for the former the defeat represented the starting point of the crisis of the Golden Horde which would lead to its disintegration, while for the latter it was the starting point for the reconquest of the part of territory of the old Rus from Mongol control, a path that led the Proto-Russians under the leadership of Moscow also to conquer the steppes, subjugating the Turkic populations. The Control of the steppes, which according to the famous Mongolian leader Genghis Khan would bring a power that would achieve it to become a Eurasian empire⁷⁹. Postulate that will also find confirmation in the Russian epic.

For these reasons, Moscow pedagogy still gives much emphasis to the battle of Kulikovo as the decisive turning point that led to the liberation of the territory under its guide⁸⁰.

⁷⁹ Alan De Benoist, Aleksandr Dugin, *Eurasia Vladimir Putin e la Grande Politica*, (Napoli: Controcorrente edizioni ,2014), p.27.

⁸⁰ Dario Fabbri, “La Russia davanti”, *Domino*, no. 3 (2024), p.6.

The important, albeit controversial, Eurasianist of the twentieth century Lev Gumilev argued how the victory of Kulikovo was decisive in strengthening In the soldiers of the various fighting Slavic principalities the idea of identity and belonging to Russian civilization over the individual principalities now having Moscow as point of reference to complete the liberation, which once occurred will confirm the Moscow canon as the pre-eminent political-cultural nucleus among the eastern Slavs. “The battle of Kulikovo was such event for Russians: it marked the emergence of Muscovite Russia as ethnos. The arrays of the people of Suzdal, Vladimir, Rostov, Pskov took the field of Kulikovo as representatives of their principalities but returned as the Russians”.⁸¹

In addition, the victory over the Mongols in the battle of Kulikovo produced in the Russian unconscious the idea of having saved European Christianity from imminent extinction which would have been brought by the Mongols in the event of Russian failure⁸². That same Christian Europe that wanted to destroy the civilization of Rus and that the proto-Russians had fought and won, generating an adverse feeling towards Europeans.

In this messianic feeling of having offered themselves to defend the world and above all the Europeans by fighting the Asians we find the emergence of that contradiction of Russian feelings towards Europe which are still present today: attraction and repulsion, West to be fought and then saved, anger at having to face an ungrateful population towards the Slavs. Same dynamic of today where Russia is disgusted by a part of the West fighting it on the field in Ukraine, while offering its epic to the whole world, but especially to the West itself to save. War and peace.

Lastly, the site of the battle of Kulikovo is located in a macro-area where throughout history decisive battles for the survival of the Russians have taken place, such as the battle of Borodino against the French in 1812 and the victorious battle of Kursk-Prokhorovka against the Germans in 1943. Pitched clashes that are remembered every day in the Kursk Victory Memorial with three bells ringing every hour each for each battle⁸³. Example of the historical continuity perception for Russians and the great sentimental relationship with the Kursk area. Kursk Oblast – within the Russian Federation –which Ukrainian

⁸¹ Alexander S. Titov, *Lev Gumilev, Ethnogenesis and Eurasianism* (UMI, 2005), p.152.

⁸² Dario Fabbri, “La Russia davanti”, *Domino*, no.3 (2024), p.6.

⁸³ Dario Fabbri, “Nulla va più”, *Rivista Domino*, no.9 (2024), p.9.

soldiers invaded with the start of an offensive on 6 august 2024. First invaders on Russian territory since the end of the Great Patriotic War. A potentially crucial event in the dispute between Russians and Ukrainians if the invasion of Kursk were to be perceived as humiliation by the population speaking Tolstoy's idiom, with the latter in history having imposed a change in leadership every time they saw imperial greatness humiliated by military defeats. A feeling of disappointment in the event of a Russian defeat in Kursk region could be amplified by the population's psychological relationship with this territory.

Although all these highlighted positive consequences of the battle of Kulikovo marked a decisive turning point towards the Moscow-led Russian liberation from the Mongolian game, this event, however, did not lead to complete autonomy and it will be necessary to wait another century for the battle that marked definitive independence.

The event in question is the subsequent confrontation between the Russians and the Tatar-Mongols on the Ugra river's banks, which occurred in 1480 precisely one century after the battle of Kulikovo. A Clash remembered by historiography as "Great stand on the Ugra river". Causus belli was the decision of the prince of Moscow Ivan III to interrupt the annual tributes to the Golden Horde. In response to this the Tatar-Mongols began a military operation against the Russians to reaffirm their authorities and so they crossed the Polish territory –their allies – until settled in front of the Ugra river, a course halfway between Moscow and Kursk, at that time natural border between the Polish-Lithuanians and Muscovite state. The name with which this episode is remembered – "Grand Stand" – derives from the fact that there was no direct clash in the open field between the two armies, they lined up respectively on both sides of the river and the Russians' tenacious defense of their bank succeeded in preventing the breach of Asiatic army, which if successful would have resulted in an offensive directly on Moscow.

The failure of the Mongolian Tatar offensive, the killing of their leader, and the non arrival of Polish allies led the Steppe army to retreat from battle⁸⁴. A retreat that also represented the final withdrawal of the Mongolian Tatars from the eastern Slavs territories and marked the final disintegration of the Golden Horde Khanate itself⁸⁵.

⁸⁴ Dario Fabbri, *Sotto la pelle del mondo* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2024), p. 21.

⁸⁵ Giorgio Cella, *Storia e geopolitica della crisi ucraina. Dalla Rus' di Kiev a oggi* (Roma: Carocci editore, 2021), p. 89.

Russian success, once again achieved under Moscow leadership, represented the long-awaited final liberation and independence of the East Slavic territories from the Mongol Tatar yoke, and thus the end of all Russian economic, political and military obligations towards the Asians. Moreover, the fact that definitive success came once again under Muscovite leadership “led to a further strengthening of Muscovite authority over the neighboring principalities of Rostov, Tver, Vladimir and others, also potential heirs of Kievan Rus”⁸⁶. In addition, another vital victory in a geographic area near Moscow reaffirmed the strategic need to control territories protecting Moscow so as to have a chance to retreat in case of failure. A Strategic dictate has always been pursued in Russian military history and is still alive in the Russian mind with the will to maintain Ukraine as a buffer zone.

The Russian victory in the “great front” under Muscovite leadership was the culmination of a process of liberation of the Eastern Slavs that began with Nevskij and continued under Moscow’s leadership, strengthened with the victory in the Battle of Kulikovo and obtained with the victory on the Ugra River. Thanks to this definitive success over the Tatar- Mongols, the Muscovite institutions were able to take credit for having liberated the territories of the eastern Slavs from the Asians and thus concluding that process of re-appropriation of the identity of Kievan Rus which had begun with the prince of Novgorod republic and therefore the Muscovite power could claim a direct link with Kievan Rus, which still continues today.

Thanks to these successes, the Moscow institutions were able to leverage this liberating mission of the Eastern Slavs, which was also strengthened with the great bond that was being built with the institutions of the Orthodox Church which had moved to Moscow since the 14th century, to impose direct control on the other neighboring Slavic principalities also heirs of the Rus.

In addition to the fact of having led a part of the Eastern Slavs to success and the fact of having a strong relationship with the Orthodox Institution hosted within it, the Muscovite power and its hold on the neighboring principalities increased due to two other events which also occurred under the command of the sovereign who led the Russians to victory in the great front on the Ugra river, Ivan III. Russian ruler still unreached for years in power, forty-three from 1462 to 1505.

⁸⁶ Ivi, p.90.

With the fall of the Eastern Roman Empire with the conquest of Constantinople by the Turks in 1453, the Muscovite prince Ivan III hastened to claim the title of Third Rome for Moscow⁸⁷ so as to obtain an additional mission as a tactic to strengthen the power of his kingdom externally and at the same time further reinforce the control over the neighboring principalities and he immediately accepted Pope Paul II's proposal to marry Zoe Paleologa, a descendant of the last emperor of the Roman Empire Constantine XI⁸⁸, with the wedding – a physical symbol of the *translatio imperii* – which was celebrated in Moscow in 1472. “Two Romes have fallen, Moscow is the third, there will not be a fourth⁸⁹”. Thus the monk Filofej of Pskov rang at the end of the event.

This act embodied the ambition of the Muscovite sovereign to extend his influence to the territories left orphaned by the Christian Roman emperor, a political continuity that could also be sought by leveraging the common Orthodox faith of these territories, not surprisingly more than a century later came the adaptation of the Muscovite church liturgy to adapt to the Byzantine canon to extend the influence on the Balkans churches⁹⁰.

Although this increase in soft power did not lead to a territorial conquest of the territories that were under the control of Constantinople, nevertheless by celebrating itself as the Third Rome and obtaining this continuity also from the dynastic point of view, Moscow managed to achieve the propaganda objective of becoming a point of reference in the minds of people beyond its borders both in the Balkans, where it still remains strong connection with Serbia, but also in Western Europe, where a part of the citizens still considered Moscow thanks to this title obtained in the 15th-century heir of imperial Rome. Propaganda that is revived even today with Moscow engaged in a war in Ukraine also against the US-driven Europe but at the same time reviving a cultural battle to appeal to Western minds and hearts by showing its continuity of Third Rome and standing as a bulwark of conservative Europe values against the value drifts created by the United States⁹¹. Moscow aims to preserve the European values that Europe itself is losing to be able to restore them to the old continent in the future. Surely a tactic⁹² to divide the

⁸⁷ Dario Fabbri, *Sotto la pelle del mondo* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2024), p.62

⁸⁸ Ibidem

⁸⁹ Dario Fabbri, “La Russia davanti”, *Domino*, no.3 (2024), p. 7

⁹⁰ Dario Fabbri, *Sotto la pelle del mondo* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2024), p. 63

⁹¹ Lionel Barber; Henry Foy; Alex Barker, Vladimir Putin says liberalism has become obsolete, *Financial Times*, 28/6/19

⁹² Federico Bertasi, “Infuria la guerra culturale”, *Domino*, no. 3 (2024), p.114

Western front recompact behind support for Ukraine but which also hides an unconscious openness towards a part of it. Maximum symbol of the contradiction of the relations between Russia and the West: if on one side Russia fights the West on the field, on the other intends to save it. As happened in the 14th century with the battle of Kulikovo when the Russians defeated the Mongols and celebrated that they saved Christian Europe from the Mongol threat.

In addition to the claim of the title of Third Rome which had Ivan III as its protagonist, another element that contributed to strengthening Muscovite power was the conquest always under his command of the Novgorod Republic in 1478. In addition to conquering a large territorial entity which allowed to the Muscovite principality to significantly increase its extension, the importance of the event was also significant on a symbolic level as it was described above how the Novgorod Republic with the Nevskij epic represented a direct link with Kievan Rus. Although its power had gradually passed to Moscow, it had still remained an independent principality and represented the only Slavic principality that could compete with Moscow for the primacy in the space of the Eastern Slavs given the large territorial extension and a saving mission for the Slavs by tracing themselves to the Nevskij epic. With the conquest of Novgorod in 1478, Moscow became the undisputed main actor in the space of the Eastern Slavs. It further increased its connection with Kievan Rus by appropriating Novgorod's own Nevskij epic. Furthermore, with the conquest of Novgorod, Prince Ivan III was the first Muscovite ruler to proclaim himself "Tsar⁹³ of all the Russias"⁹⁴, entitled for having concluded a process of conquest and subjugation to Moscow of the neighboring Slavic principalities heirs of the old Rus.

Just two years after the taking of Novgorod, in 1480 as described above Ivan III led the Slavic principalities in the victory against the Mongols in the Great Stand on the Ugra River definitively freeing the eastern Slavic space from the Tatar yoke and permanently extending his influence over the surrounding principalities.

Thus at the beginning of the 16th century with the end of the temporal leadership of Ivan III, he left his successors a kingdom strengthened both in terms of geographical dimension but also in terms of influence on the neighboring territories. The Grand Principality of

⁹³ From the latin *Caesar*, "Czar", Emperor

⁹⁴ Carolina De Stefano, *Storia del potere in Russia. Dagli zar a Putin* (Brescia: Editrice Morcelliana, 2022), p. 13

Moscow now presented itself as the undisputed main player in the once Kyivan Rus area. Now the sovereign of the Grand Duchy of Moscow could boast both the title of Tsar of all the Russians –for having led part of the eastern Slavs out of the Mongol yoke – and that of sovereign of the Third Rome, which together with a very close relationship with the Orthodox Church with seat in Moscow, allowed the prince a great hold on the neighboring Slavic principalities now subjected to him, a hold that would have provided the necessary strength to continue expansion. An impetus that would lead Moscow to become an empire by conquering for the first time territories outside the traditional space that was of the old Rus.

This happened a few decades later when, under the command of Tsar Ivan IV – remembered as the terrible- the Russians managed to conquer and bring under Muscovite rule two autonomous khanates with a Tatar ethnic majority and Muslim faith, heirs of the Golden Horde. In 1552, the Kazan or Volga Khanate was conquered, and in 1556, the Astrachan or Caspian Khanate. These conquests not only greatly expanded the territories of the Moscow kingdom, which could now reach as far as the Caspian sea, but also represented a historical turning point: the beginning of the Russian empire centered on Moscow. The beginning of the empire did not happen by the decision of a leader or by judgment of some historical posterity, but as happened or happens in every civilization even in the Russian case the transition to the imperial form occurred in a completely unconscious form⁹⁵.

An empire is born unconsciously, when to remove the first defensive line for the reason of survival, a kingdom or nation conquers foreign territories and peoples⁹⁶ and after conquest to keep allogeneic peoples under its domination it endows itself with a mission, an imperial mission, telling itself ingenerate with divine power and at that point, *ex-post*, realizes that it has become an empire. Born spontaneously an empire will also end unknowingly, not by the decision of an individual, but for strategic reasoning as in the case of the Tatars-Mongols of the Golden Horde who as addressed above their imperial parable ended by defeat remedied by the Russians in the great front on Ugra river.

This is what happened to the Russians who, to move away the first defensive line to the east to avoid new invasions from the Orient, ended up subjugating foreign people – of

⁹⁵ Dario Fabbri, *Geopolitica Umana* (Milano: Gribaudo, 2023), p. 44

⁹⁶ Ibidem

Turkish ethnicity with Muslim faith- to respect their Russian dominant canon based on Slavic ethnicity, Slavic language and Orthodox Christian faith. Once the Turkish population had been subjugated, the Russians endowed themselves with an imperial mission of defending the Christian Orthodox religion and finding themselves managing a multi-ethnic empire adopted imperial management policies that were learned ironically by being under the Tatar-Mongols in the past centuries⁹⁷.

A relationship of power that continues to this day where in multi-ethnic Russia the ethnic Russians (Russkij) remain the dominant group, while the different peoples conquered over time (rossijskij) have been assimilated but not considered as equal⁹⁸, and where the Russians want to continue to subjugate the Ukrainians, a population closer to the dominant group respect the others, in order to push away the Western first line of defense, meeting Ukrainian resistance. Friction underlying the current clash.

Moreover, in addition to marking the beginning of imperial Russia, such Russian conquest of Tatar Khanates concluded the process of overthrowing hierarchies in the steppes that had begun with the victory at Kulikovo: now the Russians subjugated those Tatar steppe peoples who for centuries under the Mongol empire had subjugated the eastern Slavic states. Finally, Such first Muscovite conquests beyond the historical space of the Rus marked the beginning of a process of expansion both westward and eastward to extend the first line of defense. Dynamics that continue today with the attempted expansion into Ukraine linked to the strategic dictate of increasing strategic depth.

By conquering the steppes now the Russian Empire became the Eurasian Empire, A characteristic that it maintains even today. A historical passage, that of the steppes conquest, which has been and continues to be celebrated by Russian Eurasianist intellectuals who see the conquest of the former territories of the Golden Horde as the founding moment of present-day Russia⁹⁹. They have not eliminated from their identity the past as vassals of the Mongol empire but rather located in the conquests under Ivan IV the moment of the replacement of the Golden Horde with the Tsar and the fusion of the eastern Slavs with the Golden Horde capable of giving, according to them, that

⁹⁷ Carolina De Stefano, *Storia del potere in Russia. Dagli zar a Putin*. (Brescia: Editrice Morcelliana, 2022), p.12.

⁹⁸ Dario Fabbri, *Geopolitica Umana* (Milano: Gribaudo, 2023), p. 48.

⁹⁹ Alain De Benoist; Aleksandr Dugin, *Eurasia Vladimir Putin e la Grande Politica* (Napoli: Controcorrente edizioni, 2014), p 27.

strength that continues to this day to fuel Russian maximalism and exceptionalism¹⁰⁰. A thought which, although it may seem particular and minoritarian, on the contrary, turns out to be shared by most of the Russians.

“Beyond the bourgeoisie of Moscow or St. Petersburg, the deep Russian living between the Volga and Siberia considers himself Eurasian, not European. Despite the imperial pedagogy wants the Rus of Kyiv embryo of the contemporary nation, these consider themselves Slavic but also descendants of Hellenic Byzantium and of the Turk-Mongolian Golden Horde. Exemplary of a peculiar species located between Europe and Asia. Sure that the West has long been rotten and dying, but without even embracing its Chinese, Korean or Turkmen neighbors, considered subhuman”¹⁰¹.

An insight into the Russian unconscious which restores the ability of this people to place themselves in the present in continuity with their past and not forget the specific traits acquired during their journey. A thought that shows how the right world to describe the Russian community is that of Eurasian, which just as geographically is placed between Europe and Asia also from the point of view of its characteristics embraces elements of both, such as Christianity or Marxism –during the Soviet Union – of European origin and management of power of Asian origin – but without fully identifying with the other two civilizations and perceiving itself as a unique civilization. And in this we can find a root of its contradictory relationship with the West and its distance from Asian peoples behind the vaunted unlimited friendship with the Chinese.

1.5 Conclusion, behind the disputed legacy

In the analysis addressed above, it was seen how the Kyivan Rus was an important common experience in the history of the eastern Slavs, whose principalities that composed it were accumulated by the same language –proto-Slav –the same orthodox faith after the conversion of Vladimir I and by the same dynastic lineage –Rurikid – of rulers. With the disintegration of the old Rus due to internal centrifugal forces and the joint invasion and destruction brought by the Tatar Mongols, the various principalities

¹⁰⁰ Ibidem

¹⁰¹ Dario Fabbri, “quanto è invisibile agli occhi”, *Domino* no.4 (2022), p. 9

that made up the Kingdom took different paths based on the different geographical positions between those who were more exposed to the power of the Tatar Mongols and those who were more exposed to that of the Western Catholics.

The principalities in the north began their own path which had as its protagonist the republic of Novgorod and the principality of Vladimir with the victories over the Germans and Swedes and the submission to the Mongols. Power inherited from the city that emerged in that northern area, Moscow, which succeeded first in leading the principalities of the north out of the Mongol yoke and then reuniting around itself part of that geographic space that was of the Rus of Kiev – proclaiming itself the Third Rome and the most important city of the Rus – and then managed to conquer the Tatar-Mongol kingdoms of the steppes and thus become the Eurasian empire, which is still alive today. A different path from that which was undertaken by the most important kingdom that emerged in the southwestern area from the disintegration of Kyivan Rus, The reign of Galicia-Volhynia, in which Ukrainian historiography traces the element of Ukrainian national continuity after the collapse of Kyivan Rus. That kingdom, still of the Orthodox faith and led by rulers of the Rurikid dynasty, in its phase of best splendor in the first half of the 13th century managed to expand its borders and arrive to control a territory that extended from the Carpathians to the Dnepr¹⁰², therefore corresponding to current Western Ukraine, also managing to conquer the now non-influential Kiev but with great symbolic significance. It was a period in which the kingdom imposed itself militarily against the invasion of steppe peoples of Muslim faith, thus also acting as a shield to Europe, also imposing itself on the Poles but failing to do the same on the Tatar-Mongols, becoming their tributary. Its epic bulwark against the invasion of Muslim peoples earned its sovereign Daniil the coronation with the title of *Rex Russiae* by a papal legate in 1253, the only Rurikid ruler to have been crowned by a Catholic pontiff¹⁰³. A title which Ukrainians still claim to contest the title of “Tsar” claimed over the centuries by Muscovite sovereigns.

¹⁰² Giorgio Cella, *Storia e geopolitica della crisi ucraina. Dalla Rus' di Kiev a oggi*. (Roma: Carocci editore, 2023, p. 91.

¹⁰³ Ivi, p.92

Due to various pressures from different peoples, the kingdom collapsed in the second half of the 14th century. Its territories were annexed by the Lithuanians and Poles who would have merged to form the catholic Polish-Lithuanian Confederation in the XVI century.

Territories of Galicia and Volhynia, which then came under the control of the Catholic Austro-Hungarian Empire when in the 18th century there was the partition of Poland and then came under the control of the Soviet Union in the 20th century, following the invasion of the Red Army of Poland as a result of the Russian Germans Molotov-Ribbentrop pact signed in 1939.

From the historical trajectory of these two regions of Galicia and Volhynia, which are still two symbolic regions of today's western Ukraine and the core of Ukrainian independence and pro-European sentiment, it can be seen how its inhabitants standing as many as six centuries under Western European empires developed characteristics different to the eastern part of the country, which suffered most from the impact of the Russian Eurasian empire and thus acquired fewer European elements and more pro-Russian sentiments. Differences that generated tension between the eastern and western parts of Ukraine that led to the internal war that began in the Donbas in 2014, the core of the conflict that became regional with Russian support for the secessionist regions of the Donbas and then became European but also global with the direct entry of Russian army into Ukrainian territory in 2022 which was responded to by support of the USA and European states to the tenacious defense of Ukraine.

This historical analysis shows that although the experience of Kyivan Rus united the ancestors of Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians, thus sharing a genesis of language, religion and form of government, however the end of this kingdom led to the beginning of different paths among the Eastern Slavs who led on the one hand to the rise of an imperial entity centered on Moscow and a national entity centered on Kyiv, with an imbalance of forces in favor of the former which for centuries has also been trying to gain control of the latter to increase its defensive depth.

Although the Kyivan kingdom is a historical element that belongs to both Russian and Ukrainian communities, the conflict between Moscow and Kyiv has not spared even history and both collectives claim themselves as the sole custodians of the old Rus, excluding the other. Both in the present rewrite their own history as a tactic to achieve

their own power policies¹⁰⁴ and therefore it is “the present that gives shape to the past, selecting what best serves the future”¹⁰⁵.

Thus the Russians appropriate the legacy of the Rus for their own imperial purposes of reconquering Ukraine, recreating a narrative to delegitimize the existence of the Ukrainian nation. Narration that emerges from the article “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”¹⁰⁶ written by President Vladimir Putin and published by the Kremlin in July 2021, a few months before the invasion of Ukraine, where the unity of the eastern Slavs in the Kyivan experience is emphasized, the legacy of which would be found only in Moscow.

“Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are all descendants of Ancient Rus, which was the largest state in Europe. Slavic and other tribes across the vast territory (...) were bound together by one language, economic ties, the rule of the princes of the Rurik dynasty, and – after the baptism of Rus- the orthodox faith. The spiritual choice made by St. Vladimir, who was both Prince of Novgorod and Grand Prince of Kyiv, still largely determines our affinity today”¹⁰⁷. It is to be underlined as Vladimir Putin refers to the Kiev experience as “Ancient Rus”¹⁰⁸ to avoid any reference to Kyiv.

The Same exercise was done in reverse by the Ukrainians who also claim the exclusive legacy of the Kyivan experience, reconstructing a narrative aimed at excluding Moscow from the historical common experience and aimed at highlighting how the Kyivan Rus a thousand years ago was already a first example of Ukrainian nation. A narrative therefore as a tactic for the strategy of achieving independence by breaking all ties with Russian imperialism. Narrative that emerges from the speech made by Volodymyr Zelenskyy on 28 July 2021, not surprisingly a few days after the publication of Vladimir Putin’s article, on the day of the anniversary of the baptism of the Rus. A foundational historical moment also in Russian pedagogy but which in the speech made by Zelenskyy is claimed exclusively in a Ukrainian key to legitimize the independence and the right to reclaim

¹⁰⁴Federico Bertasi, “Forza del Déjà-vu”, *Domino*, no. 8 (2024), p. 50.

¹⁰⁵ Paolo Jedlowski “Memorie. Temi e problemi della sociologia della memoria nel XX secolo”. *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, no.3 (2001), p 373.

¹⁰⁶ Vladimir Putin “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians” Kremlin.ru, 12/7/2021.

¹⁰⁷ Ibidem

¹⁰⁸ Ibidem

Crimea¹⁰⁹, since Vladimir's conversion (Volodymyr in Ukrainian) took place on Crimean soil.

"Today we celebrate the day of Christianization of Kyivan Rus-Ukraine. This is the official and, above all, the historically correct name of the holiday, which underlines the inseparability of the two states. There are a thousand years and a sign between Kyivan Rus and Ukraine. There is a hyphen between them in the text. And it's not just a punctuation mark. This is a sign that Ukraine is the successor to one of the most powerful states of medieval Europe. (...) Kyivan Rus is the mother of our history. The twenty-four regions of Ukraine and the Crimean Peninsula are his fleshly daughters and are rightfully his heirs.

Cousins and very distant relatives must not try to appropriate his legacy or try to demonstrate their involvement in a history of thousands of years and thousands of events, being thousands of kilometers away from the places where they took place."¹¹⁰

It should be noted that in the speech the Kyivan kingdom is defined as "Kyivan Rus-Ukraine" to underline the direct link with Ukraine and in the written version of the speech published by the Ukrainian government the name of Prince Vladimir has a Ukrainian diction becoming Volodymyr.

Examples of how, contrary to what was invented by the Enlightenment, there is no single history but different "histories" as many events, territories and peoples¹¹¹. And example of how unlike most European countries believing its end have abandoned the study of history, most of the "peoples obsessively chew and rehash their history and that of the others"¹¹².

History, therefore, is part of the strategic dimension of empires and nations. the reworking of the past allows to build the essence of the spirit of the people, –*Volksgeist*¹¹³ – driving force¹¹⁴ of every human action in according to Hegel.

¹⁰⁹ Volodymyr Zelenskyy, "Kyivan Rus'. 1033". Address by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on the occasion of the Day of Christianization of Kyivan Rus'-Ukraine, president.gov.ua, 28/7/2021.

¹¹⁰ Ibidem

¹¹¹ Dario Fabbri, "Le luci nelle case degli altri", *Domino* no.8 (2024), p.8.

¹¹² Ivi, p.7

¹¹³ Friedrich Hegel, *Lezioni sulla filosofia della storia* (Roma-Bari: Editori Laterza, 2003).

¹¹⁴ Federico Bertasi, "Forza del Déjà-vu", *Domino*, no. 8 (2024), p. 45.

CHAPTER II

The Russian invasion of Ukraine. An analysis embedded in the study of the cyclical history of expansion and contraction of the Russian empire

Premise

Russia, despite being one of the major powers on the contemporary international scene, presents peculiar strengths and weaknesses that make it completely unique in the context of global relations.

Its geographical boundlessness and abundance of natural resources are certainly great strengths, but they are counterbalanced by its weakness in the technology sector.¹¹⁵

However, the greatest contradiction occurs in the demographic sector. Although Russia has an aged demographic structure, typical of a Western society, an element that should lead the Russian community towards minimalism and post-historicism as happens in various European states, the Russian community, despite having a high average age, remains profoundly maximalist, imperial, not willing to trade the pursuit for glory with living on the economy.

If Russia were therefore to be considered a "European" power, it would remain the only historical and maximalist power on the continent, physically embodying at the same time the exception to the postulate which establishes how the aging of society extinguishes the will to pursue imperial desires in the collective unconscious. But Russian exceptionalism reaches a global dimension, since Russia is the power among the various imperial actors of our time with the highest average age with 44.6 years on average¹¹⁶, a figure that brings it close to the record of the oldest countries in the world, which also includes Italy. An element that certainly represents a great limit for Russia's ambitions for power, if one were also to take into account the overall number of inhabitants lower than that of the other major powers, but counterbalanced by the strong maximalist sentiment of its community which does not die out even with the progressive aging of its demographic structure.

¹¹⁵ Luca Diaconescu, Mirela Elena Mazilu, "Perfect Geopolitics and Strategies to Maintain Russia as a World Power," *Journal of Public Policy and Administration* 5, no. 2 (2021).

¹¹⁶ Dario Fabbri, "La Russia davanti," *Domino*, no.3 (2024).

A real strong point, because what really allows Russia to remain one of the main world powers is precisely the obsession of its people with maintaining its status as a power, a true remedy for demographic and economic limits.

The aim of this research is precisely to study and deepen the relationship between these two opposing components of its community: on the one hand its maximalist and ambitious character of glory and on the other an aged demographic structure with a much lower absolute population to other powers, which places a limit on such ambitions, studying the impact of this on the behavior of the Russian actor in the international scenario.

Finally, I will analyze the mutual relationship between the geopolitical and demographic components on the technological sector, capable in turn of influencing the other two components, since the development of the technological sector will adapt to the particular need to challenge US hegemony by having a demographic structure, not a superpower one.

Choices in the technology sector will also have a decisive role in Russia's survival as a great power.

The temporal reference of the analysis is that of the Russian invasion of Ukraine which took place in February 2022. An event chosen since, in addition to representing a historical episode of the utmost importance for the future of European and global balances, it appears to represent in summary the relationships of the specific components of the Russian community listed above (demographic, geopolitical, technological) that this research aims to study. In fact, this Moscow action appears to have been influenced by all the dynamics set out and at the same time appears to be in turn capable of influencing them, creating new relationships between them. Russia's new attitude on the international scenario will arise from this situation and will determine its future as a great power.

The direct Russian entry into the internal Ukrainian conflict in fact does not arise from a decision of a single leader, but from that collective maximalist and imperial Russian feeling that claims Ukraine as its own, since in the Russian collective unconscious there remains the historical legacy of its own empire and from this the vivid memory that all the decisive victories for survival occurred precisely in Ukraine and being still located in the boundless Sarmatian lowland and therefore tormented by the fear of encirclement, a

feeling that has returned to frighten the Russians with the expansion of NATO to the east, For the Russian community, control over Ukraine remains vital and this leads 75% of the population¹¹⁷ to approve the special operation led by Vladimir Putin.

However, this Russian desire to reconquer Ukraine clashed with Kiev's tenacious resistance and Moscow's plans immediately had to deal not only with the limitations of its own military mechanism¹¹⁸, with the limitations of its demographic structure and indeed the objective of the operation, faced with the initial failure, it has reconfigured itself from the total conquest of Ukraine to the conquest of a land bridge between Russia and Crimea¹¹⁹.

However, to achieve this goal, the Kremlin continues to plan an adequate deployment of troops in order not to suffer huge losses that could undermine the ability to have adequate human resources for the upcoming challenges of the future, in the fight to survive as a great power.

This is one of the reasons for the stalemate in the conflict, with Moscow having at its disposal the weapon of its demographic advantage over Kiev, which it could exploit to launch a massive offensive based on a broad mobilization, but which is not being carried out due to the fear of creating a further demographic problem "in the largest country in the world, populated by just 144 million souls and with open dossiers with the main powers of the globe."¹²⁰

However, if the Moscow army is winning tactical victories against its Ukrainian counterparts, on a general level, the special operation launched by the Kremlin is proving to be a strategic defeat¹²¹ because, in addition to expanding and uniting the European states against itself in the NATO coalition led by the United States, it is delivering Russia into the arms of China, which, in addition to benefiting from the current sale of natural resources, could ask for Russian land resources. Furthermore, Beijing, on the one hand, supports the war effort launched by Moscow, not out of friendship but to prolong Russian

¹¹⁷ Andrei Kolesnikov, "The Cold War Putin Wants. Why Russia Seeks to Change, Not End, the Conflict in Ukraine," *Foreign Affairs*, 23/01/2025.

¹¹⁸ Serdar S. Guner, "Geopolitics, Geography, and Ukraine-Russia War," *Transatlantic Policy Journal*, (2022).

¹¹⁹ George Friedman, "Perché strategicamente la Russia ha già perso la guerra," *Domino*, n.1 (2022).

¹²⁰ Dario Fabbri, "Quanto a mezzanotte?," *Domino*, n.2 (2022).

¹²¹ Dario Fabbri, *Sotto pelle del mondo* (Milano: Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore, 2024), p.68.

distraction, on the other hand, it threatens Russian influence in Central Asia and the Arctic¹²².

The management of the technological sector today more than ever is crucial to avoid becoming a Chinese satellite, a condition that is unacceptable for the Russian population that lives off power and nurtures a superiority towards its Eastern neighbors¹²³. Currently, the Russian community is rallying around its leader and supports the special operation because it shares the goal of pushing away American expansionism, reaffirming itself as a power in the eyes of the West. It is reassured by tactical successes on the field, but this consensus would collapse as soon as the population were to perceive Russia's decline into a Chinese satellite, considered an unacceptable condition to the Russian community.

For these reasons, the Russian invasion of Ukraine was chosen as a temporal reference, since it allows us to start from it to investigate the intertwining of Russian maximalist sentiment and demographic and technological limits, the impact of these relations on the fate of Russian power.

The first chapter of the research went beyond the above-mentioned components that the analysis wants to study, to understand the future of the subject of Russian, namely geopolitics, demography and technology. In fact, the first section of the work, using the help of history and collective psychology, has delved into the origins of the feelings of the Russian people, to trace the source of its maximalism, a characteristic maintained over the centuries and still a peculiar characteristic.

An analysis in search of the roots of maximalism that also led to understanding the genesis of the Russian empire and the relationship between Russians and Ukrainians and the origin of the contradictory Russian sentiment towards the European peoples. This research projected itself into the past to understand the present and future of the Russian actor.

Moreover, it has emerged that since the first proto-state experience of the Eastern Slavs, which united the ancestors of the Russians and the Ukrainians, these populations began to be respected in Europe as well as feared. This condition will be repeated over the centuries together with the interference of European powers in Russian internal affairs, in order to further weaken it in moments of weakness. this is a memory not removed by the

¹²² Lucio Caracciolo, "La guerra vista dalla pace," *Limes*, no. 7 (2024).

¹²³ Dario Fabbri, "Quanto è invisibile agli occhi," *Domino*, no.4 (2022).

Russians, who for this reason today show violence in the eyes of Westerners in order to be feared and therefore respected, and appear united to avoid interference for divisive purposes as happened in the past. An angry and united attitude moved by the fear of losing the status of a great power.

It has emerged that it was precisely in the first state experience of the Eastern Slavs, the Kievan Rus, that the foundations for the contradictory relationship between Russia and Europe were laid, since it was in this temporal phase that the conversion of the proto-Russians to Christianity took place, an element that still unites it with the Europeans, but the choice of subordination to the Church of Constantinople and not to Rome for geopolitical reasons, led it from the beginning to a peculiar identity.

A peculiarity that, as seen in the first part, increased with the insertion of the proto-Russians for the first time in an imperial architecture, led by the Mongols, from whom they inherited the concept of how a strong central power was necessary to hold together a vast territory.

It is precisely this Mongol invasion, which in addition to causing the end of the reign of Kievan Rus, left feelings in the Russian soul that are still present today: such as the fear of encirclement that still today leads to the desire to extend the first line of defense which is equivalent to the intention of controlling neighboring states such as Ukraine, the fear of invasion from the steppes that led over the centuries to expand to the Pacific Ocean becoming a geographical giant, the fear of repeating internal divisions that could favor the invader and finally the unity of the people around the religious institution of the Orthodox Church, which from that moment began to represent the symbol of the survival of Russian civilization, becoming over the centuries a political religion before a spiritual one of defense of its own civilization.

These feelings, therefore, are originated from fear, a fear that remains, still living today in the vast Sarmatian plain that inspires deep terror of invasion. The idea of being able to suffer a new invasion is still present in the Russian mind and that today is linked to the NATO enlargement, a hostile action planned by the United States according to the Russians¹²⁴, which still today leads this community to the desire to extend its borders for fear of disappearing. Ambition for control that increases for that area in which part of the

¹²⁴ Serdar S. Guner, "Geopolitics, Geography, and Ukraine-Russia War," *Transatlantic Policy Journal*, (2022).

founding myths of the empire took place and whose possession over the centuries has played a life-saving role, that is Ukraine, whose desire to prefer the Western field after centuries of Russian imperial violence resonates for Moscow as a betrayal, which amplifies anger and torment.

Finally, it emerged that from Mongol rule, the Eastern Slavic states took different paths, with some representing the core of the Ukrainian nation and others representing the core of the Russian Empire. The protagonist of this last path will be Moscow, which will first succeed in leading part of the Eastern Slavic states out of Mongol subjugation by extending its control over them and finally will become an imperial midpoint in an unwitting manner with the conquest of territories outside the historical space of the Eastern Slavs, inhabited by Turkish populations of Muslim faith, an action driven by the fear of new invasions from the steppes. And it is in this phase of struggle for liberation from the Mongols that the Russians' identity is strengthened, who, by defeating the Mongols, feel an identity distance from both Europe and Asia. But it is precisely at this moment that contradictory feelings with the populations of the old continent are strengthened, since if the Russians feel a distance from them at the same time Tsar Ivan III claims the title of "Third Rome", and the Russians themselves, as soon as they defeat the Mongols, declare that they have saved Europe itself from the Asian threat.

Feelings still present in the Russian collective psyche, which continue to mark a contradictory relationship with the European populations, also confirmed by the choices on the field, with the invasion of Ukraine launched to militarily demonstrate opposition to the Western order built in Eastern Europe, while at the same time claiming the centuries-old title of Third Rome and therefore of true guardian of the European values lost by the old continent.

Feelings of a complicated community, the true driving force of a Eurasian empire, halfway between Europe and Asia, which, despite its economic and demographic limitations, does not lose its will to live off glory and feed off power.

The aging of the population and the contraction of the population are new phenomena about which we still know little and we know even less about the impact of these on the maximalist ambitions of imperial powers. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and the previous Russo-Georgian war in 2008, have invalidated the theory formulated by American academics at the beginning of the third millennium according to which the

demographic decline would have led Russia to configure itself as a peaceful power¹²⁵. Such research on Russia, a subject in which the feeling of its population yearning for glory and power is in contradiction with the limits given by the demographic structure, could be useful since in the future such new demographic phenomena will characterize more and more powers, which will have to combine such internal scenarios with power objectives.

2.1 Russian-Ukrainian War in the international context: how the conflict can change the global order

We live in a phase of contrasting hegemony¹²⁶. The global hegemony of the United States of America, physically expressed through the control of the seas - an element which in turn generates current globalization and the global network connection based on submarine cables (internet) - is challenged by several actors.

Several empires challenge American dominance, without fear of retaliation from Washington. Russia invades Ukraine to reassert its control in the post-Soviet space¹²⁷ challenging the American containment, built in Europe to distance Moscow.

Iran relies on its local proxies Hamas, Hezbollah, Houthis and Syrian-Iraqi militias to challenge Israel's dominance in the Middle East and challenge the regional order built by Washington and entrusted to Israel through the Abraham Accords.¹²⁸

Finally, China has the ambition to bring back under its control the island of Taiwan, located in its geographical space, but which has become the fulcrum of US maritime containment¹²⁹ to the detriment of Beijing, which literally prevents China from leaving home. Chinese ambition is not to be found in the presence of semiconductor factories on the island but in its strategic role, the control of which would allow it to break the US containment, plotted against it and therefore pass from a land power to a maritime one,

¹²⁵ Jennifer D. Sciubba, *8 billion and counting. How sex, death and migration shape our world*. (New York: W. W. Norton e Company, 2022)

¹²⁶ Dario Fabbri, *Sotto la pelle del mondo* (Milano: Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore, 2024), p. 16.

¹²⁷ Russia Attacks Ukraine. Putin's Forces Attack Ukraine. *New York Times* 23/02/2022
<https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/24/world/russia-ukraine-putin>

¹²⁸ Dario Fabbri, "L'anno della marmotta, *Domino*, no.10 (2024).

¹²⁹ John J. Mearsheimer, "Taiwan's Dire Straits," *The National Interest*, no. 130 (2014).

challenging the hitherto undisputed US maritime hegemony.¹³⁰ In past eras, as a rule, the greatest activity of rival actors in challenging the leadership of the hegemon occurred at the moment of physiological decline of the latter. Instead today, a greater challenge from the antagonists does not correspond to the decline of the US hegemon and this represents the peculiar characteristic of the current situation¹³¹.

Indeed, the United States continues to be the leading power, enjoying a state of form far superior to its rivals. Washington presides over the control of the oceans on a global scale and remains unrivaled in terms of military and technological strength, continuing to possess good demographic data and maintaining a firm grip on Europe. Yet what leads the various rival powers to challenge American hegemony without fearing its retaliation can be traced back to the perception¹³², an element that continues to play a major role in the actions of states, since they are composed only of human beings. Americans, despite being inhabitants of the first power, feel depressed. A third of its population has been clinically diagnosed with depression¹³³. There is a lack of happiness and euphoria in society. These feelings are confirmed by the data of the high suicide rate¹³⁴ and the use of Fentanyl, a synthetic opioid that is very widespread especially among the young. Only in 2023, it was revealed that this substance caused one hundred thousand victims¹³⁵. It is no coincidence that the aforementioned opioid is produced in China and imported from Mexico where it is assembled. A geopolitical weapon in the hybrid war between the US and China, where China, if it cannot bridge the military and technological gap with the hegemon, in the challenge with it, resorts to lower-cost but potentially very harmful weapons, such as Fentanyl or Tik Tok. This latest Chinese social network is very popular among Western teenagers, used by the Beijing government to indoctrinate young Americans into hedonistic and individual lifestyles that are therefore not suited to the pursuit of power and at the same time useful for increasing internal divisions in the

¹³⁰ Ibidem

¹³¹ George Friedman, "The Real Word Order", *Geopolitical Intelligence Report*.

¹³² Dario Fabbri, *Sotto la pelle del mondo* (Milano: Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore, 2024), p.16.

¹³³ Mary Kekatos, "Depression rates among US adults reach new high: Gallup", *ABC news*, 17/05/2023

¹³⁴ Suicide rate estimates, age-standardized Estimates by WHO region, World Health Organization, 2022

¹³⁵ US centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023

American society¹³⁶. Economic advantages of asymmetric war operations which have also been seized by the other actor eager to challenge US hegemony, Russia, which also having a smaller budget compared to the American superpower has increasingly resorted in recent decades to such information wars, such as the production of fake news in an attempt to divide the US-led Western bloc and its influence, as in the case of interference in the 2016 American elections to favor Donald Trump's victory or in the case of cooperation with China to convey anti-Western messages through social networks such as Tik-Tok which had a significant effect in the protests that led to the dismissal of pro-Western governments in many African countries with establishment of anti-Western and pro-Moscow governments¹³⁷.

This American depression is not a new phenomenon in history, but it turns out to be a specifically imperial syndrome, which appears to arise in the phase of maturity of a power, immediately after having experienced the peak of maximum greatness. Rome experienced this condition after defeating the Carthaginians (146 BC), an event that led it to govern the first globalization, based on the dominion of the Mediterranean, whose management burdens falling on it caused it for the first time a feeling of fatigue. But this feeling was not followed by the end of its empire, indeed Rome continued for centuries to be the undisputed hegemon in the area.

The same dynamic applies to the power at the helm of today's globalization, whose victory in the confrontation with the Russian (Soviet) empire at the twilight of the second millennium allowed it to gain access to the dominion of global control of the seas, and thus to become the first uncontested power. Having ascended to the summit alone, as happened to the Romans, even for the Americans, the frustration deriving from the task of single-handedly overhauling a world that had become populated by six billion at the dawn of the third millennium, a task to be carried out without any more Soviet help, did not take long to arrive. This frustration became evident a few years after the collapse of the Soviet empire, when the Americans, carried away by the enthusiasm generated by the victory of the Cold War and with the idea that the liberal-democratic system could be exported to all the nations of the world, launched themselves into wars in distant areas

¹³⁶ Giuseppe De Ruvo, *Da Hegel a Tik Tok. Metafisica e geopolitica del capitalismo digitale* (Monza B: Etabeta, 2022).

¹³⁷ Marta F. Ottaviani, *Brigate Russe. La Guerra occulta del Cremlino contro l'Occidente* (Milano: Bompiani, 2023).

such as Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003). The failure of these conflicts belied the idea in the minds of many Americans that the world was waiting for the USA, generating that frustration that over the years has led to the current depression and brought into crisis the imperial mission of American exceptionalism "of the city on the hill"¹³⁸, or the idea of a "necessary nation"¹³⁹ exporter of democracy and freedom across the planet, which over the centuries had served as a social glue, leading to the current division of American society between the post-historical coasts that can no longer bear the imperial burden and the "heartland"¹⁴⁰ fully in history that points the finger at the coasts and at the European allies for the failures in recent decades.

It is from such divisive feelings spread in American society that this perception arises among its antagonists of how the USA are weaker than in the past and therefore more challengeable. It is this perception that has led to the current scenario of contested hegemony, which most likely will not lead to the end of American hegemony, since the USA continue to be the first power still untouchable and with its antagonists possessing strategic problems and not able to form a pole, an alliance, that can seriously challenge the USA and its allies, but which will lead in the current phase to a challenge by rival actors to the order built by the hegemon.

It is therefore in this context of contested hegemony and the perception of greater weakness and distraction of the United States that we can trace the choice of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, with Moscow less fearful of a possible retaliation by Washington.

An event that was followed just over a year later, on October 7, 2023, by the terrible attack by Hamas against Israel, behind which also hides the long hand of Iran, with the aim of destroying the regional order entrusted by the USA to Israel through the Abraham Accords, also supported by some Arab countries such as the Emirati states and Saudi Arabia¹⁴¹.

¹³⁸ Oliver M. Lee, "The Geopolitics of America's Strategic Culture," *Comparative Strategy*, (2008)

¹³⁹ John J. Mearsheimer, Stephen M. Walt, "The Case for Offshore Balancing. A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy," *Foreign Affairs*, (2016).

¹⁴⁰ "Heartland" refers to the American Midwest.

¹⁴¹ Dario Fabbri, *Atlante Storico. Dal Novecento ai giorni nostri* (Milano: Gribaudo, 2024).

A conflict that, behind the polarizing and religious clash between Palestinians and Israelis, hides the great clash between Iran and Israel for the hegemony of the Middle East, with the former challenging the regional order designed by the US hegemon.

An event, therefore, that of October 7th that is related to the challenge launched by the Russians to the European order of the American superpower. A relationship not in the sense of Russian financing of Iran or its regional actors, but in the sense that both events find a root in the perception of lesser American deterrence and certainly the direct Russian challenge to the West, launched with the Ukrainian invasion has opened a dangerous example for Washington's rival actors.

There is a danger that the “third shot” could be represented by the Chinese invasion of Taiwan, potentially capable of detonating and uniting the pieces of the “third world war and pieces”¹⁴².

In fact, for the US the main hot front, beyond Ukraine and the Middle East, remains the Indo-Pacific, and China remains its main rival. The Russian danger fits into this dimension, that is, of strategic asymmetry for Washington, which sees Europe as the continent to continue to control in order to maintain its position as the first imperial power and the Indo-Pacific as the location of its main rival.

The biggest puzzle of the US apparatus in recent years has been to think about how to divide the two enemies, Russia and China, opening up to Russia to play it against China, the reverse of Kissinger's intuition¹⁴³, avoiding that this could at the same time represent a green light for Moscow to maintain relations with European countries that could undermine American control over the European continent¹⁴⁴. In trying to answer this enigma, the Washington apparatus found itself faced with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, preferring indirect support for Kiev rather than a direct entry into the conflict, both to avoid a Moscow response that could generate an all-out conflict and to avoid handing Moscow over completely into the arms of the “dragon”.

The relationship between the three powers USA-Russia-China is still being defined, since if the special operation with all its brutality had the objective of showing the Russian

¹⁴² “Papa Francesco: “Stiamo vivendo una terza guerra mondiale a pezzetti” *RaiNews.it* 18\12\2022 <https://www.rainews.it/articoli/2022/12/papa-francesco-guerra-in-ucraina-ci-sveglia-stiamo-vivendo-la-terza-guerra-mondiale-a-pezzetti-cf4efbdb-ca50-4245-a3de-ddd4bbdf262e.html>

¹⁴³ Giuseppe De Ruvo, *Storia e filosofia della geopolitica. Un'antologia*. (Roma: Carocci Editore, 2024).

¹⁴⁴ John J. Mearsheimer, Stephan M. Walt, “The Case for Offshore Balancing,” *Foreign Affairs*, (2016)

reaction to the expansion to the East of the US-led NATO coalition¹⁴⁵, perceived by Moscow as an attack on its security, the resulting Western compact support for Kiev has further brought Russia closer to anti-Western actors such as China or Iran and the military limitations shown by Moscow on the ground have revealed the limits of Russia as a superpower which risks downgrading Russia to a second-rate power, an inferior ally of China¹⁴⁶. This latter situation is unacceptable for the very men of the Russian state bureaucracy, planners of the competition with China for the leadership of the world against¹⁴⁷, but above all for the same population that would forcefully demand a change of leadership if it were to notice a simultaneous reduction in the rank of power and, moreover, a decline to a minority partner of an Asian power towards which the Russians have always nurtured contempt and racist superiority¹⁴⁸.

In 1905 the annihilation of the Russian fleet by the Japanese in the Korean Strait, the first defeat in the history of a European power against an Asian one¹⁴⁹, produced such a strong trauma in Russian society that it generated violent protests from the urban masses and mutinies in the army, all united by resentment towards the Tsarist imperial power, which was considered guilty for the defeat, which was double because it occurred at the hands of Easterners. Feeling of anger towards the central authority for the war disaster that led many workers in the country to spontaneously create self-governing bodies¹⁵⁰, the famous Soviets, which a few years later would absorb the now uncontrollable fury of the community towards the emperor, due to the new disastrous test of the Russian army in the First World War, the basis for the seizure of power by the communists.

The annihilation of the Russian navy by the Japanese, in addition to triggering that anger in all social strata of the Russian population that would lead the Bolsheviks to seize imperial power, awakened another nightmare that had remained latent in the Russian collective unconscious, that of a new threat from the East, a legacy of the great trauma of the invasion of the Mongol populations in the thirteenth century.

¹⁴⁵ Serdar S. Guner, "Geopolitics, Geography, and Ukraine-Russia War," *Transatlantic Policy Journal*, (2022).

¹⁴⁶ Ibidem

¹⁴⁷ Francesco Casarotto, "Pechino sogna il Sud del mondo," *Domino*, no.6 (2023).

¹⁴⁸ Dario Fabbri, *Sotto la pelle del mondo* (Milano: Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore, 2024), p.68.

¹⁴⁹ Carolina De Stefano, *Storia del potere in Russia. Dagli zar a Putin* (Brescia: Editrice Morcelliana, 2022), p.34

¹⁵⁰ Ivi p.44

A terror towards the Orientals that had never died out in the collective psyche and had always re-emerged in a messianic key that was all Russian. In the nineteenth century, Alexander Pushkin recalled how "Only Russia protected itself and the West from the Tatars, from the threat coming from the East"¹⁵¹ and in the same vein Vladimir Solov'ev prophesied the conquest of the planet by the Asian peoples with the annexed coming of the antichrist¹⁵². A terror towards the Asians that could not fail to re-emerge with the annihilation of the Russian navy by the Japanese and with the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks, the poet Alexander Block invited the Europeans "to embrace the Bolshevik revolution, otherwise Moscow would stop protecting them from the Orientals"¹⁵³.

This statement by the poet provides us, as usual, with a glimpse into the complicated and contradictory thought of the Russian community, where the fear towards the Orientals has always been accompanied by the typical Russian messianic view on the world of taking on the mission of individually fighting dark forces for the good of humanity, especially for Europeans, who have always been considered ungrateful for such an effort. A thought that once again brings back the contradictory feelings of Russians towards European communities, considered hostile and threatening to their security, but towards which they maintain, at the same time, a duty of protection.

A historical insight into the racist feeling of Russian superiority towards the Orientals, which still today also hides a great fear towards the latter and which signals how, in the event that the Russian community were to become aware of a decline in its power to a Chinese minority partner, this would cause a very strong earthquake in society with unpredictable consequences, since it would reawaken this terror towards the Orientals, latent in the Russian psyche since the devastation inflicted by the Mongols in the thirteenth century.

a scenario widely known by the high officials of the state and the Russian apparatus, who for these reasons, try to underline the tactical successes obtained by the army on the battlefields, to prevent the population from becoming fully aware of the strategic dangers for survival as a great power, which they are facing since the beginning of the Ukrainian invasion. This attempt cannot last forever and will be increasingly difficult if the negative

¹⁵¹ Alexander Puskin, *Klevetnikam Rossii*, Edizione A. Saakiant, I, 317, (1962)

¹⁵² Dario Fabbri, *Sotto la pelle del mondo* (Milano: Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore, 2024), p.68

¹⁵³ Ibidem

consequences were to increase and, for these reasons, there is no shortage of signs of openness of the Russian apparatus to the American ones to be used as escape routes in the face of the difficult scenario, as in the case of the interview of Vladimir Putin, granted to the American journalist Tucker Carlson¹⁵⁴, where the president of the federation draws the attention of Westerners to the danger represented by China and not by Russia¹⁵⁵, or the signals of openness launched, always by the Kremlin leader from the annual conference of the Valdai club a few days before the US elections towards the re-elected US president Donald Trump, affirming Russia's willingness to dialogue¹⁵⁶.

However, the fate of relations between Moscow and Washington, and of these with Beijing, will depend first of all on the decision of the first American power whether or not to open up to Russia and, this will be linked to the fate of the competition between the USA and China in the Indo-Pacific. In the event of growing tension between the two and a simultaneous Russian difficulty, Washington could open up to Russia to use it in an anti-Chinese key. The US opening to Russia in an anti-Chinese function would also respond to the American strategic dictate of dividing its enemies, to prevent them from forming a common Eurasian front aimed at undermining its superiority¹⁵⁷.

A Russian-American rapprochement, therefore, which up to now would seem beneficial for both parties and therefore obvious in its realization, but in practice, it continues to remain distant because the American problem always returns, represented by the strategic asymmetry and that is to continue to have in Europe the key continent to maintain hegemony. The American control over the old continent could be undermined in the event of an opening to Russia¹⁵⁸. Furthermore, the removal of the possibility of a Russian-American negotiation is due to the continuation of the conflict in Ukraine. A war, beyond the rhetoric, not resolvable by a single leader stationed in the White House, as it is a centuries-old clash between two communities, one yearning for empire and the other for existence as an independent subject. In a compromise session, the Russian leader would ask the American counterpart for the immediate withdrawal of foreign soldiers from

¹⁵⁴ Prima intervista rilasciata dal presidente della federazione Russa ad un giornalista occidentale dall'inizio del conflitto in Ucraina.

¹⁵⁵ "Interview to Tucker Carlson," President of Russia, en.kremlin.ru, 9/02/2024.

¹⁵⁶ Vladimir Soldatkin, Guy Faulconbridge, "Putin praises Trump, says Russia is ready for dialogue," *Reuters*, 8\11\24.

¹⁵⁷ John J. Mearsheimer, Stephen M. Walt, "The Case for Offshore Balancing. A Superior U.S Grand Strategy", *Foreign Affairs* (2016).

¹⁵⁸ Dario Fabbri, *Sotto la pelle del mondo*, (Milano: Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore, 2024), p.70.

Ukraine, the neutrality of Kiev, the annexation of the conquered territories¹⁵⁹, too much for the US hegemon which has built twelve CIA bases on Ukrainian territory since 2014¹⁶⁰ and that cannot allow sudden changes in spatial redefinitions in order not to lose control over Europe.

Furthermore, the difficulty of a negotiation or a truce between Moscow and Washington is amplified by the fact that the military clash underway on the ground represents one of the many dimensions of the clash between the West and Russia, where the competition embraces many other areas, such as the political, religious, technological and energy ones, with Ukraine representing only the visible epicenter of the rupture¹⁶¹. A war that the more it goes on, the more it accelerates the distance between the American-led Western zone and Moscow, both in the visible and less visible dimensions. The evolution of these relations between powers, therefore, will also depend on the outcome of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and the development of other ongoing conflicts and on the positions that the apparatuses, and above all the populations, of the various powers will take in relation to these. Regardless of how the conflict ends, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has already had an impact on a global scale, since it represented a direct challenge to the US international order and, in fact, this event was followed by challenges from other actors such as Iran to this American order. Furthermore, the relevance of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is such that the fate of Russia as a great power will depend on it, and on it, the future balance of power between the great powers. If, for the moment, the Russian advance into Ukrainian territory has failed to meet the Kremlin's initial intentions, to achieve through this action multiple objectives such as a profound enlargement of its empire, the division of the European front and positioning itself as the vanguard of the "other world" to the challenge of American hegemony¹⁶², causing instead a compact strengthening of the European continent around the Atlantic alliance and a slide towards the position of minority partner of the Chinese empire, with the associated difficulty of placing itself at the head of a global front of states adverse to the Western one, however, the strength of the Kremlin

¹⁵⁹ Ibidem

¹⁶⁰ Adam Entous, M. Schwartz, "The Spy War: how the C.I.A secretly helps Ukraine fight Putin," *The New York Times*, 25/02/2024.

¹⁶¹ Carlo Galli "Il punto incandescente della seconda Guerra fredda: la scala dello sconvolgimento," *Le Grand continent*, (2023).

¹⁶² Pietro Figuera, "La controffensiva globale di Mosca," *Domino*, no.6 (2023)

has been that of adapting promptly both on the battlefield and on the rhetorical level, to the difficulties encountered and the limits of its power that have emerged. In fact, in the document on foreign policy, published by Russian diplomacy a year after the beginning of the conflict, a clear reference to an updated concept of multilateralism emerged. Reference to this concept, which in itself places Moscow in the field opposed to the Western one, since the multipolar scenario is mentioned by powers with revisionist wills of the order established by the hegemon¹⁶³.

But the novelty is given by the fact that this reference does not hide an ambition to lead the "world against", but rather, a real and pragmatic vision emerges of a power that has understood its own reduction, due to the fact of not having won in Ukraine and presents itself as equal and not superior to the others not placed in the Western field¹⁶⁴. However, knowing the particularity of the Russian subject, it is not excluded that messianic universalistic visions may re-emerge to stand as the leader of the global south against the front, led by the United States, one of the many objectives of the invasion launched in Ukrainian territory. But the opposite cannot be excluded either, that is, a Russian choice to mediate with the West and insert itself into the anti-Chinese containment. If the rivalry between the United States and China were to increase, in relation to a possible Chinese strengthening, Russia will be called to take sides, so as not to be crushed by the two and a decisive role in the positioning of the country will be played by the decision of the community itself, which will choose whether to stand with a threatening West, towards which at the same time it also addresses a centuries-old duty of protection, or with the feared Asians, but would categorically refuse to play the role of minority partner of these. Or, in line with its exceptionalism, it will choose to continue to remain hostile to both. The sense of danger will be decisive.

In any case, in future Russian history books, the special operation will be remembered as the glorious event that relaunched Russia in its imperial dimension, or the disastrous event that represented the beginning of its decline as a power.

¹⁶³ Ibidem

¹⁶⁴ "The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation," *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, mid.ru, 31\03\23.

2.2 One State, One Continent. The Russian Geographic Giant

2.2.1 *An unprecedented geographical expansion generated by the fear of new invasions*

The fact that it is the largest state in the world¹⁶⁵ is certainly one of the major strengths of the Russian superpower. An unparalleled geographical size that leads Russia to be described as a continent rather than a simple state.

Despite being firmly in first place in the ranking of the largest states in the world with an extension of 17 million square kilometers¹⁶⁶, however, since the renunciation of communist ideology, Moscow has experienced a notable geographical reduction. A reduction that is added to the same ones that have also occurred under the demographic and economic profile and which, together, have generated a decrease in Russian power on the international scene since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Although this phenomenon seemed to have stopped in the first decade of the third millennium with the rise to power of Vladimir Putin, and indeed seemed to be on the verge of being reversed starting from the operation that led to the annexation of Crimea in 2014, in line with economic and demographic improvements and therefore of power¹⁶⁷, there still remains today the potential risk for Russia to suffer further reductions from a geographical point of view.

Moscow has, within its borders, regions with independence tendencies, whose ambitions can potentially be appropriately fueled by powers such as China and Turkey, interested in increasing their influence in Russian territories in the Caucasus and Central and Eastern Asia¹⁶⁸. Secessionist pressures in some regions within the Muscovite empire that may increase with the prolongation of the war in Ukraine, as has already happened in some areas, such as Dagestan in the Caucasus, where anger over the internal economic situation has been linked to greater dissatisfaction, given the greater demand for men by Moscow

¹⁶⁵ Timothy J. Colton, *Russia. What everyone needs to know.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹⁶⁶ Ibidem

¹⁶⁷ Raffaele Marchetti, Silvia Menegazzi, *Manuale di Relazioni Internazionali. Teorie per capire la politica globale.* (Roma: Luiss University Press, 2022).

¹⁶⁸ Luca Diaconescu, Mirela Elena Mazilu, "Perfect Geopolitics and Strategies to Maintain Russia as a World Power," *Journal of Public Policy and Administration*. Vol.5 no.2 (2021).

as a result of greater difficulties encountered by the army on the battlefield. A combination that has produced tensions and violent protests against the "special operation" launched by the Kremlin, also characterized by independence demands¹⁶⁹. The same dynamics occurred in other peripheral regions of the Muscovite empire in Central Asia with high levels of poverty and high rates of sending men to the ranks of the imperial army, such as in the region of Bashkiria in the Urals.¹⁷⁰ Protests by the local population that remain absent at the moment, but which risk being triggered by external actors who have interests in them, leveraging the high number of soldiers sent as in Tatarstan, inhabited by the population of Turkish origin, heirs of the golden horde on which Ankara intends to extend its influence¹⁷¹, or in Buryatia, inhabited by a population of Mongolian origin, on which Mongolia and China want to project their control¹⁷². A war in Ukraine, therefore, which has and will have a great impact on the stability of the Russian empire and, therefore, on the future geographical extension of Russia. A war that is also a direct consequence of the geographical reduction of the Russian actor since the Soviet collapse, which has determined the loss of the strategic Ukrainian territory and which Moscow is now determined to reconquer.

From the study of the origin of the Russian subject, carried out in the first chapter, it emerged how Moscow, leading the various Slavic principalities to definitive success against the Mongol Tatars, managed to establish itself as the reference city, from the point of view of temporal power in the northern area of what was the Kievan kingdom, being able to claim not only to have led the Russians towards complete liberation from Asian domination, but also to have concluded that process of saving the identity of Kievan Rus, begun with Nevsky's victories over the Europeans, thus also placing itself in continuity with the experience of the old Rus and the Novgorod Republic. Claims that increased the grip on the neighboring Slavic princedoms.

In addition to this political pre-eminence of Moscow in the northern area of what was once Kyivan Rus', there was also a spiritual one, which began with the transfer to Moscow in 1322 of the seat of the Orthodox Church, a religious institution that, already at the time

¹⁶⁹ Lorenzo Maria Ricci, "L'impero in guerra," *Domino* no.3 (2024).

¹⁷⁰ *ibidem*

¹⁷¹ Luca Diaconescu, Mirela Elena Mazilu, "Perfect Geopolitics and Strategies to Maintain Russia as a World power," *Journal of Public Policy and Administration*, Vol.5 no. 2 (2021).

¹⁷² *Ibidem*

of the move, had a strong identity character for the Eastern Slavs, having been the only entity to remain standing at the time of the destruction brought by the Mongol devastations and, for this reason, had become the symbol of the survival of the very identity of the old Rus'. The move to Moscow of the main institution of the Orthodox church gave a strong boost to the ambitions of the Muscovite kingdom to reunite under itself the area that was once Kievan Rus', both for its identity and religious aspect, giving a spiritual and messianic tone to Muscovite ambitions of conquest. A great collaboration between the state and ecclesiastical power was born right away, which certainly helped Moscow to have a greater hold on the neighboring princedoms, which was crucial in leading them to victory over the steppe populations, freeing the territory of the Eastern Slavs from them and managing to reunify under itself part of the territory that constituted the medieval kingdom of Rus. A victory, which in addition to freeing the Eastern Slavs from the Mongol yoke, strengthened the bond between State and Church. The symbol of this very close relationship had become the sovereign himself, proclaimed Tsar, after the reconquest of a significant part of the territory that constituted the Kievan kingdom, possessing a very strong centralized and autocratic power, inherited from the political management experimented under the Mongols, inheriting at the same time the model of the Byzantine emperor from the proclamation of Moscow as the "Third Rome" which conferred on him divine power and also over the Church¹⁷³. The sovereign embodied at the same time the role of spiritual and temporal guide, which together allowed the tsar to place himself as the protector of civilization. A dynamic that in Russia has never stopped and Russia still today claims the mission of protecting order from chaos through the theory of the double shield¹⁷⁴, that is, through the military and spiritual shield both placed in defense of civilization, symbolically embodied by the Tsar.

This increasingly close relationship between political and religious institutions, after the victory in the battle of the "Great Confrontation"¹⁷⁵ of 1480 greatly increased the role of Moscow, as a temporal and at the same time spiritual leader which, together, greatly

¹⁷³ Aldo Ferrari, *Russia. Storia di un impero euroasiatico* (Milano: Mondadori Libri, 2024), p.56

¹⁷⁴ Luca Gori, *La Russia Eterna. Origini e costruzione dell'ideologia post sovietica* (Roma: Luiss University Press, 2021), p. 108.

¹⁷⁵ Giorgio Cella, *Storia e geopolitica della crisi ucraina. Dalla Rus' di Kiev a oggi* (Roma: Carocci editore, 2022).

strengthened Moscow's hold on the Eastern Slavs, fueling the expansionist drive of the Muscovite kingdom that led it to become an empire.

Moscow, finding itself at the helm of an Eastern Slavic kingdom still located in the Sarmatian lowland, a flat territory exposed to external threats and, having in mind the vivid memory of the invasions suffered by the Swedes, Germans and above all the Mongols, took advantage of the great hold on its people to continue an expansion, aimed at increasing the defensive depth and moving away the first line of defense, so as to have large buffer areas, where to defeat possible invaders¹⁷⁶, since the two victories over the Mongols at Kulikovo and on the Ugra had been achieved in an area not far from Moscow, showing the need for larger buffer zones, to prevent foreign invasions from easily heading to the gates of the kingdom's capital. Moreover, having been under the Mongol architecture, now the Eastern Slavs were aware of the great extent of the Eurasian space¹⁷⁷ and now that they had the necessary strength, they were waiting for nothing else but to conquer it.

These conquests were not long in coming and the Russians, under the command of Tsar Ivan IV, managed to take possession of two kingdoms heirs of the Golden Horde, the khanates of Kazan (or of the Volga) and Astrakhan (or of the Caspian), respectively in 1552 and 1556.

These conquests, in addition to significantly increasing the size of the kingdom, thus allowing the defensive depth to be extended as per strategic dictates, represented the beginning of the imperial dimension of the Muscovite kingdom, having conquered territories outside the traditional space of the Eastern Slavs and now containing populations largely alien to the dominant Slavic-Orthodox canon. The importance of the conquests, amplified by the fact that they represented the reversal of the balance of power in the steppes: it was the Russians who now dominated the Eurasian space and subdued those Tatars who had subjugated the Russians after the collapse of Kievan Rus. Victories therefore that, in addition to marking the beginning of the empire, gave it a Eurasian dimension from the very beginning¹⁷⁸.

¹⁷⁶ Timothy J. Colton, *Russia. What Everyone needs to know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p.18.

¹⁷⁷ Aldo Ferrari, *Russia. Storia di un impero eurasiatico* (Milano: Mondadori Libri, 2024) p.53

¹⁷⁸ Nikolaj S Trubeckoj, *L'eredità di Gengis Khan. Il grande conquistatore e la civiltà delle steppe* (Milano: Società Editrice Barbarossa, 2005), p.50-51.

According to the Eurasianists, these conquests marked the fusion of the Russians with the steppe space and, therefore, with the legacy of the Mongol empire of Genghis Khan, whose legacy according to these intellectuals was not only welcomed positively, but transformed into a Russian religious key, further strengthening the Russian identity¹⁷⁹ and its power. In fact, according to these intellectuals, it was the fusion with the Eurasian space, obtained by these victories, that significantly increased the strength of the Russian empire, already strong in a solid relationship between temporal and spiritual power, contributing significantly to increasing its expansive impetus¹⁸⁰. In any case, these conquests allowed the Muscovite empire to begin that path of expansion, both towards the south and especially towards the east, which led Moscow to extend as far as the Pacific Ocean¹⁸¹ and become a geographical superpower.

In general, moreover, these conquests marked the beginning of a period of territorial expansion, both towards the West and the East, which would last for four centuries, ending with the renunciation of the communist doctrine at the twilight of the second millennium. It was precisely under the Soviet version of the Russian Empire, in the second half of the twentieth century, that the point of maximum territorial extension was reached, if one were to also take into account the states of the Eastern bloc under direct Russian command and the various states on every continent under Russian influence, presenting a dimension equal to 22.5 million¹⁸² square kilometers¹⁸³, benefiting also from the messianic ideological force of the communist doctrine, which was able to influence states even beyond its borders and on every continent.

A process of disruptive geographical growth, born from the desire to extend the first line of defense, given the great fear of experiencing new invasions being located on a plain. A fear that led Moscow to be a geographical superpower.

¹⁷⁹ Ibidem

¹⁸⁰ Alain De Benoist, Alexandr Dugin, *Eurasia. Vladimir Putin e la Grande Politica* (Napoli: Controcorrente edizioni, 2014) p.27

¹⁸¹ Aldo Ferrari, *Russia. Storia di un impero eurasiatico* (Milano: Mondadori Libri, 2024, p.90

¹⁸² Luca Diaconescu, Mirela Elena Mazilu, "Perfect Geopolitics and Strategies to Maintain Russia as a World Power," *Journal of Public Policy and Administration*, vol.5, no.2 (2021).

¹⁸³ Se si tiene conto solo dell'URSS la sua dimensione territoriale non rappresenta il massimo mai raggiunto nella storia russa che spetta all'impero zarista con 23,7 milioni.

2.2.2 Geographical Scaling after the End of the USSR

The Russians of the Muscovite kingdom, having become an autonomous power after freeing themselves from the Mongol rule, driven by the fear of suffering new invasions, began that policy of territorial expansion that would lead them first to expand to the east, to avoid new Asian invasions, thus becoming a Eurasian empire merging with the steppes. From this important conquest, they continued the process of territorial extension both towards the far east, but also towards the south and west, which after four centuries allowed Moscow to reach the point of maximum geographical extension during the Soviet version of the Russian empire, also taking into account the buffer states in Eastern Europe, formally independent but in fact, under Russian control and the states in the various continents under Russian influence. The expansion process was interrupted with the renunciation of communist ideology, which was also accompanied by a notable geographical reduction.

With the conclusion of the Second World War, the Russian Empire under the guise of the Soviets, presented itself as a great superpower, the only one that realistically possessed the means to seriously challenge US hegemony and in fact, although at the end of the second millennium, the Americans prevailed, from 1946 began that competition between Moscow and Washington, remembered as the "Cold War"¹⁸⁴, which, if it did not lead to a direct clash, however, given its great intensity, managed to divide the world into two opposing blocs. Intensity fueled by the fact that the two superpowers, in addition to a great geographical and demographic strength, and therefore military¹⁸⁵ and economic, both possessed two "opposed progressive universalistic missions"¹⁸⁶ capitalism and communism, where each saw the other as the existential enemy¹⁸⁷ with such a force of attraction that it divided the globe into two opposing blocs, where the ideological and value-based clash was added to the geopolitical and military one, since the two blocs "touched" each other geographically in Europe.

¹⁸⁴ Alfonso Giordano, Limiti. Frontiere, confini e la lotta per il territorio. (Roma: Luiss University Press, 2018)

¹⁸⁵ Both the USA and the USSR were nuclear superpowers

¹⁸⁶ Carlo Galli, "Il punto incandescente della Seconda Guerra Fredda: la scala dello sconvolgimento," *Le Grand Continent* (2023).

¹⁸⁷ Ibidem

Although the US empire had the advantage of being a maritime power, which potentially allowed it to surround the land power of the Soviet Union¹⁸⁸, The Russian Empire with its communist ideology, however, presented factors that frightened Washington, amplified by the fact that Moscow presented itself as the power located in the Heartland and controlling a good part of the "island world"¹⁸⁹ from the Pacific Ocean to East Germany. This last factor has always fueled the fears of Anglo-Saxon geopolitical strategists, first English and then American, as witnessed by the writings of Halford Mackinder first, and Nicholas Spykman later.

Moscow, with an extension of 22.5 million kilometers, figured with a wide gap over the others as the first power in terms of geographical size¹⁹⁰. It turned out to be the second largest economy behind only the USA¹⁹¹ and with a population of 286.7 million inhabitants¹⁹², from the "last census in 1989"¹⁹³, it was ranked third in the world after China and India.

This last element, which allowed it to have "5 million men in uniform"¹⁹⁴, which, combined with the fact of being a nuclear power, made it a de facto military superpower. Stretching from the Baltic Sea to the Pacific Ocean and from the Arctic to the Black Sea and the Caspian, the main element of its greatness was certainly its enormous geographical extension which, if combined with a communist imperial mission with a universal character that allowed Moscow to hold together a boundless empire and at the same time extend its influence beyond its borders and theoretically in every state, made Russia a real superpower. Formally, the size of the Russian empire under Soviet guise, with an extension of 22.5 million square kilometers, did not represent the historical peak of territorial breadth, which was reached under the Tsarist empire, which in its phase of maximum size reached in 1866 an extension of 23.7 million square kilometers, stretching from the Baltic Sea to Alaska in North America.

However, the data regarding the surface area of the Soviet phase of the Russian Empire refers only to the extension of the Soviet Union, composed of the 15 Soviet Socialist

¹⁸⁸ Dario Fabbri, *Geopolitica Umana* (Milano: Gribaudo, 2023).

¹⁸⁹ Giuseppe De Ruvo, *Storia e filosofia della geopolitica* (Roma: Carocci editore, 2024), p.20

¹⁹⁰ Timothy J. Colton, "*Russia. What everyone needs to know*" (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹⁹¹ Ibidem

¹⁹² Ibidem

¹⁹³ Ivi p. 5

¹⁹⁴ Ibidem

Republics, created on the basis of ethnic groups formally under the control of Moscow¹⁹⁵, without taking into account the formally independent but de facto Russian-controlled states of Central and Eastern Europe and the states on various continents under the command of communist forces and therefore exposed to a strong Muscovite influence. With Moscow's choice to downsize its empire and therefore abandon communist ideology, which led to the collapse of the Soviet Union and to Moscow's direct administration only of the Russian territory, corresponding to the territory that until that moment had belonged to the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, the largest of the fifteen that made up the USSR, a decrease in territorial vastness was also accompanied by a demographic and economic decrease and therefore of the Russian power¹⁹⁶, also scaled down by the loss of an imperial ideology with universal value¹⁹⁷. Furthermore, the dissolution of the Soviet Union opened a season of territorial conflicts between the states that emerged from the collapse of the Soviet Union, since its complex organization meant that it was composed of state entities, created on an ethnic basis to encourage disputes between them, so that the imperial center of Moscow had the pretext to intervene more in local dynamics and apply greater control¹⁹⁸. Since these republics had become sovereign states with the collapse of the USSR, the rekindling of ethnic-territorial disputes between them, without Moscow having the necessary power to immediately interrupt the conflicts, meant that these disputes immediately resulted in war¹⁹⁹, as in the case of “Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, Abkhazia and later Georgia and finally Ukraine.”²⁰⁰ Conflicts which, however, immediately produced a Russian intervention, interested in maintaining leadership in the post-Soviet space, renamed by Moscow as its “near abroad”²⁰¹ and opening a season of Moscow involvement in local conflicts from 1991 up to today, with the direct Russian intervention in the ethnic-territorial dispute that divides Ukraine, a

¹⁹⁵ Carolina De Stefano, *Storia del potere in Russia. Dagli zar a Putin* (Brescia: Editrice Morcelliana, 2022) p.58.

¹⁹⁶ Raffaele Marchetti, Silvia Menegazzi, *Manuale di Relazioni Internazionali. Teorie per capire la politica globale* (Roma: Luiss University Press, 2022).

¹⁹⁷ Carlo Galli, “Il punto incandescente della seconda Guerra Fredda: la scala dello sconvolgimento,” *Le Grand Continent*, (2023).

¹⁹⁸ Errico De Gaetano, Andrea Lopreiato, *Il risveglio dell'orso russo. Le campagne militari della Federazione Russa dalla Georgia all'Ucraina* (Reggio Emilia: Diarkos editore, 2023), p.15.

¹⁹⁹ Ibidem

²⁰⁰ Ibidem

²⁰¹ Alfonso Giordano, *Limiti. Frontiere, confini e la lotta per il territorio* (Roma: Luiss University Press, 2018), p.160.

local dimension of the dispute that has gradually taken on ever greater connotations up to the current global one.

Although the choice of the Moscow apparatus to reduce its international standing with the dismantling of the Soviet empire has led to a territorial reduction, post-Soviet Russia continues to be a geographical superpower and with an extension of 17.2 million square kilometers, Moscow continues to be the largest state in the world, “occupying 11 percent of the earth's surface, 39 percent of the European one and 29 of the Asian one”²⁰², extending almost 10,000 kilometers from west to east from the exclave of Kaliningrad in the Baltic to Ratmanov Island²⁰³ on the border with Alaska and 4,500 kilometers from north to south, from the Franz Josef Land archipelago in the Arctic Ocean to the Caspian Sea²⁰⁴.

If, despite the imperial transition, Russia has maintained its leading position in terms of geographical size, the same has not happened in terms of demography and economy, since the collapse of the USSR, in addition to determining a geographical reduction, has also determined the beginning of a severe demographic and economic crisis. From a demographic point of view, the absolute decrease in population went from 286.7 million from the last census of the USSR in 1989 to 143 million in independent Russia in 1991²⁰⁵, was accompanied by a drastic drop in births and life expectancy, also due to the uncertainty immediately following the end of the Soviet empire²⁰⁶. This was combined with a strong economic crisis in the last years of the 1990s with the risk of default of the Russian state, also attributable to the uncertainty caused by the chaos that followed the end of the Soviet system. Elements that together significantly reduced the power²⁰⁷ of the post-Soviet Russian empire, also called into question by the enlargement of the Atlantic Alliance, which the countries of Central and Eastern Europe spontaneously joined at the beginning of the 2000s, countries that until a few decades earlier had been satellites of Moscow, which chose, by strategic dictate, the most distant ally, namely the USA, in an

²⁰² Timothy J. Colton, *Russia. What everyone needs to know about Russia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p.8.

²⁰³ Ibidem

²⁰⁴ Ibidem

²⁰⁵ Ibidem

²⁰⁶ Jennifer D. Sciubba, *8 Billion and counting. How sex, death, and migration shape our world* (New York: W. W. Norton e Company, 2022), p.85.

²⁰⁷ Raffaele Marchetti, Silvia Menegazzi, *Manuale di Relazioni Internazionali. Teorie per capire la politica globale* (Roma: Luiss University Press, 2022).

anti-Russian function. Element that testifies to how Russian control over its European satellites, unlike American management, was based on oppression and, at the same time, testifies to how the victory of the Americans in the Cold War with the systemic rival Soviet occurred first of all on values²⁰⁸. In fact, the "Western conquest of minds"²⁰⁹ in Central and Eastern Europe since the 1980s, combined with Moscow's economic difficulties in keeping these Eastern European countries within its sphere of influence, has led to the collapse of the socialist bloc established by Moscow in that area, which in turn has had a significant impact on the disintegration of the USSR²¹⁰.

Reasons that explain the current great anti-Russian sentiment in Eastern Europe with Poland and the Baltic states at the forefront.

However, under the administration of Vladimir Putin, who became president of the Russian Federation on December 31, 1999, since the beginning of the third millennium a greater state control over companies exporting raw materials has begun, which has brought greater revenue to the state coffers and which have favored an economic recovery, which has allowed to finance both the expenditure for the modernization of the military apparatus and to support demographic political measures²¹¹, aimed at favoring increases in births.

Even in this case, the correlation between the geographical, demographic and economic factors was repeated and, the improvement of the economy was accompanied by the demographic one which relaunched the Russian ambition to extend its territorial extension²¹² and to regain control of those territories that for centuries had served the Russian empire as a means of distancing the first line of defense from Moscow, but were lost with the collapse of the Soviet Union and which since the first decade of the 21st century were slipping towards the Western camp led by the United States, such as Georgia and Ukraine. For these reasons, since the first recovery of Moscow in its power factors, assertive actions against them have begun, for example the suspension of gas supplies²¹³

²⁰⁸ Emanuel Pietrobon, "Zbigniew Brzezinski, l'ultimo geopolitico," *Insideover*, 18/10/22.

²⁰⁹ Ibidem

²¹⁰ Ibidem

²¹¹ Alexander Etkind, *Russia against modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023), p.18.

²¹² Jennifer D. Sciubba, *How sex, death, and migration shape our world* (New York: W. W. Norton e Company, 2022).

²¹³ Leonardo Bellodi, *Gas e Potere. Geopolitica dell'energia dalla guerra fredda a oggi* (Roma: Luiss University Press, 2022).

up to a direct war to impose on these states that became independent since 1991, a return under the direct influence of the Kremlin.

Harsh actions, in line with the objective of the Russian political-military administrations, since the beginning of the third millennium, to return to being a great power, to return to being a "respected country"²¹⁴ as the President of the Federation Vladimir Putin has claimed since his inauguration.

The ambition to return to being a great power on the international scene had to start from the reacquisition of influence in the territory that once belonged to the Soviet Union, which would have allowed at the same time to increase the defensive depth and put an end to the expansionism of the US-led Atlantic Alliance towards its borders. Compared to the other nations born from the post-Soviet collapse, the most coveted by Moscow was certainly Ukraine, since it hosted an Eastern Orthodox Slavic community, its control would have relaunched the new Russian imperial mission of defending tradition and Orthodoxy and, at the same time, many geopolitical analysts, as in the case of Brzezinski, also ruled that without Kiev, "Russia would cease to be a Eurasian empire and would increase its center of gravity towards the East"²¹⁵.

Objectives of returning great power, and violent policies to achieve them, are and continue to be supported by the population, since, such intentions of the Moscow elite to increase the status quo of the country at an international level have awakened the feelings of a maximalist community, which lives on power, and feeds on the fear that it manages to instill in others, especially in Europeans, who as we have seen, since the first proto-state experience of Kievan Rus, this community is safe when it is respected by its neighbors, in its head a symptom of fear installed on others that makes it feel be great power. Angry in the will to demonstrate its strength, after the humiliation of the American interferences in the Russian scenario following the collapse of the USSR, the latter capable of increasing the resentment of the "bear".

Furthermore, Moscow's desire to extend the first line of defense and thus to regain direct influence on strategic states for Moscow such as Ukraine was, from the beginning, supported by its population, since the Russian community, when it began to perceive, in

²¹⁴ Errico De Gaetano, Andrea Lopreiato, *Il risveglio dell'orso russo. Le campagne militari della Federazione Russa dalla Georgia all'Ucraina* (Reggio Emilia: Diarkos editore, 2023).

²¹⁵ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard* (New York : Basic Books, 1997), p.46.

the first decade of the 21st century, that the possibilities of Georgian and Ukrainian entry into the Atlantic alliance were becoming more concrete, rediscovered that fear present in its unconscious of being surrounded²¹⁶. Legacy of the end of the reign of Kievan Rus, which occurred due to the destruction of the Mongols from the East, at a time of encirclement with simultaneous invasions of Germans and Swedes from the West. Because of this, in the Russian psyche the sense of encirclement is synonymous with imminent destruction, a sense of encirclement that the Russians relive with the American-led NATO, expanding from the West towards its borders and a simultaneous rise of Chinese power. The Russians feel crushed by both the West and the East and this in their soul is a symptom of something not positive, such as to justify a battle for the survival of their civilization.

In the case of Ukraine in particular, the ambition of its control is relaunched by the Russian community, both in relation to the fear of encirclement, but also due to a centuries-old Russian feeling of having a duty of protection towards the "younger Ukrainian brother"²¹⁷ whose choice to look elsewhere generates great anger in Muscovites, especially if they prefer the Americans, not only Westerners but also the great enemy when Russia was a Soviet superpower²¹⁸.

Russia's desire to reassert control over Ukraine has rekindled the historical confrontation with the US hegemon, since behind the Ukrainian question there is the issue of NATO enlargement, which for Washington is consistent with the victory of the Cold War that legitimizes the role of redesigning the European architecture without consulting Moscow, and for Russia it is a betrayal of the Americans' promise not to expand NATO after the reunification of Germany in Western terms.²¹⁹

With the Ukrainian invasion, the theme of an unfinished Cold War returns and this time with a hot front in Ukraine²²⁰ and where, unlike the first one which in its tension had

²¹⁶ Errico De Gaetano, Andrea Lopreiato, *il risveglio dell'orso russo. Le campagne militari della Federazione Russa dalla Georgia all'Ucraina* (Reggio Emilia: Diarkos editore, 2023), p.29.

²¹⁷ Carolina De Stefano, *Storia del potere in Russia. Dagli zar a Putin* (Brescia: Editrice Morcelliana, 2022).

²¹⁸ Dario Fabbri, *Sotto la pelle del mondo* (Milano: Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore, 2024).

²¹⁹ Marc Trachtenberg, "The United States and the NATO Non-extension Assurances of 1990: New Light on an Old Problem?" *International Security*, Vol.45, No.3 (2021), pp.162-203

²²⁰ Carlo Galli, "Il punto incandescente della seconda Guerra fredda: la scala dello sconvolgimento," *Le Grand Continent* (2023), p.9

generated a bipolar order²²¹, “now uncertainty dominates”²²², increased by a greater weakness of the powers challenging the US hegemon that increases its unpredictability. Even the American hegemon with respect to bipolar confrontation, if it remains untouchable from a technological-military point of view, from the point of view of soft power it has been weakened, since the wars launched in its unipolar moment at the conclusion of the success with the Soviet giant, have undermined its credibility in the world, which does not accept Americanization²²³, something that the Americans have understood and that today generates two different responses, cause of the social rift between the furious and still maximalist Midwest and the post-historical coasts, asking for forgiveness from the world and willing to renounce violence and therefore empire. Among Washington's challengers, Russia, despite the ambition of its ruling class to return to being a great power supported by a violent and maximalist population, is significantly undersized compared to the competition with Washington during the Cold War, especially from a demographic point of view, as it now has a demographic structure that cannot afford continuous and mass wars. Furthermore, unlike the twentieth century, Moscow no longer has a universal imperial mission, which was provided by communism, but presents a narrative to be adapted, depending on the location, to the limits or errors of America²²⁴. In the Russian case, its obstacles to being a superpower are compounded by the collective perception of its existence as being in danger, which increases its unpredictability and, above all, an irrationality in its responses.

2.3 Strategy and tactics of the Russian Empire

Talking about strategy for an empire, a nation, a people, means talking about the obligations to be met in order to survive. The strategy is unique and binding, it just needs to be recognized²²⁵. For a power, missing it means risking his own survival. The various options for fulfilling these vital tasks constitute tactics.

²²¹ Ivi p. 34

²²² Ibidem

²²³ Dario Fabbri, *Sotto la pelle del mondo* (Milano: Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore, 2024), p.23.

²²⁴ Carlo Galli, “Il punto incandescente della seconda Guerra fredda: la scala dello sconvolgimento,” *Le Grand Continent* (2023), p.41

²²⁵ Dario Fabbri, *Geopolitica Umana* (Milano: Gribaudo, 2023), p.142.

Even in the case of the Russian actor, the strategic obligations to which the Grand Duchy of Moscow was subjected, despite the passage of centuries, have remained the same as those to which the Russian Empire in its post-Soviet version is subjected today. What the various imperial versions assumed by Russia throughout its history have in common, from the Tsarist to the Soviet to the present-day Putinian, is that the dominant nucleus of the empire has always remained the same, that is, composed of ethnic Russians (*russskij*)²²⁶, and over the centuries they have maintained the imperial centre in the territory corresponding to the founding nucleus of the empire, that is, the Grand Principality of Moscow, always located in the Sarmatian lowlands, an element which from the beginning has exposed it to the danger of invasion given its poor defensibility²²⁷.

In fact, what still distinguishes the Russian Empire from other international actors is its poor defensibility²²⁸ of its imperial centre, since it is still located on a plain with no large orographic barriers or oceans or rivers that could represent natural borders to protect it from other powers, but on the contrary, it is surrounded by flat territories, to the west by the Northern European Plain and to the south and east by the steppes, which over the centuries have represented "highways"²²⁹ for the incursions of both European and Asian populations, intent on conquering Russian territories. The only defensive element available to its imperial nucleus has always been the presence of forests and the harsh inhospitable climate, saving elements since they have ultimately always allowed the survival of Russian civilization from invading peoples, but at the price of often reaching the point of end, and which explain the military tactic used several times over the centuries of letting oneself be invaded.

Given its characteristics, continuing to inhabit this territory still produces terror and insecurity in the Russian soul, which increases further when it becomes aware of the increase in the power of nearby powers, fear that translates into aggression²³⁰. Today it is anguish that is linked to the expansion of the Atlantic Alliance²³¹ towards its borders and that has already produced a violent Russian reaction with the invasion of Ukraine, aimed

²²⁶ Aldo Ferrari, *Russia. Storia di un impero eurasiatico* (Milano: Mondadori Libri, 2024), p.9

²²⁷ Ibidem

²²⁸ George Friedman, "The Geopolitics of Russia: Permanent Struggle," *Stratfor*, 15/10/2008.

²²⁹ Ibidem.

²³⁰ Ibidem.

²³¹ Alfonso Giordano, *Limiti. Frontiere, confini e la lotta per il territorio* (Roma: Luiss University Press, 2018), p.160.

at the reconquest of a territory that for centuries has played the vital role of stopping invasions that called into question the very existence of the empire and, at the same time, an action that turns out to be a means of vehemently showing Russian opposition not only to the security project designed by the US hegemon for Eastern Europe, but also to its conception of modernity²³². A brutal action that, however, hides a great existential fear of seeing one's own civilization disappear.

In fact, this violent action by Russia today is connected to the main strategic obligation that the Russian actor must pursue since its appearance in order to survive and not disappear, given the poor defensibility of its borders, that is to increase its defensive depth and therefore try to lengthen the first defensive line as much as possible²³³ reaching the point of controlling the plains from which invasions have come throughout history, up to the control of the mountain ranges and finally reaching access to the oceans. It was precisely this fear of suffering new invasions and therefore of disappearing²³⁴ that made Moscow begin the path that led it to become an empire, with the conquest of the kingdoms heirs of the Golden Horde located in the steppes along the Volga basin up to the Caspian Sea, in order to have protection along those flat steppes that facilitated the descent of Asian populations. As we have seen, it was the beginning of a process of territorial extension that would lead Moscow to become a geographical superpower encountering fewer obstacles in the expansion towards the Pacific and greater towards Europe, given the presence of more peoples and fewer geographical barriers²³⁵. Although Moscow has become a geographical superpower and has adopted multiple imperial missions throughout its history that have exalted a divine design behind its great expansion, as happens in all empires with an ex post definition of imperial mission, the process that led Moscow to be the largest state in the world began unknowingly, by defensive nature²³⁶ and therefore to survive, which over the centuries has led to moving away the first line of defence both towards Europe and Asia, so as to have areas as protective buffers along both the Northern European Plain and along the steppes. An expansion process that is still ongoing, since given the geographical connotation of the Russian imperial core, it is

²³² Alexander Etkind, *Russia Against Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023).

²³³ Dario Fabbri, *Geopolitica Umana* (Milano: Gribaudo, 2023), p.152

²³⁴ Ivi p.44

²³⁵ George Friedman, "The Geopolitics of Russia: Permanent Struggle," *Stratfor*, 15/10/2008

²³⁶ Aldo Ferrari, *Russia. Storia di un impero eurasiatico* (Milano: Mondadori Libri, 2024), p.9

exposed to constant "instability"²³⁷, especially towards Europe, where the geographical connotation prevents it from having defensive stability and this generates a constant instability, still present.

In fact, since the affirmation of the Muscovite Kingdom, it has sought, by strategic dictate, to extend its defensive depth first towards the steppes and then towards the European plain by creating buffer zones as defensive outposts. The conquest of the khanates, heirs of the Golden Horde, not only entailed the transition to an imperial form but for the first time Moscow had an area used as a "buffer"²³⁸. From that moment on, a dilemma of imperial management began for Moscow²³⁹, since it had to have territories to protect its imperial nucleus and at the same time ensure that these populations accepted the role of being subordinate to the protection of the Russian empire, a condition not always accepted. A problem that continues today and which appears to be at the basis of the Ukrainian question, where Moscow needs Kiev as a buffer area, to protect from possible Western invasions since it has defeated the invaders here several times over the centuries, but the Ukrainian population no longer accepts this role of subordination to the strategic needs of the Muscovite imperialism.

Having inherited from the Mongol Empire a management of power strongly centralized on the sovereign, power at the same time sacralised and universalized by the legacy of the "Third Rome" which, together, contributed to giving life to the peculiar Mongol-Byzantine autocracy embodied by the emperor²⁴⁰, the more the empire expanded and the more the terrors used as a buffer area increased and the more the control of this strong central power over the territories increased so that their populations maintained the role of defensive bulwark. The more the territorial extension increased and the more the control over the peripheral areas became more invasive and, at the same time, difficult given the great distances and this increased the terror perpetrated by the central power to keep the distant territories within itself. Up to the extreme case of the Russian Empire under Soviet guise, which represented the maximum geographical extension and which reached all strategic prospects extending from the Muscovite nucleus in the north to the Arctic and the Urals, towards the east it controlled the steppes and Siberia up to the Pacific

²³⁷ George Friedman, "The Geopolitics of Russia: Permanent Struggle," *Stratfor*, 15/10/2008, p.12.

²³⁸ Ivi p.4.

²³⁹ Ibidem

²⁴⁰ Aldo Ferrari, *Russia. Storia di un impero eurasiatico* (Milano: Mondadori libri, 2024), p.55.

Ocean, to the south the control of the plains up to the Tien Shan mountain range, up to the Caspian Sea and up to the Caucasus mountain range shielded it from the Chinese, Iranian and Turkish empires. While towards Europe it controlled the territories up to the Black Sea, going beyond the Baltic-Carpathian strategic defensive corridor and penetrating into the European plain extending up to the Elbe in the heart of Germany, managing to obtain excellent defensive stability also on the European front, where the threat of the Atlantic Alliance was shielded by a large defensive area.

However, the Russian empire with a communist mission did not reach the last and most important strategic dictate, that of access to the oceans via the Mediterranean or through the Baltic, which would have allowed to ease the great difficulty of the centralized economic and military control, perpetrated by the imperial centre exasperated by the huge territorial extension²⁴¹. Geographic advantage that without the maritime dimension proved to be a limitation, until the decision at the end of the twentieth century of the imperial centre to undertake a geographical resizing of the empire "abandoning the peripheral provinces"²⁴² and thus renouncing the imperial mission of communism with the collapse of the USSR in 1991²⁴³.

A decision that consequently entailed the loss of buffers along the European plain, in the Caucasus and in Central Asia. Losses that reawakened the instability of the borders of the post-Soviet Russian empire, especially in the western border, given the loss of the large defensive area that extended from East Germany to the Baltic and the simultaneous choice of those countries, which until a decade earlier had been its buffers in Central and Eastern Europe, to join the US-led Western camp since the early 2000s. Elements that reawakened at the beginning of the third millennium the great Russian fear of suffering new invasions²⁴⁴, being now more vulnerable, given the lesser control of territories that could act as a buffer along the European Plain and with an antagonistic power growing towards its borders. Always in the same time period, in the first decade of the third millennium, Russian fear increased with the greater openings of Ukraine and Georgia towards a

²⁴¹ George Friedman, "The Geopolitics of Russia: Permanent Struggle," *Stratfor*, 15/10/2008, p.10

²⁴² Dario Fabbri, *Sotto la pelle del mondo* (Milano: Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore, 2024), p.58.

²⁴³ Ibidem

²⁴⁴ Serdar S. Guner, "Geopolitics, Geography and Ukraine Russia War," *Transatlantic Policy Journal* (2022).

possible entry into the Atlantic alliance led by the United States²⁴⁵. Fear that reawakened that terror of suffering a new encirclement ²⁴⁶ with Kiev and Tbilisi also inside the Western alliance, which in the Muscovite mind was synonymous with extinction, since the last encirclement had caused the collapse of the civilization of Kievan Rus. In the Russian project, at the end of the second millennium to reduce the size of the empire with the renunciation of the communist doctrine, there was no idea of losing influence on the socialist republics that constituted the first ring of protection such as the Baltic states, Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia and Kazakhstan. If the objective of regaining influence over the Baltic states was removed immediately due to their desire, from the beginning of their independence, not to return under the Moscow orbit, for the other states that formed the first ring of protection, Moscow has sought the strategic objective of not losing influence over them since the collapse of the USSR.

However, in the case of Ukraine and Georgia, Moscow's plan met with great opposition to return under Russian influence after having achieved the long-awaited conquest of independence²⁴⁷, a feeling in line with the other countries that emerged from the socialist bloc, especially those of Central-Eastern Europe.

But in the case of Georgia and Ukraine, the risk that they might slide towards an alliance with the US could not be accepted, neither by the Moscow establishment for strategic reasons, nor by the Russian population who perceived, and perceives, an existential threat with the arrival of a potential rival on their doorstep.

For this reason, in 2008 Moscow waged a direct war on Georgian soil to prevent it from ending up in the Western camp²⁴⁸. The same reason that led Moscow to intervene directly in Ukraine since 2014, with the clash that here has become more violent given Moscow's greater desire to regain control of Kiev, given its strategic and symbolic significance and the greater Ukrainian opposition to a return to Moscow's imperial control. A clash that, given the harsh opposition between the two groups, continues to this day and, given Moscow's strategic obligation to reconquer all of Ukraine and indeed to start from it to

²⁴⁵ Errico De Gaetano, Andrea Lopreiato, *Il risveglio dell'orso russo. Le campagne militari della Federazione Russa dalla Georgia all'Ucraina* (Reggio Emilia: Diarkos editore, 2023)

²⁴⁶ Ibidem

²⁴⁷ Alfonso Giordano, *Limiti. Frontiere, confini e la lotta per il territorio* (Roma: Luiss University Press, 2018), p.161.

²⁴⁸ Errico De Gaetano, Andrea Lopreiato, *Il risveglio dell'orso russo. Le campagne militari dalla Federazione Russa dalla Georgia all'Ucraina* (Reggio Emilia: Diarkos editore, 2023), p.37.

regain a greater defensive area along the European Plain, does not seem destined to end in the short term. Even taking into account Russia's demographic and military limitations, even if Moscow were to regain full control of Ukraine, it would not stop its ambitions there²⁴⁹ and at the same time faced with the scenario of loss of its sovereignty, a significant part of the Ukrainian population, especially those living in the western area, would vehemently and with all their strength oppose a return to direct Russian influence. The Ukrainian question is therefore linked to the strategic problem of Russian imperial management of having to have buffer areas to protect its borders but, at the same time, of having to keep the populations of these territories subordinate to the primary interest of the imperial centre²⁵⁰. This latter exercise has become difficult after the collapse of the USSR, especially in Eastern Europe as demonstrated by the tough Ukrainian opposition. These are the reasons that make the Ukrainian conflict decisive for Moscow's pursuit of its primary strategic obligations to regain a sphere of influence on the European border and that, at the same time, show the reason for the ongoing harshness and the difficulty of reaching a compromise, given the struggle of both for survival, the Russians to survive in the imperial dimension and the Ukrainians to survive as a nation²⁵¹. What is certain is that a factor of uncertainty has re-emerged in an area between the Eurasian landmass and the Old Continent²⁵², over the centuries always a prelude to something not positive. For the moment, Ukraine remains the epicentre of a hot war that hides behind it a greater and multidimensional clash between Russia and the West led by the United States.

2.4 Strategy and Tactics of the Tsarist Empire

From the fall of the medieval Christian kingdom of Kievan Rus, in what was its northern area, the Muscovite Principality emerged as a leading player in the fourteenth century. The kingdom inherited from the beginning of its rise a temporal power of Rurikid origin, its first prince being Danil, son of Prince Nevsky of Novgorod, and a leading role in spiritual power with the transfer to itself of the central institutions of the Orthodox

²⁴⁹ George Friedman, The Geopolitics of Russia: Permanent Struggle, *Stratfor*, 15/10/2008, p.12.

²⁵⁰ Ivi p.4.

²⁵¹ Lucio Caracciolo, "La guerra vista dalla pace," *Limes*, no.7 (2024), p.10.

²⁵² Ivi p.29.

Christian Church. Elements that allowed this kingdom to place itself in continuity both with the experience of the old Rus and with the process of saving its identity that began with the protagonism of the Novgorod Republic and at the same time managed to benefit from the very beginning from a very close relationship between temporal and spiritual power, where both institutions for the Eastern Slavs already before the affirmation in the Muscovite centre possessed a strong symbolic identity value. During the destruction brought by the Mongols, the populations of the various principalities that constituted the kingdom of Kievan Rus rallied around the institution of the Orthodox Church, seeing in it the only lifeline for their salvation. Since the Church, unlike the political leaders, managed to survive the devastation of the steppe peoples, who after the conquest imposed an indirect dominion and therefore did not eliminate the religious confessions, this meant that at the end of this period of conquest suffered, the Orthodox Church had become an identity symbol of survival of the civilization of the Eastern Slavs for all the populations of the principalities, heirs of the Kingdom of Rus, which with its fall had taken different destinies including the Principality of Muscovite.

Even from a temporal point of view, being its first prince of the Rurikid dynasty and son of Prince Nevsky of Novgorod, this element meant that in addition to maintaining a direct link with Kievan Rus, it allowed Moscow to place itself in continuity from the beginning with the figure of Nevsky, which also had a strong identity closely linked to the idea of survival in the northern principalities heirs of Rus', since under his leadership these northern principalities managed to defeat the Swedes and the Germans, thus saving the very identity of Rus and therefore strengthening a sense of common belonging to the same civilization and therefore of collective identity. For these reasons, the arrival in the Muscovite centre of such institutions with a strong symbolic identity and the beginning of a strong synergy between them from the very first moment, gave a great strength from a symbolic point of view that helped the Muscovite Kingdom to begin a process of expansion and therefore of conquest of the neighbouring Slavic-Christian principalities, heirs of Rus'. Since the state cell of the Muscovite Principality was also located in the Sarmatian lowlands, and therefore from the beginning characterized by the porosity of its borders and therefore by a difficult defensibility, in order to survive it had to expand and such expansion could not but begin towards the neighbouring principalities. Principalities with which it shared a common past and therefore the objectives of conquest towards

them could be justified by Moscow through propaganda both from the temporal point of view, exploiting the hereditary link with Novgorod that allowed it to stand as the continuator of the saving mission of the identity of Rus' begun by the northern principalities and updated with the Muscovite mission to lead the liberation from Mongol control, and both from the spiritual point of view thanks to the arrival of the headquarters of the Orthodox Church near it, which with a strong symbolic-identity significance of salvation also from the spiritual point of view gave a tone of divine investiture to Muscovite territorial ambitions. This close relationship between spiritual and temporal power, both endowed with a strong symbolic-identitary value, gave a strong impulse to Moscow's hold on the neighbouring principalities, whose control was considerably strengthened by the definitive victory of the Eastern Slavs led by Moscow in 1480 over the Mongols, which put an end to every bond of subordination and which allowed the Muscovite centre to focus on the mission of having freed the Eastern Slavs from the Mongol yoke, thus significantly increasing its leading role in the area. The Muscovite sovereign had inherited from the beginning a Slavic-Viking model of political leadership to which had been added the autocratic characteristic inherited from the Mongols and, the fact of having accomplished the mission of liberating the eastern Slavs from the Mongol yoke with the annexed extension of control over the neighbouring principalities, the most important of which were conquered militarily such as Novgorod in 1478, with the consequent unification under his own control of a good part of the territory that constituted Rus', had led the sovereign to call himself "Tsar (emperor) of all the Russias"²⁵³. Added to this was the claim, again in the 15th century, of the title of Third Rome after the fall of Constantinople, as a mission to try to extend control over the territories of Eastern Europe that remained without the guidance of the Eastern Roman Empire²⁵⁴, seeking through such propaganda to increase the strategic depth towards Europe. The claim to be "Third Rome", which in addition to increasing its prestige, was based on the marriage of the Muscovite ruler Ivan III with Sophia Paleologus in 1472²⁵⁵, granddaughter of the last emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire, a fact that allowed the

²⁵³ Carolina De Stefano, *Storia del potere in Russia. Dagli zar a Putin* (Brescia: Editrice Morcelliana, 2022), p.13.

²⁵⁴ Aldo Ferrari, *Russia. Storia di un impero eurasiatico* (Milano: Mondadori Libri, 2024), p.56

²⁵⁵ Fabrizio Bertot, Antonio Parisi, *Ucraina. La guerra geopolitica tra Stati Uniti e Russia* (Roma: Historica Edizioni, 2019), p.21.

Muscovite heirs to claim the title of emperor of Rome with divine power²⁵⁶. This last factor was crucial in Russian history not because it corresponded to the beginning of the imperial parable, which as happens for every subject its beginning is not decided by the claim of an imperial institutional form but when a kingdom or a nation conquers territories and populations that historically should not belong to it and takes on the burden of leadership as in the Russian case with the conquest in the sixteenth century of the Khanates heirs of the Golden Horde, but it was relevant because to the leadership model of the Muscovite sovereign to the autocratic element, inherited from the Mongols, was now added the universal divine imperial one, inherited from Constantinople, giving life to a Mongol-Byzantine autocracy, which together with a close relationship with the Church, significantly increased the figure of the "Tsar of the Russias".

By the end of the fifteenth century, Moscow could claim to have completed the mission of liberating the Eastern Slavs from the Mongols, to have reunited part of the historical territory of Rus' under its dominion and to be the Third Rome. Elements that, together, gave it such strength that it could continue its expansion even outside the historical space of Rus, that is, in those steppes that over the centuries had facilitated the incursions of Asian peoples who had seriously called into question the very existence of the Eastern Slavs, thus becoming a true empire and having for the first time populations outside the dominant canon under its control. After the conquest of the steppes, continuing to have the dominant nucleus located in a vast plain and therefore continuing to feel a persistent threat to their existence, now that they had the necessary strength to do so, the Russians continued to expand the first line of defence to possess the greatest possible number of buffer territories to protect the imperial nucleus, both along the steppes and in the northern European plain. It was the beginning of that process of expansion, always fueled by the fear of disappearing, which would lead Russia to become a geographical superpower. A process of expansion that continues even today with the desire to reaffirm its control over Ukrainian land, since even today there remains a strong sense of insecurity and danger, especially from the West. In fact, this existential fear of disappearing since having an imperial nucleus located in a plain not defended by orographic barriers is the constant element in Russian history, from the beginning with the rise of the Principality of Moscow

²⁵⁶ Ivi p.22.

to the current Russian Empire²⁵⁷. A territorial conformation, and the associated feeling of fear, at the basis of its strategic obligation to pursue a distancing of the first defensive line in order to survive, which generated that expansion still in progress. An expansion, from the original nucleus of the Muscovite Principality until reaching an imperial dimension with a pan-Slavic and Orthodox imperial mission and centred on a model of autocratic Mongol-Byzantine power represented by the figure of the Tsar, or emperor, until the renunciation of this dimension at the beginning of the twentieth century with the adoption of the communist universalist mission, which can be divided into three moments.

2.4.1 The strategic conquest of Novgorod in 1478 with which Moscow obtained a strategic hinterland

The first significant moment of this expansion process started by the Principality of Muscovite, the nucleus of what will be the Russian Empire, in order to push away the first line of defence and therefore to survive, is the conquest of the Republic of Novgorod in 1478. The importance of this conquest of this Slavic principality, also heir of Rus' on a symbolic level, has been highlighted in the previous pages. Analysing this conquest on a merely strategic level, it is important to underline how this success allowed the first significant territorial extension of the Principality of Muscovite and this first notable enlargement of the Muscovite nucleus is peculiar, since it was not directed south towards the plains that would bring invasions, but north, obtaining a large hinterland to which to retreat in the event of the destruction of the Muscovite imperial centre.

The acquisition of such a large territory in the north also allowed the Principality of Moscow to achieve its strategic objectives, to have a land control extended to the Arctic Sea and to the north-east to the Ural Mountains, thus managing to control, for the first time, natural elements that could represent a real border. It should be noted, however, that if today the strategic importance of the Arctic Sea has increased, with an increase in competition for its control, thanks to global warming and innovative technologies for drilling the polar ice cap that open up possibilities for the exploitation of the rich energy resources contained therein and above all for its navigability that could guarantee

²⁵⁷ George Friedman, "The Geopolitics of Russia: Permanent struggle," *Stratfor*, 15/10/2008, p.2.

alternative navigation routes²⁵⁸, this last element that increases the appetites of Russia and China, both of which would like to obtain alternative routes to the US hegemonic control of the seas (globalization), when Moscow obtained its control in the fifteenth century its strategic use was severely limited given its icy and frozen connotation²⁵⁹.

Even with regard to Moscow's gaining control of the Ural Mountains, it should be noted that, if from a strategic point of view this represented the first control of a mountain range of significant importance useful for screening invasions from the East, however beyond them there were no populations capable of threatening the existence of the Russians and the Asian populations could potentially continue to use the steppes to invade Moscow, therefore the important control of the Urals from a strategic point of view was however not sufficient to eliminate the danger of invasion from the steppes.

2.4.2 The strategic conquest of the khanates heirs of the Golden Horde of the XVI century: The achievement of a first buffer area along the steppes. Beginning of the imperial policy of managing buffer areas

The conquest of the steppes was the central element of the second key moment of the expansion of the Muscovite Principality with the conquests of the kingdoms, heirs of the Golden Horde, namely the Khanate of Kazan (or of the Volga) in 1552²⁶⁰ and of Astrakhan (or of the Caspian) in 1556²⁶¹.

Conquests of considerable importance both from a symbolic and strategic point of view. As we have seen, from a symbolic point of view, they represented the subversion of relations in the steppes, with the Russians going to subjugate those who had subjugated them in the past centuries and, at the same time, this is the moment in which we can trace the beginning of the imperial dimension of the Muscovite Kingdom. Since a nation or a kingdom becomes an empire for reasons of survival, and at first unconsciously, when it conquers territories that should not belong to it by history or geography and furthermore

²⁵⁸ Alfonso Giordano, Limiti. Frontiere, confini e la lotta per il territorio (Roma: Luiss University press, 2018), p.126.

²⁵⁹ Lorenzo Vita, *Imperi (In)finiti. Russia, Turchia, Francia e Regno Unito in lotta contro il destino* (Roma: Historica / Giubilei Regnani, 2022), p.52.

²⁶⁰ Carolina De Stefano, *Storia del potere in Russia. Dagli zar a Putin* (Brescia: Editrice Morcelliana, 2022), p.14.

²⁶¹ Ivi p. 15.

as soon as it is consciously imposed on them it also takes on the task of guiding the subjugated populations with a mission and at the same time also takes on the burden of others, that is, by spending with an anti-economic approach and making war also for the subjugated peoples, in order to keep the empire alive²⁶².

In the Russian case, this transition to an imperial dimension can be traced precisely to the moment of conquest of the kingdoms heirs of the Golden Horde, since they not only represented the first Muscovite expansion outside of its historical and geographical space, but the Muscovite nucleus, after having subjugated populations of Turkish ethnicity and Muslim faith under its own dominion, equipped itself with an imperial mission of guidance and took upon itself the burden of the conquered populations by spending and waging war for them too with an anti-economic approach.

The Muscovite imperial mission, consistent with its claim to be the Third Rome, envisaged a defence of pan-Slavism and Christian Orthodoxy and was consistent with its dominant nucleus of Slavic ethnicity and Christian Orthodox faith and therefore alien to the subject steppe populations of Muslim faith and ethnically non-Russian. The factor through which the Muscovite imperial centre managed to maintain a hold on these populations, distant from the dominant canon, was the strength of the figure who stood in defence of this imperial reality, namely the Tsar. The emperor, who even though he stood in defence of Christianity of Byzantine origin, had inherited from the Mongol domination a connotation of autocratic power typical of the steppes and now that he also became the ruler of the steppes, even if defender of Christianity, was seen by the populations of the plains as the very powerful figure who, thanks to his immense power, could be legitimized as the lord of the steppes and therefore respected. A vision also shared by Russian Eurasianists who still emphasize how with this conquest the Tsar replaced the Khan of the Golden Horde, merging forever with the Asian dimension which, definitively adding to the Eastern European one already present in the Russian soul, gave life to a Eurasian dimension of the Russian empire from its beginning, symbol of its exceptionalism compared to European and Asian civilizations²⁶³. Eurasian spatial dimension which, according to many, has become the first identity factor of the Russian empire, which

²⁶² Dario Fabbri, *Geopolitica Umana* (Milano: Gribaudo, 2023), p.45.

²⁶³ Alan De Benoist, Aleksandr Dugin, *Eurasia, Vladimir Putin e la Grande Politica* (Napoli: Controcorrente edizioni, 2014), p.27.

unlike many European nations has not known an identity based on the mystique of blood but on the "mystique of space"²⁶⁴, an element which would constitute the most important factor of social cohesion in the Russian empire having a multi-ethnic dimension since the beginning of its trajectory with the conquest of these kingdoms with a Muslim majority. Subjugation of the Orthodox Slavic imperial nucleus over the first conquered populations, alien to its own dominant Russian canon, which in addition to the common identity of inhabiting a Eurasian space, in practice occurred through imperial management policies that Moscow had learned under Mongol rule²⁶⁵, that is, policies that alternated violence to impose its control with successive integrations of loyal non-Russian elites²⁶⁶ without being assimilated or Christianized²⁶⁷. It was the beginning of the policies of managing a multi-ethnic empire that will be repeated over the centuries and that reach up to the present day, with the use of Muscovite violence in the case of territories with instances adverse to the will of the imperial nucleus with subsequent entrustment of power to the local elite loyal to Muscovite power, as in Chechnya at the end of the second millennium and in Georgia and Ukraine in the first decade of the third millennium²⁶⁸. In the Ukrainian case, in the second decade of the third millennium, this policy of Russian imperial management entered into a crisis of having a loyal local elite capable of administering the country while safeguarding Muscovite imperial interests after coercive actions by Moscow, where the increasingly harsh opposition of a part of the Ukrainian population, generally coinciding with the population inhabiting the western area of the country and supported by the Western powers, led since 2014 with the protests in Maiden Square to a Ukrainian choice of side in favour of the West²⁶⁹, with the consequent harsh reactions from Moscow, which began in the same year with the occupation of Crimea and with the support of the pro-Russian separatists of the Ukrainian regions of Donbass, up to the

²⁶⁴ Adriano Roccucci, *Impero russo e mondializzazione tra escatologia e geopolitica. Da Roma alla Terza Roma*, XXXVIII Seminario internazionale di studi storici, Roma, Campidoglio, 20-21 aprile 2018 <https://www.dirittoestoria.it/17/memorie/Roccucci-Impero-russo-mondializzazione-escatologia-geopolitica.htm>

²⁶⁵ Carolina De Stefano, *Storia del potere in Russia. Dagli zar a Putin* (Brescia: Editrice Morcelliana, 2022), p.16.

²⁶⁶ Aldo Ferrari, *Russia. Storia di un impero eurasiatico* (Milano: Mondadori Libri, 2024), p.68.

²⁶⁷ Carolina De Stefano, *Storia del potere in Russia. Dagli zar a Putin* (Brescia: Editrice Morcelliana, 2022), p.16.

²⁶⁸ Errico De Gaetano, Andrea Lopreiato, *Il Risveglio dell'orso russo. Le campagne militari della Federazione Russa dalla Georgia all'Ucraina* (Reggio Emilia: Diarkos editore, 2023).

²⁶⁹ Fabrizio Bertot, Antonio Parisi, *Ucraina. La guerra geopolitica tra Stati Uniti e Russia* (Roma: Historica Edizioni, 2019), p.45.

direct Russian invasion in 2022, born with the aim of bringing the entire country back under direct Muscovite influence.

In addition to having great importance from a symbolic point of view, Moscow's conquests of the kingdoms, heirs of the Golden Horde, also had a great impact from a strategic point of view. These conquests allowed Moscow to move the first defensive line away from the imperial nucleus towards the south and south-east, thus gaining control of the steppes up to the Caspian Sea. The first consequence from a strategic point of view is that these annexations provided Moscow, for the first time, with control of a buffer area along the steppes where it could potentially shield any new invasions from the east and south²⁷⁰. However, the conquest of a buffer area opened up that obligation of imperial management to keep the population of a buffer area subordinate to the interests of the imperial centre, a task not always taken for granted, as shown for example by the current Ukrainian case, where Moscow needs Ukraine as a buffer area to block possible invasions from the West and a good part of the Ukrainian population no longer wants to be subordinate to Muscovite imperial interests. Furthermore, with the conquest of a first buffer area a strengthening of central power began, since in those regions further away from the imperial core political control became increasingly invasive to keep the population loyal to Moscow so as to be able to continue to have such areas as defensive outposts to stop possible invasions that could undermine the very existence of Moscow, fear that would have led to Muscovite interest in continuing to extend the first defensive line, which in turn would have led to a further strengthening of the control of central power.

Another consequence of great strategic importance is that this expansion to the south of its imperial core allowed Moscow full control of the Volga basin, from its source north of Moscow to its mouth in the Caspian Sea, thus also acquiring access to that sea and, thus, also arriving near the Caucasus Mountains. The conquest of full control of the Volga basin up to the Caspian Sea was a great conquest from a strategic point of view, vital for the very survival of the now Russian empire, since if an opposing power had had control of its mouth or simply of a stretch of it, by going up the watercourse, it could have reached the Muscovite state core in the surroundings of Moscow and would have found itself in the position of calling into question the very existence of the Russian participant.

²⁷⁰ George Friedman, "The Geopolitics of Russia: Permanent Struggle," *Stratfor*, 15/10/2008, p.4.

Volga, which would represent in the following centuries the main artery of diffusion of faiths, and therefore of the identity itself, of the various imperial forms of the Russian actor²⁷¹: from the Tsarist empire with a Christian-Orthodox mission, to the Russian empire with a Marxist-Leninist faith, up to the current post-Soviet empire with a recovered conservative Christian mission. A river that represents "the autobiography of a people"²⁷².

In addition to representing the way of spreading the ideas that will give a purpose to the various Muscovite imperial forms, the defence of this crucial waterway, over the centuries, has proven to be synonymous with salvation as during the Second World War, becoming, and continuing to be, as in the case of the Orthodox Church, a symbolic element possessing for the Russian population not only an identity but also a spiritual significance given its salvific value.²⁷³

Furthermore, reaching the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus Mountains allowed Moscow to reach two crucial natural elements from a strategic point of view, since they represented defensive elements, useful for screening and protecting the Muscovite empire from the neighbouring Persian and Ottoman Turkish empires.

Finally, this extension of the first defensive line south of the Muscovite imperial nucleus provided Moscow with a territorial platform to be used to continue a territorial extension towards Central Asia, which would have been easier, given the presence of a sparsely inhabited territory and which would have allowed it to reach the Pacific Ocean within a century, becoming a geographical superpower.

In fact, a few decades after the conquest of the two khanates of Kazan and Astrakhan, there was the conquest of another khanate, heir to the Golden Horde, located further east than the first two, namely the khanate of Sibir, which controlled a large, sparsely inhabited space beyond the Urals and coinciding with the northern course of the Ob River²⁷⁴. Since this territory opened the doors to the vast, sparsely inhabited plains that led to the ocean, the conquest of the Khanate of Sibir allowed Moscow to gradually control, in the following decades, the entire area that extended from the Urals to the Pacific Ocean,

²⁷¹ Marzio G Mian, *Volga Blues. Viaggio nel cuore della Russia* (Milano: Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore, 2024), p.17.

²⁷² Marzio G. Mian, *Volga Blues. Viaggio nel cuore della Russia* (Milano: Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore, 2024) p.15.

²⁷³ Ivi p.17.

²⁷⁴ Aldo Ferrari. *Russia. Storia di un impero eurasiatico* (Milano: Mondadori Libri, 2024), p. 70.

which took the name of Siberia from the Khanate of Sibir. Therefore, the conquest of the three khanates, heirs of the Golden Horde, not only allowed Moscow to become a multi-ethnic Eurasian empire, but also allowed that unprecedented territorial expansion towards the east that led the Russian empire to occupy an immense geographical space, in a relatively short period of time²⁷⁵, thus becoming a land superpower "strongly projected towards the east"²⁷⁶.

If this unprecedented expansion allowed the Muscovite imperial nucleus to extend the first line of defence to the east up to the Pacific Ocean, eliminating the existential danger of invasions by Asian peoples from the steppes, on the other hand, being now a geographical superpower, the Muscovite central power needed to maintain control over a vast territory and for this reason social policies were introduced aimed at this objective of preserving power. The most important of these measures was the introduction of serfdom which limited the movement of the population precisely to preserve control of a vast territory, launched in the same period in which the foundations for modernization were being laid in many European countries, thus becoming one of the factors that explain the historical backwardness of Russia compared to the European powers²⁷⁷.

The establishment of serfdom was not the only consequence of this immense territorial expansion that contributed to strengthening Russian backwardness. In fact, with this colossal territorial expansion, Moscow was moving its geographical centre of gravity towards the east, at a time when the historic land trade route of the Silk Road was in decline while world trade based on ocean routes was increasingly important²⁷⁸ and which saw the European powers play a leading role while the Russian empire in this reconfiguration of the global chain assumed a "peripheral and backward" position²⁷⁹ compared to European countries. Ports with guaranteed access to ocean shipping routes, which now that Russia had become a land superpower, were more necessary than ever for Moscow, to deal with the socio-economic problems caused by the same territorial overextension and, for these reasons, from the 18th century the conquest of access to the

²⁷⁵ Ivi p.71.

²⁷⁶ Ivi p. 70.

²⁷⁷ Neil Robinson, *Russia. A state of uncertainty* (London: Routledge, 2022), p.21.

²⁷⁸ Aldo Ferrari, *Russia. Storia di un impero eurasiatico* (Milano: Mondadori Libri, 2024), p.71.

²⁷⁹ Boris Kagarlickij, *L'impero della periferia. Storia critica della Russia dalle origini a Putin* (Roma: Castelvechi, 2023), p.135.

Baltic Sea and the Black Sea became the primary objective in Tsarist foreign policy²⁸⁰, but, unlike the expansion towards Asia, that towards the West would have been much slower and more difficult²⁸¹, given the concentration of more population in a smaller space²⁸².

However, these seas present the geographical problem of allowing access to ocean routes through straits, as they are geographically closed, as in the case of the Dardanelles Strait between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean or the Danish Straits between the Baltic Sea and the North Sea, with the consequent risk for Moscow of being excluded from ocean traffic, if a power hostile to it were to control these straits²⁸³. A scenario that also occurred at the time of maximum Russian power under the Soviet guise where the failure to reach ocean routes, necessary to cover the exorbitant costs deriving from maintaining an immense land empire, was one of the factors that led to the choice of imperial downsizing.

2.4.3 The failure of the project to transform the Russian empire into a maritime empire in the XVIII century

The conquest of the Baltic and Black Seas to seek entry into the global ocean routes, which were the object of the third moment of expansion of the Tsarist empire during the 18th century, expansion, this time, directed towards the West. If the Muscovite imperial nucleus had managed to push the first line of defence to the east, reaching as far as the Pacific Ocean during the 17th century, managing to control the steppes that in the past had facilitated invasions by eastern peoples who had called into question its existence, it nevertheless remained exposed to potential invasions from Europe, having no buffer areas along the northern European plain. For these reasons, the Muscovite Tsars, after having succeeded in conquering the immense plain of Central Asia, from the 18th century onwards dedicated their efforts in foreign policy to trying to push the first defensive line as far away as possible along the northern European plain and in the steppes leading to

²⁸⁰ Aldo Ferrari, *Russia. Storia di un impero eurasiatico* (Milano: Mondadori Libri, 2024), p. 71.

²⁸¹ Ibidem.

²⁸² Aldo Giannuli, *Geopolitica. Comprendere il nuovo ordine mondiale* (Milano: Adriano Salani Editore, 2024), p. 196.

²⁸³ Lorenzo Vita, *Imperi (In)finiti. Russia, Turchia, Francia e Regno Unito in lotta contro il destino* (Roma: Historica / Giubilei Regnani, 2022), p. 54.

the Black Sea, always for the primary strategic dictate of survival which translated into the obligation to push as far away as possible the threat of new invasions by European peoples who could call into question the existence of the Russian Empire. Northern European plain that had, and continues to have, the most defensible point, because it is narrowest, between the Carpathian Mountains and the Baltic Sea (an area corresponding to present-day Poland), while beyond this line, it expands in a triangle towards the east, whose central direction points to the Muscovite imperial nucleus with the strategic risk for Moscow that if an adverse power found itself (finds itself) in control of the northern plain beyond the Carpathian-Baltic line, it in the event of expansion would have benefited (would benefit) from the breadth of the plain, being able to aim directly at the conquest of the Muscovite imperial nucleus, a territorial characteristic that instead would have increased the defensive difficulty of Muscovite. It is from here that during the Tsarist empire the French attacked under the command of Napoleon and the Germans during the First World War and will do so again during the Second World War against Russia with the Soviet imperial mission, offensives that will put the Russian defensive capacity to the test. For this reason, for the strategic dictate of survival, even during the Tsarist empire, the Russians expanded the first defensive line to the west up to the Baltic-Carpathian defensive line, going beyond the territory of present-day Ukraine.

The moving away of the first defensive line to the west during the 18th century therefore responded to a dual strategic objective: to expand as much as possible along the European plain and on the steppes of the Black Sea so as to increase the defensive depth and at the same time gain access to the Baltic and Black Seas respectively, and then depart from these conquests to gain access to the oceanic routes. This last objective of gaining access to ocean routes always responded to the strategic dictate of survival, since after the conquest of the immense territory in Central Asia, to survive as a geographical superpower, at the same time, the Tsarist empire needed maritime routes to cope with the difficulties of socio-economic stability given the immense land extension.

Conquests that had as protagonists during the 18th century two emperors: Peter the Great, in power from 1696 to 1725²⁸⁴, and Catherine II, empress from 1762 to 1796²⁸⁵.

²⁸⁴ Carolina De Stefano, *Storia del potere in Russia. Dagli zar a Putin* (Brescia: Editrice Morcelliana, 2022), p.21.

²⁸⁵ Ivi p.24.

Two crucial moments in Russian history, not only for military successes and expansion to the West, but also for the changes and transformations in the economic and social structure that such conflicts entailed since, to compete with the European armies, reforms were necessary, the same that were necessary after the conquests to keep the populations conquered in the West under their dominion. Both Tsars therefore looked to the West, not for love of it but for the need to learn the technological innovations and the advanced European administrative structures, useful to modernize the Russian empire to face and defeat the European armies.

This element, that is, looking to the West to "drain useful knowledge"²⁸⁶ to modernize the backwardness of the empire to be more competitive in the international arena, which will be repeated several times throughout history. An action that must be conducted with the utmost caution, as it hides a great danger, since the Russian community perceiving itself as a distinct and separate civilization, denies its ruler of the moment when he "shows himself enchanted by the culture of others"²⁸⁷ synonymous, for the Russians, with maximum betrayal and both emperors, both Tsar Peter and Tsarina Catherine, after having started to look to Europe to fill the Russian backwardness, were no longer able to take their eyes off the West, both ending up accused by their people of being culpably Western. This last element will represent a limit to their plans for conquest, especially in the case of Tsar Peter's project to transform Russia into a European maritime power. The same dynamic will be repeated at the end of the second millennium, when the secretary of the Soviet Communist Party Mikhail Gorbachev, in an attempt to reform the Soviet Russian empire in crisis, will take the Western model as a point of reference, but will end up losing contact with his own people, who will accuse him of having looked outside of their own civilization²⁸⁸ and failing in the attempt at renewal. Both sovereigns, Tsar Peter I and Tsarina Catherine II, having to pursue the strategic dictate of survival that imposed a land expansion to the west on the immense European plain until the conquest of access to the seas, and having to drain knowledge from the old continent, gave their empire an identity as a tactic functional to the objectives to be pursued: and so Tsar Peter, with objectives of conquest on the northern sea, tried to pursue the identity of a European maritime empire

²⁸⁶ Dario Fabbri, "Quanto è invisibile agli occhi," *Domino* no.4 (2022), p.9.

²⁸⁷ Dario Fabbri, *Sotto la pelle del mondo*, (Milano: Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore, 2024), p.58

²⁸⁸ Ivi p.59

and the transfer of the capital to the Baltic Sea is a clear example of the ambition, while the Tsarina chose as the identity to be achieved that of the Greek and Mediterranean empire, with the resumption of the centuries-old objective of conquering Constantinople, to make it her own imperial centre from which to radiate her power in the seas as well as in the Balkans. This latter project, more in line with the Tsarist imperial mission to defend the Orthodox Christian religion, with this belief having arrived in the lands of the Eastern Slavs precisely from Byzantium and for this reason the capture of Constantinople, which would have provided the long-awaited outlet to the warm seas, could also be justified from a spiritual point of view.

Under the command of the Tsar Peter the strategic objective of gaining access to the Baltic Sea was achieved. Also thanks to the modernizing reforms introduced by the sovereign, the army of the Tsarist empire succeeded in defeating the Swedes in the "Great Northern War" which lasted twenty-one years, from 1700 to 1721²⁸⁹, almost coinciding with the entire mandate of the sovereign, concluded with the signing of the Treaty of Nystadt, through which the Russian empire obtained Livonia, Estonia and the border territories with Finland, thus becoming the main participant in the Baltic Sea²⁹⁰. Peter I's ambitions to start from these conquests to continue the expansion in the North Sea were confirmed by the foundation of numerous cities on the Baltic Sea, the most important of which took the name of St. Petersburg and was transformed into the capital of the Russian Empire to replace Moscow, an element that reflects the great ambition of the Tsar to transform the Tsarist empire into a maritime power capable of starting from the Baltic, to carry out an expansion along the North Sea and reach the ocean. The name of the new capital itself, "Petersburg", was an emblem of the sovereign's ambition since it took the name of the Tsar but with a "Dutch-speaking diction"²⁹¹, Holland which was one of the maritime powers of the time, studied by the Tsar to replicate innovations in his homeland that would also make the Russian empire maritime and modern.

However, in addition to the opposition of the various European powers, this project of Tsar Peter I, to continue the expansion in the North Sea, was also interrupted by the

²⁸⁹ Carolina De Stefano, *Storia del potere in Russia. Dagli zar a Putin* (Brescia: Editrice Morcelliana, 2022), p.22.

²⁹⁰ Lorenzo Vita, *Imperi (In)finiti. Russia, Turchia, Francia e Regno Unito in lotta contro il destino* (Roma: Historica / Giubilei Regnani, 2022), p. 53.

²⁹¹ Dario Fabbri, *Sotto la pelle del mondo* (Milano: Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore, 2024), p. 63

opposition of the Russian community itself to becoming a maritime power. In order to become a maritime power, it was not enough (it is enough) just to move the capital to the sea and build a powerful navy, but for this transition to occur, the anthropological transformation of the population had to materialize, which had to become willing to sail the waves. The same transformation that the Chinese population lacks today and that without it, will not be able to replace the American hegemony based on the global control of the waters, the latter achieved starting from the maritime conversion of its population at the end of the 19th century. In the case of Russia in the 18th century, the population refused to complete this transition and was not willing to overcome the fear of the sea, because it saw in the moving of the capital from Moscow to St. Petersburg the betrayal of the Third Rome and the concretization of a project that was too European and Western and therefore, obligatory to be rejected²⁹². From that moment, not only was the expansion project in the North Sea interrupted, during the USSR the expansion from the Baltic lands to the east was only terrestrial and the expansion project in the North Sea was not continued, but above all with this refusal of the Russian population in the 18th century to become a maritime power, the Tsarist project to become a thalassocratic power failed, a project that also failed under the command of Tsarina Catherine and subsequently never resumed, causing Russia to remain a terrestrial superpower. A characteristic that it still maintains today with all the limitations that this condition entails, both from the economic-social point of view and, above all, from the geopolitical point of view. Since, not having a broad control of the seas to project itself elsewhere, a terrestrial power remains blocked in a regional dimension and remains exposed to a potential containment of a maritime power, such as that which Russia is suffering today from the United States. Difficulties in the relationship with the sea that also emerge from a military point of view in the current war with Ukraine, with the limitations shown by the Russian navy in the clash in the Black Sea, defined as its "home sea"²⁹³ where it is unable to achieve a definitive success, despite being in control of the Crimean peninsula, and despite having in front of it a land power over which it has a notable military advantage. Furthermore, always under the leadership of Tsar Peter I, military successes were achieved that allowed conquests of great strategic importance. The military successes

²⁹² Ibidem

²⁹³ Antonio Bufis, "La guerra in Ucraina sul mare," *Geopolitica.info* 15/04/2022

against the Persian Empire allowed the pre-existing controls on the Caspian Sea to be extended beyond the Caucasus chain, reaching as far as today's Baku, thus significantly distancing the first defensive line also in the area to the south from its imperial core and thus obtaining greater defensive coverage from the Ottoman and Persian Empires.

Finally, the military success against the Crimean Khanate, a khanate under the influence of the Ottoman Turks, allowed the conquest of the strategic fortress of Azov located near the mouth of the Don River in the Black Sea²⁹⁴, from which the Tsarist army under Tsarina Catherine would move to continue the expansion in the Black Sea.

The plan to transform the Russian Empire into a thalassocratic empire, capable of moving from the Baltic Sea to extend into the North Sea and reach the ocean, failed under Peter the Great. Under Tsarina Catherine II, the "Greek project" was launched²⁹⁵. It consisted of the Russian objective of reaching the Mediterranean, after having conquered the Black Sea and Constantinople as a response to the strategic dictate of having to move the first defensive line westward and reach the oceanic trade routes. An ambition hindered by the Ottoman Empire that guarded the access to the Mediterranean, being in control of the Black Sea and Constantinople.

This expansion project compared to that of Tsar Peter could find greater consensus in the Russian community, since it was in line with the Russian imperial mission of being the Third Rome and therefore heir of Constantinople, both from a temporal and spiritual point of view. A mission that brought with it the idea of having to liberate the Second Rome (Tsargrad) and the Christian Orthodox peoples of the Balkans and the Caucasus from the "infidel Muslim Turks"²⁹⁶. For this reason, if a military offensive had been launched by the Tsar against the Ottoman Empire to conquer the Black Sea, so as to conquer Constantinople and so as to conquer the Balkans and at the same time have control over the Mediterranean, so as to access the ocean routes and try to aspire to become a real maritime power, such a call to arms would have had great consensus among the Russian masses, since it would have been justified and exalted by propaganda that would have underlined the tones of a holy war and a war of liberation.

²⁹⁴ Carolina De Stefano, *Storia del potere in Russia. Dagli zar a Putin* (Brescia: Editrice Morcelliana, 2022), p. 22.

²⁹⁵ Elena Tagliaferri, "Russi e turchi, finti amici," *Domino* no.5 (2023), p.114.

²⁹⁶ Ibidem.

This time the mission was to liberate Constantinople and the Balkans from Turkish populations, which would have been in line with the historic Muscovite mission of having liberated the territories of old Rus from Turkish populations. Given these premises, the beginning of a military campaign against the Ottoman Empire could not fail to receive the support of the Russian community. Support that led the Tsarist army to achieve more successes that allowed first to obtain and then to extend more and more the control of the Russian Empire over the Black Sea: from the fortress of Azov, the Russians first managed to conquer the important centre of Kherson thus having full access to the Black Sea, subsequently they first managed to put an end to Ottoman control of the Crimean Khanate, and then directly annexed Crimea in 1783²⁹⁷ and finally, in light of the many successes, the Russians managed to wrest from the Turks the treaty that guaranteed St. Petersburg the much desired due of passage of its goods through the Dardanelles Straits towards the Mediterranean. The conquest of Crimea was an important event not only from a strategic point of view but also from a symbolic one, since this place possessed a strong irrational component in the Russian psyche, since the peninsula had celebrated the conversion in 988 of the king of Kievan Rus, Vladimir I to Orthodox Christianity, a confession later extended to the entire people. An event that represented one of the founding myths of Russian civilization and above all represented a connection both with the kingdom of old Rus and a connection with Constantinople. For these reasons, the Muscovite imperial nucleus and the ecclesiastical institutions within it had maintained a relationship with this event, to increase their legitimacy and the physical conquest of the Tsarist troops of this territory, which fell into the hands of the Turks after the end of the kingdom of Rus, allowed them to physically reclaim the place of the myth and, through this reclaiming, the temporal and spiritual institutions strengthened the historical relationship both with Rus but above all with Constantinople, thus reinforcing the imperial mission of being the Third Rome. A bond with this founding myth that, since the annexation of Crimea, was strengthened by Tsarist imperial pedagogy, to strengthen its own imperial self-celebration of being the Third Rome. Over the centuries it has strengthened the Russian relationship with the Crimean peninsula, which has meant that even today Crimea has a strong emotional and irrational value in the Russian collective unconscious. This pushed Russia

²⁹⁷ Carolina De Stefano, *Storia del potere in Russia. Dagli zar a Putin* (Brescia: Editrice Morcelliana, 2022), p.25

to reconquer it from Ukraine in 2014, not only for its strategic value of projection into warm seas, but also for the affective component. Reacquisition of Crimea in 2014 which has also allowed in contemporary times, after centuries, post-Soviet Russia to strengthen its bond with the place of one of the founding myths of its civilization to reaffirm and relaunch, as in the Tsarist era, the myth of being the Third Rome and the imperial continuity with Constantinople. That Constantinople destroyed by the Western powers in the crusade of 1204, those who in Russian propaganda today would like to destroy the new Constantinople, Moscow, for which it is right to fight against them to save the world from an evil power²⁹⁸. Revival of the myth of the Third Rome today, which serves Moscow to justify on a propagandistic and spiritual level the clash with the US-led West. Propaganda that restores the messianic and universalistic idea that Russians have regarding their own civilization and its role in international dynamics.

After the annexation of Crimea by the Russians in the 18th century, the successes of the Tsarist army in the battle against the Ottoman Turks for the conquest of the seas continued, up to the memorable Russian conquest in 1790, under the command of General Suvorov, of the Turkish fortress of Izmail located in a strategic position near the mouth of the Danube in the Black Sea²⁹⁹.

With the 1792 treaty that ended the Russo-Turkish conflict, St. Petersburg gained full control of the northern coast of the Black Sea, since this negotiated agreement sanctioned the Russian annexation of Crimea, the Kherson area and "the area where Odessa stands today up to the Dniester River"³⁰⁰. These latter territories are once again being disputed in the current Russian-Ukrainian conflict since Moscow aims to regain control of them to regain possession of the northern coast of the Black Sea to once again aspire to gain access the Mediterranean. It is no coincidence that the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin, in the speech given on the occasion of Moscow's recognition of the separatist republics of Donbass "referred precisely to General Suvorov"³⁰¹, one of the protagonists in the operations of conquest of the Black Sea.

²⁹⁸ Marzio G. Mian, *Volga Blues. Viaggio nel cuore della Russia* (Milano: Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore, 2024), p.29.

²⁹⁹ Lorenzo Vita, *Imperi (In)finiti. Russia, Turchia, Francia e Regno Unito in lotta contro il destino* (Roma: Historica / Giubilei Regnani, 2022), p.56.

³⁰⁰ Ibidem.

³⁰¹ Ivi p.57.

With the peace treaty of 1792 everything seemed projected towards the final conquest of Constantinople and the full success of the "Greek project" with the full transformation of the Russian empire into a maritime power, but even in the case of Catherine II's ambitions, it was not possible to realize the final passage from the conquest of access to the sea to the full transformation into a thalassocratic power.

The long-desired final passage to full thalassocratic power did not happen, both because there was no Russian conquest of Constantinople, which if it had ended up under Russian control would have allowed full expansion both in the Balkans and in the Mediterranean, moving the empire's centre of gravity more towards the West, and because as in the case of Tsar Peter the Great, the Tsarina also ended up being accused of Westernism because of the modernizing reforms on the Western model made by the empress to keep the new conquered European populations within the empire. The greatest example of the detachment between the ruler and the people were the people's revolts that went down in history as the rebellion of the Cossack Emel'jan Pugachev³⁰² (1773-1775), an uprising that was anything but individual, but rather involved "thousands of peasants and soldiers"³⁰³ who blamed the Tsarina's excessive Westernism and her admiration of European-style enlightenment, the greatest betrayal, as in the case of Tsar Peter, for a population that does not allow its sovereign to fall in love with cultures foreign to its own. "Insurgents who in the high phase of the rebellion occupied the boundless plains between the Volga and the Urals"³⁰⁴. Tensions that subsided only as the war against the Turks continued. Furthermore, with the launch of the project of conquest of the seas launched by Catherine II, a rivalry began between the Russian and British empires, since at the end of the 18th century, London was launched towards the hegemony of the seas, which would be obtained in the 19th century, and saw in the Greek project of Tsarina Catherine a potential obstacle to the control of the Mediterranean essential for the English achievement of the Indies. Rivalry between London and Moscow that will last for centuries, given the English application of the tactic of containment to Russia to stop its extension towards Europe, to continue to be the hegemon in the old continent. Tactic that will be inherited by the United States with the replacement of Washington in London, as

³⁰² Aleksandr Puskin, *Storia della rivolta di Pugachev* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2023).

³⁰³ Dario Fabbri, *Sotto la pelle del mondo*, (Milano: Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore, 2024), p.58

³⁰⁴ Ivi p.59.

hegemon of the seas after the Second World War and that will lead to the beginning of the rivalry between the United States and Russia after 1945. US containment tactic against Russia after 1945, which continued to be supported by the English one, London continuing to be a maritime power and also having, like Washington, the strategic obligation to prevent the emergence of a power on the continent. The same strategic obligation that explains the current Anglo-American protagonism in containing Russian expansionist ambition, with the USA in the lead being the global hegemon, which led the Anglo-Saxon maritime powers to be protagonists in supporting Ukraine and which explains the great rivalry between the Anglo-Saxon maritime powers and Russia. Finally, under the command of Tsarina Catherine II, the first defensive line was extended westward along the Northern Plain, fulfilling the strategic dictate of having strategic buffers along the Northern European Plain up to the Baltic-Carpathian defensive line, thus having a greater defensive capacity in the event of an invasion by a European power along this line, which would prove to be a lifesaver during the French invasion of Russia under Napoleon in 1812³⁰⁵. Westward expansion of the Russian Empire along the European Plain that occurred as a result of the three partitions of Polish territory between 1772 and 1795³⁰⁶ carried out by the Russian Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Prussia that led to the end of the Polish state entity and the obtaining of St. Petersburg of the territory corresponding to today's Lithuania, Belarus and part of today's Poland and that allowed the extension westwards up to the Baltic-Carpathian corridor. Event that explains the great Polish rivalry towards Russia today, which has led Warsaw to be one of the protagonists in the European support for Ukraine in an anti-Russian key³⁰⁷.

2.4.4 *The annexation of Ukrainian territory by the Tsarist empire*

In the paragraph dedicated to the strategy of the Tsarist empire, it emerged how the third significant expansion of the Muscovite imperial nucleus was directed towards the West,

³⁰⁵ Francesco Benigno, *L'età moderna. Dalla scoperta dell'America alla Restaurazione*. (Bari-Roma: Editori Laterza, 2024).

³⁰⁶ Carolina De Stefano, *Storia del potere in Russia. Dagli zar a Putin* (Brescia: Editrice Morcelliana, 2022), p.25.

³⁰⁷ Chiara Azzarini, "Polonia , sulla soglia della storia," *Domino*, no.7 (2024).

to simultaneously achieve the strategic objectives of extending the first defensive line along the northern European plain and the steppes located between the Black Sea and the Russian Empire, so as to have control of the areas where it could potentially block any invasions from the West, and at the same time gain control of the seas, so as to possess ocean routes to increase its power by becoming a maritime power and at the same time overcome the economic and social difficulties due to the fact that in the seventeenth century it had become a land power strongly projected towards the East.

This phase of expansion towards the West of the Tsarist empire is however relevant, in relation to the current relations between the Russian and Ukrainian communities since it is in this temporal phase that Moscow, thanks to the conquests that took place under the power of Catherine II, came into possession of those territories today disputed between Moscow and Kiev, going on to conquer the northern strip of the Black Sea, namely that territory extending from the current Donbass to the mouth of the Danube, including Crimea. These conquests were strategic, since in addition to providing greater protection from the Turkish empire, they potentially allowed further expansion towards the conquest of the Mediterranean. However, these territories were not taken away by Moscow from the Ukrainian state, which as a fully state-owned and autonomous entity as it is today did not yet exist, but from the Ottoman Empire. As regards the relationship between the Russian Empire and the state and proto-state entities with which historiography identifies the roots of the current Ukrainian state, the significant event had occurred a few decades before that 18th century, characterized by expansion to the West, namely in 1654. The year in which the Cossacks of the Zaporizzja Sic, a proto-state entity in which scholars trace the nucleus of the Ukrainian state³⁰⁸, swore allegiance to the Tsar. This agreement was interpreted differently by the parties, since for the Cossacks it represented a temporary military alliance between equals, while for the Russians it represented a submission of the former to the Tsar³⁰⁹. An agreement that, beyond its limited effect, acquired over time, and still has, a great symbolic significance in the history of relations between Moscow and Kiev, since the Ukrainians continue to interpret it as an act that recognizes the re-establishment of their autonomous national entity³¹⁰ lost after the

³⁰⁸ Carolina De Stefano, *Storia del potere in Russia. Dagli zar a Putin* (Brescia: Editrice Morcelliana, 2022), p.20

³⁰⁹ Aldo Ferrari, *Russia. Storia di un impero eurasiatico* (Milano: Mondadori Libri, 2024), p.87

³¹⁰ Ivi p.88.

collapse of Kievan Rus, while the Russians as an annexation into their own imperial entity, legitimate heir of Rus, of a population of the same lineage, thus interpreting the treaty as a reunification of the same people under Moscow³¹¹. The Treaty of Pereyaslav, which over time has acquired considerable importance, since it has been interpreted as the core of the ongoing conflict between Russian imperial ambitions and Ukrainian national ambitions, where Moscow, centuries later, still needs the Ukrainian population loyal to the Tsar within its own empire as a defensive bastion to protect against possible invasions, while Kiev aspires to full independence from Russian imperial ambitions.

However, if the Treaty of Perejaslav lays the foundations for that tension between imperial and national ambitions still in progress, the premises of that agreement and therefore of that friction still in progress, are to be traced, as discussed in the first chapter, precisely at the end of the medieval Christian Slavic-Viking kingdom of Kievan Rus, when the principalities that composed it took on different destinies, with a great differentiation between the path of those located in the northern area and those in the southern area.

The Northern Area was more subject to the domination of the Mongol Empire and where Moscow will emerge as the main centre, benefiting from the arrival in the 14th century of the Rurikid dynasty of Novgorod at the head of the temporal power that brought with it the mission of saving the civilization of the Eastern Slavs, begun by the victories against the European armies of the prince of Novgorod Nevsky, a mission sanctified by the arrival of the central institutions of the Orthodox Church. This will allow a great Muscovite hold on the neighbouring principalities that will allow it to lead them towards the victory that will sanction the end of the subordination of the Slavs towards the peoples of the steppes, allowing it to propagate that it has achieved the mission of saving the civilization of the Eastern Slavs, having freed them from the Mongols. This will allow it the power necessary to reunify part of the territory that was of the Rus under its command, allowing its sovereign to name himself "Tsar of all the Russias"³¹² and Emperor of the "Third Rome", elements that together generated a huge force that allowed for the beginning of a period of conquests, first towards the east and then towards the west that will make Russia a Eurasian empire. As discussed in the previous paragraph, subordination under the

³¹¹ Ibidem

³¹² Ivan III proclaimed himself "Tsar of All the Russias" after the conquest of Novgorod in 1478 even though the Ruthenian populations, heirs of the southern principalities of Kievan Rus, were not yet under his control.

peoples of the steppes provided the Eastern Slavs, under Muscovite leadership, with that knowledge of the Eurasian space that was conquered as soon as Moscow achieved independence that gave it not only an imperial dimension but also a full Eurasian identity. This was added to the European one, thus fully generating that dual European and Asian Russian soul that still today leads Moscow to declare itself a civilization in itself. As seen, it was only after the full conquest of Central Asia that Moscow concentrated on extending the first line of defence westward, to create outposts in the plains and to access the seas to compensate for the fact that it had become a land power too oriented towards the East. It was at this time that to achieve these objectives it found itself in the position of having to subjugate those people who were also heirs of the Christian Slavic-Viking kingdom of Rus but who, after its dissolution had taken a different path than Moscow and, although sharing the same ethnic descent, the same creed and language, because of the different paths, presented different identities and ambitions but with both claiming the uniqueness of descent from the medieval kingdom of Rus. These people were the heirs of those who inhabited those principalities located in the southern area of the medieval kingdom of Rus who, after its end, took a different path than the northern ones. Such southern principalities were the kingdoms of Galicia and Volhynia.

Kingdoms which, as seen in the first chapter, at their moment of maximum extension during the epic of the kingdom of Rus, were unified reaching an extension corresponding to the current western Ukraine, extending from the Carpathians to the Dniro River with Kiev, the area which over the centuries will represent the basin of strong Ukrainian nationalist and anti-Russian sentiment and not by chance, in these kingdoms Ukrainian historiography traces the continuation of its nation after the disintegration of the kingdom of Rus. After the disintegration of the medieval kingdom of Rus, the principality of Galicia-Volhynia retained its independence, led by the Rurikid dynasty, thus maintaining a Slavic-Viking temporal power, while its people maintained the faith that was of the Kievan kingdom, namely an Orthodox Christian creed. Similar causes that led to the disintegration of the medieval kingdom of Rus, namely internal struggles for power at the same time as simultaneous offensives by several hostile powers were being suffered, led to the end of this state reality in 1349³¹³ with the region of Volhynia that was annexed by

³¹³ Giorgio Cella, *Storia e geopolitica della crisi ucraina. Dalla Rus' di Kiev a oggi* (Roma: Carocci editore, 2021), p.94.

Lithuania while Galicia by Poland. These Slavic-Orthodox people, descendants of the inhabitants of Galicia and Volhynia, who, losing their sovereignty found themselves subjects in new state entities, began to be called "Ruthenians"³¹⁴, a name that derives from a Latinization of "Rus" and that differentiated them from the other heirs of Rus who lived under the rule of Moscow, namely the Muscovites. As regards the Ruthenians who ended up under the control of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, it should be noted that the Lithuanian sovereigns did not adopt repressive measures against the Orthodox Slavs, on the contrary, they learned from them various political, military, administrative knowledge that was typical of the kingdom of Rus. For these reasons, and together with the fact that after its expansion the subjects of the Lithuanian kingdom were predominantly Eastern Slavs, a part of the historiography describes the Lithuanian kingdom in the second half of the 14th century as a "Russian (Ruthenian)-Lithuanian state".³¹⁵ Things changed when, from the end of the 14th century, the Kingdom of Poland, also located in the northern plain and therefore feeling great insecurity given the poor defensibility of its borders that increased enormously with the simultaneous pressure from the west of the Grand Duchy of Moscow, increasingly wanted for strategic reasons to increase the first defensive line to the east, to have a buffer area useful for moving the existential threat of the Muscovite Reign away from the center of the kingdom. A perception that continues today, with Warsaw which is not coincidentally at the forefront of the ranks of European countries in supporting Kiev, in an attempt to prevent a Muscovite expansion towards its borders that would occur in the event of the collapse of the Ukrainian army³¹⁶. To achieve its strategic obligation to ward off the Russian threat, in addition to the certain military aid provided by Warsaw to Kiev in order to help stop the Russian advance, some sources report that at least 10000 Polish soldiers may have already fought in the Ukrainian ranks since the beginning of the conflict in 2022³¹⁷.

This Polish desire to create a buffer zone under its control, to distance the first line of defense, led Warsaw to increase its control over the Kingdom of Lithuania and its Ruthenian subjects, which began with the dynastic union between the Polish and

³¹⁴ Ivi p. 95.

³¹⁵ Ivi p.96.

³¹⁶ Elia Morelli, "Kaliningrad epicentro della tensione," *Domino*, no. 4 (2022).

³¹⁷ "Over 10,000 Polish nationals fought in Ukraine in 2022, politician says," *Tass*, 28/12/22.

Lithuanian rulers followed by the treaty of the “Union of Krevo”³¹⁸ of 1385 which established an alliance between the Polish and Lithuanian kingdoms and laid the foundations for the fusion of the kingdoms under Polish leadership which was achieved in 1569 with the Union of Lublin which gave birth to the Polish-Lithuanian Confederation where Warsaw represented the "majority partner"³¹⁹ of an imperial reality which competed for the hegemony of the Eastern European space with the Russian Empire. A turning point which had a notable impact on the Ruthenian populations since the Union of Lublin not only extended Polish control also over the Ruthenian territories of Volhynia and Kiev³²⁰, useful to Warsaw as defensive bastions in an anti-Russian key³²¹, but, unlike the Lithuanians, the Poles began an assimilation of the Orthodox Slavic populations (Ruthenian) which resulted in the beginning of an attempt to "Polonize" these people and therefore convert them to Catholicism, which however produced the opposite effect of "awakening that latent identity diversity in the Ruthenians which would have led them towards the development of a separate national conscience"³²². The awakening of the identity of the Ruthenians, which, according to Kiev historiography, coincides with the manifestation of the Ukrainian national consciousness³²³ that would have produced a century after its first manifestation with the Cossack revolt, led by Khmelnytsky³²⁴. However, the Polish attempts at assimilation of the Ruthenians, which began with the Union of Lublin in 1569, produced, especially in Volhynia and Kiev, a social, linguistic and religious “Polonization”, mainly of the noble landowners and not of the peasants who constituted the majority of the Ruthenian population under Warsaw, and who continued to maintain their Slavic-Orthodox identity unchanged, heir to the kingdom of Rus, which indeed emerged strengthened by such assimilation policies perpetrated by the Polish Empire.

³¹⁸ Giorgio Cella, *Storia e geopolitica della crisi ucraina. Dalla Rus' di Kiev a oggi* (Roma: Carocci editore, 2021), p. 97.

³¹⁹ Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *Storia della Russia. Dalle origini ai nostri giorni* (Milano: Bompiani, 2001) p.143.

³²⁰ Giorgio Cella, *Storia e geopolitica della crisi ucraina. Dalla Rus' di Kiev a oggi* (Roma: Carocci editore, 2021), p.100.

³²¹ *Ivi* p.101.

³²² *Ibidem*.

³²³ Jerzy Borzecki, “The Union of Lublin as a factor in the Emergence of Ukrainian National Consciousness,” *The Polish Review* 41,no.1, (1996), p.37.

³²⁴ *Ibidem*.

When, in the 17th century, Warsaw's attempt to assimilate the Ruthenian peasants into the Polish religious (Catholic), linguistic and cultural canon increased, this was accompanied by "increased pressure from Polish landowners"³²⁵ (or Polonized Ruthenians), many Ruthenian peasants, in addition to rediscovering their Slavic-Orthodox identity, also began to flee southwards towards the Black Sea steppes which represented free zones, free zones between the Polish, Russian and Ottoman empires and which were called in Russian "*dikoe pole*"³²⁶ (wild field) where the first term and adjective in the Russian language "refers to a sense of freedom, emptiness and space, but at the same time to the idea of strangeness"³²⁷. Shades of the meaning of the Russian adjective that perfectly convey the atmosphere of the territory, since it was free because it was sparsely populated but also strange, given its wild and unruly connotations of a territory in the middle, with the presence of nomadic populations of Turkish origin.

The Ruthenian peasants who had fled to the steppes to escape Polish control found here the presence of the Cossacks, that is, peculiar communities of warrior peasants, made up of Ruthenian peasants who had previously fled from the Polish kingdom and who in some cases had also hybridized with the Turkic populations of the steppes. The term "Cossack" derived from the Turkish word "*kazak*" which "indicated a free man, adventurer, vagabond"³²⁸ and returned the connotation of such communities that often lived by raids, in harmony with their space of action represented by the wild fields.

The emergence of these Cossack communities was not only caused by the movement of Ruthenian Slavs fleeing from increased pressure from the Polish state along the lower course of the Dnipro in the steppes, but also involved Orthodox Slavic peasants from the Russian Empire who, in order to escape increased control of the Russian Empire, fled along the Don and Volga and other rivers flowing through the steppes of Central Asia.

If, from the end of the 16th century, the Russian Empire managed to incorporate into its imperial reality the Cossack communities settled along the Don and the rivers that flowed in the steppes of Central Asia, which began to play the strategic role of guarding and extending the borders, Moscow took longer to extend its control over the Cossack communities of mainly Ruthenian origin, located along the lower course of the Dnieper

³²⁵ Aldo Ferrari, *Russia. Storia di un impero eurasiatico* (Milano: Mondadori Libri, 2024) p.86.

³²⁶ Andrea Bertazzoni, "Viaggio nell'Ucraina russa," *Domino*, no.10 (2023), p. 107.

³²⁷ Ibidem.

³²⁸ Aldo Ferrari, *Russia. Storia di un impero eurasiatico* (Milano: Mondadori Libri, 2024), p 71.

in the steppes that led to the Black Sea. Here, near the present Ukrainian city of Zaporizhia, where the Dnipro River had a wide course forming islands and creating places ideal for a defensive nature, an important political and military Cossack community called “Zaporizhia Sich”³²⁹ had emerged (“a stronghold beyond the rapids”³³⁰) which over time increased in importance, thanks to its military capabilities and the strategic space it occupied, namely that territory disputed between the Polish, Russian and Ottoman empires. A border territory, not by chance this is the meaning of the Slavic word “ukrajna”³³¹ (u, “on”, kraj, “border”)³³².

Wishing to extend their control over an area that would guarantee access to the Black Sea, and at the same time control over military communities that would be perfect for the role of a defensive bulwark of their borders, both the Russian, Polish and Ottoman empires sought an alliance with the Cossack communities of the Black Sea steppes, but even when they were stipulated, they did not have a lasting character, since the Cossacks would ally themselves with the highest bidder, and then break the alliance when they saw their independence in danger. The Cossack communities, by virtue of their historical path of escape from policies of imperial control, were strongly desirous of maintaining their freedom and this feeling clashed with the ambitions of control that the imperial realities nourished towards them and this can be considered the core of that clash that still continues between the nation that more than others has inherited this Cossack identity, Ukraine, eager to maintain its independence and the Russian empire, still determined to control this area in order to use it as a defensive bulwark of its imperial nucleus.

It was precisely the fear of losing their independence in the face of increased Polish pressure that led the Cossack hetman (ruler) Khmel'nickij of the Zaporizhia Sic to ask for protection from the Russian Tsar, a request that led to the controversial Treaty of Pereyaslav of 1654, still claimed by the Ukrainians as a symbol of their national genesis and by the Russians as a symbol of the reunification between the heirs of the same civilization of Rus.

³²⁹ Carolina De Stefano, *Storia del potere in Russia. Dagli zar a Putin* (Brescia: Editrice Morcelliana, 2022), p.19.

³³⁰ Ibidem.

³³¹ Aldo Ferrari, *Russia. Storia di un impero eurasiatico* (Milano: Mondadori Libri, 2024), p.86.

³³² Giorgio Cella, *Storia e geopolitica della crisi ucraina. Dalla Rus' di Kiev a oggi* (Roma: Carocci editore, 2021), p. 9.

The Polish attempt to strengthen its control over the Cossack communities had provoked in 1648 a major rebellion, both of the Cossacks and of the Ruthenian peasants, which was led by the Cossack hetman Khmelnickij. Through this rebellion, the Zaporizhia Sic managed to extend its control over a large part of the current Ukrainian territory and in relation to this and to the identity-based character of the rebellion, Ukrainian historiography identifies in this moment the reconstitution of a Ukrainian nation lost after the end of the medieval kingdom of Rus. But this rebellion was not driven by the desire to rebuild the Ukrainian nation, but rather by the will to reaffirm their own Ruthenian Slavic Orthodox peasant identity in the face of greater Polish pressure, to which was added, in the case of the Cossacks, the will to reaffirm their freedom³³³. Instances, both of the Ruthenian peasants and of the Cossacks, that in any case occupy a central place in the formation of the Ukrainian national identity especially in the area of Western Ukraine, an area which more than any other has maintained for historical reasons a strong link with the Ruthenian and Cossack identity from which it inherited in addition to the Orthodox Slavic identity also that of the maximum sacrifice in the name freedom and independence and which therefore explains the greater protagonism of this area of the country, as today, in choice to be willing to make the maximum sacrifice even against a larger empire, Slavic and Orthodox like it, to regain freedom and independence.

The harsh military response of the Poles led the Cossacks of the Zaporizzja Sic to have to find allies and the choice fell on the Russian empire, probably also by virtue of the same ethnicity and the same Christian-Orthodox faith, elements of identity that had played a leading role in the Ruthenian and Cossack rebellions against Polish control. Therefore, in 1654, in the face of Muscovite military protection, the Cossacks of the Zaporizzja Sic swore "eternal loyalty to the tsar in exchange for guarantees on respect for the political autonomy of the Sic"³³⁴.

However, while the Cossacks interpreted the agreement as a military alliance that granted them autonomy and independence and from which they could withdraw at any time, the Russians, as they had already done on the occasion of treaties stipulated with the steppe populations³³⁵, in exchange for their military protection, granted freedom and autonomy

³³³ Aldo Ferrari, *Russia. Storia di un impero eurasiatico* (Milano: Mondadori Libri, 2024), p. 86.

³³⁴ Carolina De Stefano, *Storia del potere in Russia. Dagli zar a Putin* (Brescia: Editrice Morcelliana, 2022), p. 20.

³³⁵ Aldo Ferrari, *Russia. Storia di un impero eurasiatico* (Milano: Mondadori Libri, 2024), p.87

but on the condition that the Cossacks would act as defenders of the borders of the empire. Moscow, moreover, interpreted the Perejaslav agreement as the first stage of that path of conquest of the territories, corresponding to today's Ukraine, inhabited by those people heirs of the medieval kingdom of Rus who since its end had undertaken a different path, namely the Ruthenians and the Cossacks of Zaporizzja. A path that would have concluded with the conquests of Catherine II at the end of the 18th century, with the exception of the territories of Galicia which, at the end of the 18th century, were incorporated into the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Russian ambitions to conquer Ukrainian territory emerged already at the time of the Perejaslav Agreement of 1654, where the Tsar proclaimed himself "autocrat of all Russia, Great and Small"³³⁶, with this distinction that was taking on a territorial character but which had been taken up by the medieval ecclesiastical distinction that called "little Russia" ("Malorossia" in Russian) the original area of the kingdom of Rus around Kiev and "great Russia" the area of extension, starting from the original nucleus of the kingdom³³⁷.

The Muscovite Russians, already from the time of the Perejaslav agreement of 1654, could justify from a propaganda point of view the alliance with the Ruthenian Cossacks as an anti-Polish function, as the arrival of the great support for the liberation of the Orthodox people from the repressive measures of Polonization and Latinization of the Poles, being able to exploit the fact of being not only a Slavic and Orthodox empire with an imperial mission to be the Orthodox Christian "Third Rome", but above all Moscow could leverage a great relationship with the central institutions of the Orthodox Church moved to Moscow from the 14th century. Orthodox Church that had remained a great point of reference for the Ruthenian peasants even after the end of the kingdom of Rus and for this reason the Muscovites could exploit the great link with the central institutions of the Orthodox church in their area to become a new point of reference for the Ruthenian communities even under temporal power. This last attempt continues to be sought by Moscow even today with the means of war to dispose of Ukrainian territory as a strategic defensive buffer.

³³⁶ Ibidem

³³⁷ Carolina De Stefano, *Storia del potere in Russia. Dagli zar a Putin* (Brescia: Editrice Morcelliana, 2022), p.21

This idea of rescue, carried out by the Muscovite Russians towards the Ruthenians in XVII century, has remained over the centuries and even today Russian historiography interprets the Perejaslav agreement as the moment in which "the great Russians went to the aid, and saved, the Ukrainian brothers and Little Russia (Malorossia)"³³⁸. Interpretations that was revived by the Russian political elite with the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which described the intervention as a new attempt to "rescue its Ukrainian younger brother from the value degradation triggered in it by its proximity to the evil West and from the Nazi regime created in Kiev also by the West"³³⁹. Rhetoric as a tactic to compact the Russian community towards support for the special operation but also aimed at not losing support from pro-Russian Ukrainian communities that have suffered from the Russian invasion on their territory and the damage associated with it.

The decision by the General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, Nikita Khrushchev, to cede the Crimean peninsula from Russia to Ukraine in 1954 is very likely to be linked to this idea of union of the Eastern Slavic peoples after the agreement of 1654, since this cession occurred on the occasion of the tercentenary of the Treaty of Perejaslav. Crimea will be invaded by the Russian army in 2014 to regain control, in retaliation for the Euromaidan protests that determined the placement of Ukraine in the Western camp.

The idea of the rescue, carried out by the great Russians towards the Ukrainian "younger brothers" in the Perejaslav agreement, which could not fail to be relaunched by the Moscow power in light of the ongoing clash between Russia and Ukraine, where both communities have reworked this crucial moment in the history of their relations in light of their own objectives, rewriting their own history in the present, to build a national pedagogy that is able to unite the community to the point that it is willing to wage war for the geopolitical objectives to be achieved: to return to being an empire in the Russian case and to remain an independent nation in the Ukrainian case. And therefore, to unite its population towards consent to the special military operation, so as to achieve the imperial objective of the reconquest of Ukraine, the President of the Russian Federation in the article "on the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" ("anticipation and

³³⁸ Ibidem.

³³⁹ Massimo Introvigne, "Putin Officially Embraces Theories Accusing the West of "Satanism", *Bitter Winter*, 10/03/2022.

manifesto of the invasion of the neighbour"³⁴⁰), published a few months before the invasion of Ukraine, highlighted the Perejaslav agreement, as the event in which the Russian empire gave a decisive contribution to the liberation from Polish oppression of the Eastern Orthodox Slavic peoples who remained outside the territory of the empire, seeking a parallel with the current scenario where Russia according to Putin arrives to protect the Eastern Orthodox Slavs, heirs of the Ruthenians and Cossacks, who ended up under the oppression of the empire, this time American, to bring them back into the Russian empire, the only possible place for people of the same culture, language and religion³⁴¹. Reunification of Orthodox Slavs which was achieved by the Perejaslav Agreement and today is to be achieved through the special military operation ³⁴².

An analogy between different eras, implemented by the Kremlin which is a pure tactic to underline the importance of what is at stake in the current clash, so as to leverage the feelings of the masses in order to unite them and obtain from them not only the necessary consensus, but also the willingness to make human and economic sacrifices for a greater purpose to be achieved³⁴³, to return to being a great empire.

At the same time, Ukrainian historiography interprets the 1654 agreement as “the founding act of its own national state”³⁴⁴ maintaining distance from the Russian Empire in the reinterpretation of the event, in order to unite the community towards the goal of independence.

Beyond the current Russian and Ukrainian reinterpretations of the Perejaslav agreement, the rebellion of the Cossacks and Ruthenian peasants of 1648 did not have the purpose of building a Ukrainian state, but had the goal of underlining their Eastern Slavic and Orthodox identity with respect to their Polish rulers and it is likely that they asked for support from the Russian Empire, as the latter was a Slavic and Orthodox empire like them but with the will to maintain its independence and this feeling of independence is likely to have played a crucial role in the formation of the Ukrainian state throughout history. Furthermore, due to the presence of strong Slavic Orthodox identity feelings plus

³⁴⁰ Pietro Figuera, “La Russia non smette di reinventare la sua storia,” *Domino*, no. 8 (2024).

³⁴¹ Vladimir Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”, *kremlin.ru*, 12/06/21.

³⁴² Ibidem.

³⁴³ Federico Bertasi, “Forza del déjà vu,” *Domino*, no. 8 (2024).

³⁴⁴ Aldo Ferrari, *Russia. Storia di un impero eurasiatico* (Milano: Mondadori Libri, 2024), p.88

the greatest desire for independence, a line of continuity can be drawn between the Sic of Zaporizzja and the current Ukrainian state, especially the western area.

The Perejaslav Agreement, beyond the propaganda throughout history and current reworkings, did not even have a lasting effect, since a few years later the Ruthenian Cossacks returned the alliance by coming to terms with the Poles. The Russians, fearing to lose the important strategic territory on their borders occupied by the Ruthenian Cossacks, waged war and defeated the Cossack-Polish coalition. A scenario that can be compared to the current one, where Moscow, fearing to lose control of the strategic Ukrainian territory as a defensive bulwark of its borders in relation to Kiev's ever-closer approach to the US-led Western sphere of influence, invaded Ukraine in 2022 to regain control. In both cases the wars have preventive character and were conducted at a time when the current Ukrainian territory was slipping towards full control by another empire, a condition which in both cases exposed the Russian empire to defensive instability on the European side and led it to act before this condition of instability was increased with full control of that territory by another power.

The Russian victory over the Polish-Ruthenian coalition, which led to the Treaty of Andrusovo in 1667³⁴⁵, sanctioned the division of control of the lands of the Ruthenian Cossacks between Russians and Poles, with Moscow definitively entering into control in the eastern part of the territory of today's Ukraine, including Kiev and for the time being without control of the coastal area of the Black Sea. Western part of the territory of today's Ukraine that would have been obtained by Moscow, with the exception of the region of Galicia, with the partition of Poland between the European powers at the end of the eighteenth century that erased the Polish Empire from the European map. Moreover, in the late eighteenth century, the victories against the Ottoman Empire under the leadership of Catherine II guaranteed the Russian Empire the conquest of Crimea and the lands along the northern coast of the Black Sea, which took the name of "Novorossiya". Thus, at the end of the 18th century, the process of conquest by the Russian Empire of the territories of the Ruthenians and Cossacks heirs, also like the Muscovites of the medieval Slavic-Viking Orthodox Christian kingdom of Kievan Rus, would have been concluded. But in the following decades and centuries, even within the same imperial reality, the different paths between Muscovites and Ruthenians, which occurred before the reunification,

³⁴⁵ Ivi p.89.

would have led to different ambitions between imperial will and independence that would have translated into conflict several times as today. Furthermore, the fact that these territories inhabited by Ruthenians and Cossacks entered the Russian Empire at different times meant that the Ruthenians living in the eastern territories of the current Ukrainian state, the first to enter Muscovite rule with the Treaty of Andrusovo, were more assimilated by Moscow, while those who entered later, such as those living in the western territory of the current Ukrainian state and especially Galicia conquered in the 20th century, have maintained their own identity and their own idea of themselves to a greater extent, as the custodians of a different path, originating in the medieval kingdom of Rus and passing through the Ruthenian Cossack experiences such as that of the Zaporizzja Sic and therefore different from the Muscovite one, which meant that they were less willing to be assimilated when they ended up in the Russian imperial reality, seeking alliances with more geographically distant empires in propitious moments of crisis of Moscow, as per strategic dictates, to pursue or maintain their independence, as in the case of the alliance with the Germans in the 20th century and with the USA in the 21st century. A scenario that led in the post-Soviet era, at the time of the return of the Russian actor on the international scene with the desire to reaffirm itself in the post-Soviet space in the first decade of the third millennium, following the disintegration of the Soviet empire in 1991, which had led to the birth of the independent Ukrainian state, to the ideological split of Ukraine between feelings of alliance with Moscow and Ukrainian nationalist and anti-Russian feelings with instances of desire for alliances with the Western camp, led by the USA, to maintain the independence achieved in 1991. Feelings that correspond, not by chance, to the geographical split between East and West population of Ukraine, created in the first two decades of the third millennium, with the eastern part more willing to return to the Russian imperial reality and the western part, a reservoir of nationalism and more determined to pursue independence, relying on the alliance with the Western bloc. Rift which, as seen, had its origins in the Russian conquest of Ukrainian territory in different phases with the eastern part of Ukraine conquered first and more assimilated and the western part more linked to its own historical path and therefore more eager to maintain independence. Relationship between geography and feelings, highlighted by the elections held since Ukraine's independence in 1991. The split within Ukraine generated the nucleus of an internal war, which began in the second decade of the third millennium

and has acquired, over the years, a greater significance up to the current scenario where it has a global dimension.

2.5 Strategy and Tactics of the Soviet Empire

2.5.1 The Twentieth Century and the USSR: The Great Expansion and Contraction in a Single Century

If, at the end of the “Great Patriotic War” in 1945, the military conquests obtained on the battlefield allowed the already immense Soviet Russian Empire a great extension of the first defensive line towards the West, just under fifty years later, the collapse of the socialist bloc in Eastern Europe first, and the Moscow decision to dismantle the architecture of the Soviet empire in December 1991, caused, as discussed in the previous paragraphs, a great territorial reduction of the Russian actor. A reduction that led the post-Soviet Russian Empire to retreat towards the borders possessed in the XVII (Muscovite imperial nucleus and Tatar lands) and also Siberia up to the Pacific. A reduction that, moreover, was particularly accentuated precisely along the northern European plain, along which the first Russian defensive line retreated from the Elbe in Germany to about 160 km from St. Petersburg. Geographical characteristics of the northern plain, given its great triangular expansion beyond the Carpathian-Baltic line which, when controlled by enemy powers, facilitated its advance towards the Moscow borders and amplified its destructive scope, allowing it to directly target Moscow. Given this territorial condition, the objective of the Moscow strategy for survival, since the Tsarist empire, had been to expand on the plain trying to reach the Carpathian-Baltic line, since it was the point that allowed a defensive capacity on it and in fact Moscow, after the victory over the German invader in the Great Patriotic War, had pushed well beyond this defensive line, expanding in the West until it had control of Eastern Germany. Although the renunciation of the Soviet imperial form at the end of the second millennium led to the retreat of the first line of defence in several areas, the one that occurred on its European borders was the most serious, since in addition to the loss of an important buffer area in a plain that when uncontrolled over the centuries had served as a "highway" for hostile powers, there was

also the fact that, immediately after the collapse of the Soviet empire, the expansion of the military alliance led by the US hegemon began towards the European borders of Russia and, unlike the Asian areas, here close to the European borders there were more powers potentially interested in the reduction of Russian power. Feelings of anger and desire for emancipation from Moscow of its former eastern satellites that could be exploited by the US hegemon to pursue its own strategy aimed at maintaining its domination³⁴⁶ on the European continent.

For these reasons, the loss at the end of the second millennium of such a large defensive area on the European plain reawakened the historical Russian insecurity, typical of a population that had always inhabited a flat territory without natural protective barriers and that, due to this geographical condition, had been subject to several invasions throughout its history that had led the Muscovite imperial nucleus to extend the first defensive line in every direction, for the purpose of survival, to the point of becoming a geographical superpower but continuing to have the imperial nucleus in the area of the unstable European plain and therefore continuing to live in perpetual insecurity, even when it now possessed a considerable geographical extension. Fear that now became terror with the contemporary expansion of the Atlantic Alliance towards its borders, perceived as an existential threat, since such Western expansion was taking place towards its European borders, and having lost defensive depth, such expansion of the US-led bloc was ever closer to the Muscovite imperial nucleus, amplifying the feeling of existential threat in the Russian community.

The reason for this “great expansion and contraction”³⁴⁷ of the first Russian defensive line during the 20th century is to be traced back to the strategic condition of the Soviet Russian Empire, maintained throughout its history, from the beginning until the renunciation of the Marxist-Leninist imperial mission, that is, that of having been a great land power “dominating the Eurasian Heartland”³⁴⁸ that achieved all strategic obligations except one, the one that was necessary for survival, that is, to become a maritime power and have full access to global ocean routes, so as to be able to fully connect its Asian part with the European one and vice versa by sea and so as to compensate and potentially

³⁴⁶ “70th session of the UN General Assembly. Vladimir Putin took part in the plenary meeting of the 70th session of the UN General Assembly in New York,” *kremlin.ru*, 28/09/2015

³⁴⁷ George Friedman, “The Geopolitics of Russia: Permanent Struggle,” *Stratfor*, 15/10/2008, p.9

³⁴⁸ *Ibidem*

alleviate the structural problems of the Russian empire. The fact of not having achieved this objective, in the long run, undermined the very sustainability of the giant Soviet land empire.

The fact that the Soviet Empire failed to achieve this vital strategic goal of realizing this transformation into a full maritime empire, remaining therefore a very large land empire and, in the long run, collapsing due to its unsustainability, is not new in Russian imperial history, indeed, every Muscovite imperial version collapsed after failing to achieve a full maritime dimension. This goal has never been achieved by the Russian Empire in its various imperial forms and this has led to collapse every time. The medieval Christian kingdom of Kievan Rus, led by the Viking Rurikid dynasty, failed in its attempt to conquer Constantinople so as to become a full maritime power, capable of connecting the Baltic, already conquered, to the Mediterranean by sea and vice versa. Remaining on the mainland, the Slavic-Viking principalities would have started a dispute that would have led the kingdom to disintegration, with a final collapse at the hands of the Asian Mongol troops, also part of the largest continental empire, collapsed because it never reached its final objective, the passage to the sea. The Muscovite kingdom, a stock among the heirs of the Rurikid kingdom, which became an Orthodox Christian Tsarist empire, collapsed in the second decade of the twentieth century after having failed, as discussed in the previous paragraph, to become a maritime power in both projects of the Tsars who aspired to its realization in the eighteenth century, both in the case of Peter the Great and Catherine II, where both managed to reach the sea but failed to lead the population to launch into the dominion of the waves, since the community was unable to trust its sovereign in both cases, due to the excessive Westernism shown by them. Peter the Great conquered access to the Baltic Sea by defeating the Swedes and built the new capital of the empire there but failed in his attempt to convince the Russian community of the need to learn to dominate the waves to extend their possessions in the lands and waters of the North Sea to access the ocean. Under the command of Tsarina Catherine, the Russians managed to conquer control of the Black Sea, defeating the Ottoman Turks but failed, due to the containment of the European powers led by the British hegemon, in the conquest of Constantinople which prevented the full realization of the Greek project that was to lead to the conquest of the Mediterranean starting from the "Second Rome". Finally, the Russian empire in Soviet form collapsed due to its unsustainability, given the absence of

a maritime dimension capable of compensating for the negative effects due to its hyper-extension of the land geography.

The fact of not having reached the full maritime dimension has meant that all Russian imperial forms, and ultimately the Soviet one, have collapsed. This failure to reach the strategic maritime condition has meant that Russian imperial history has been characterized by a cyclical expansion and contraction of the first defensive line.

Cyclicity of Russian imperial history that is not connected to the ideology chosen by the empire but by its strategic and therefore geographical condition of having the imperial nucleus, located in a boundless plain that generates a feeling of instability and that in order to survive, leads to an extension of the first defensive line along the plains, until it reaches the point of controlling a boundless land empire that requires a maritime dimension for sustainability³⁴⁹. The lack of access to ocean routes leads to an imperial downsizing and a change in imperial ideology, since the Russian collective demands the abandonment of the current imperial mission, when this does not lead to glory and hegemony and so the Russians have demanded the end of the Tsarist pan-Slavic and Orthodox empire, because it proved incapable of defeating the European powers in the First World War and moreover even humiliated by an Asian power in the early twentieth century, as did the Russians in 1991, possessing the idea of not being able to compete with the American enemy after the withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989³⁵⁰, took to the streets to demonstrate their opposition to the attempt of a part of the Soviet ruling class to preserve the Soviet imperial mission³⁵¹ by supporting the "new" project of Boris Yeltsin's nationalist Russia.

Once the imperial downsizing has been accomplished, the fact of continuing to have the imperial nucleus in a boundless plain, creator of profound insecurity, will mean that the Russian community, if it remains an independent power, will restart a process of territorial expansion and then aim to conquer the seas. This is the case of today's post-Soviet Russia, territorially downsized after the collapse of the Soviet empire, but still an empire and still the first power in the world in terms of extension, aims to conquer Ukraine to restore a sphere of influence along the European plain, to protect the imperial nucleus and, at the

³⁴⁹ George Friedman, "The Geopolitics of Russia: Permanent Struggle," *Stratfor*, 15/10/2008, p.12.

³⁵⁰ Dario Fabbri, *Sotto la pelle del mondo* (Milano: Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore, 2024), p.58.

³⁵¹ Carolina De Stefano, *Storia del potere in Russia. Dagli zar a Putin* (Brescia: Editrice Morcelliana, 2022), p.105.

same time, to start from this conquest to regain full control of the Black Sea³⁵² and the Baltic Sea, so as to attempt in the future to conquer the much desired access to the ocean routes, so as not to suffer a new downsizing. An objective as always undermined by geography itself, since, as in the past, these seas continue to be closed by straits controlled by other powers³⁵³. Invasion of Ukraine which led to the entry of Sweden and Finland into the Atlantic Alliance³⁵⁴ and thus Moscow's objectives of conquest in the Baltic Sea, demonstrated by several hybrid warfare actions in recent years, perpetrated by Moscow in these waters³⁵⁵, risk provoking an open conflict with the Western bloc. While, as regards the strait between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, it also appears to be controlled by a power present in the Atlantic Alliance, Turkey. However, Turkey, appears to be the most peculiar among Washington's European allies, since Ankara appears to be, unlike European countries, an imperial power with its own ambitions of expansion in the Balkans, Central Asia, the Middle East and Africa³⁵⁶, which, although its objectives clash in many areas with those of Moscow, especially in the Mediterranean, both having the ambition to project their influence in this area, however, being two empires with revisionist ambitions with respect to US hegemony, Moscow can potentially find with Ankara, unlike the Baltic countries, a *modus operandi* as regards the Dardanelles Strait. A strategic condition that therefore forces Moscow to gain access to the ocean routes, in order not to be subject to new reductions in power in the future. A vital objective that however passes through the Russian conquest of Ukraine and which shows even more how the ongoing war is vital for Moscow to survive as an empire and which explains the difficulty of finding an armistice or a peace treaty, also considering the stakes of Ukraine which is fighting not to disappear as a state entity.

Furthermore, as far as Russian access to the oceans is concerned, compared to past centuries, a major event is taking place, a “game changer” especially for Moscow, capable of opening up new opportunities with respect to the classic maritime routes where Moscow has historically been disadvantaged: the greater practicability of the waters in the Arctic region³⁵⁷, that will increase more and more in the future and that is potentially

³⁵² Lucio Caracciolo, “Il posto di Nessun Luogo,” *Limes* no.10 (2024)

³⁵³ George Friedman, “The Geopolitics of Russia: Permanent Struggle,” *Stratfor*, 15/10/2008, p. 10.

³⁵⁴ Edoardo Incani, “La Svezia nella NATO: addio alla neutralità,” *Geopolitica.info*, 09/04/2024

³⁵⁵ Michele Ditto, “Come funziona la guerra ibrida della Russia nel Mar Baltico,” *Aliseo*, 18/09/2024.

³⁵⁶ Dario Fabbri, “Dal bianco al blu,” *Domino*, no.5 (2023).

³⁵⁷ Jahara Matisek, “Il nuovo senso dell'occidente per l'Artico,” *Limes*, no.10 (2024), p.138.

capable of giving Moscow a greater advantage due to its great control of the area. Greater practicability of the Arctic Sea that, potentially, could not only give Moscow the much desired maritime dimension, where in the Arctic region it could acquire it without resorting to wars unlike the Baltic and the Black Sea, since the Arctic Sea laps the boundless northern Russian coast, but could also give it the maritime connection with the Indo-Pacific, where the Chinese power, ever closer to Moscow, has ambitions to increase its control. For these reasons, potentially, the Arctic could provide the access route to the ocean routes. The bond between Moscow and China is growing ever stronger, given the connotation of both of them as empires challenging US hegemony and which could strengthen the Moscow-Beijing bond for the benefit of both³⁵⁸, but friendship has its limits and the third participant not to be underestimated is the US hegemon which also controls part of the Arctic region and sees the Russian-Chinese connection in the Arctic region as a threat to its global domination. It is no coincidence that, faced with increasingly frequent Russian and Chinese military operations, the re-elected President of the United States Donald Trump has declared that he wants to obtain American control of Greenland, an immense island located between the Atlantic Ocean and the Arctic Sea and until now under the control of the Danish Crown, justifying this ambition for the "protection of the free world given the assertive actions of other powers since Western Denmark alone is not capable of carrying out this protective task."³⁵⁹ But beyond the phrase of a leader who has shocked the whole of Europe, behind it emerges the interest of a large part of the apparatus of the American empire to want to enter into full control of the island under Danish control for strategic reasons. The future of the competition in the Arctic will be profoundly influenced by the development of relations between the three powers and the ongoing war in Ukraine will be a decisive event for these relations³⁶⁰, potentially capable of strengthening the closeness between Moscow and Beijing as enemies-friends, that is, two empires with divergent interests at a regional level and competitors for leadership in guiding the anti-Western front, but cooperating in the global challenge to US hegemony, or, increasingly less likely but not impossible, capable of reinserting Moscow into the Western front as the last defensive bastion in an anti-Asian

³⁵⁸ Flavia Lucenti, Giulia Sciorati, "Quale "alleanza"? Le relazioni sino-russe e la guerra in Ucraina," ISPI (2023), pp. 37-42.

³⁵⁹ Christina Lu, "Why is Trump so obsessed with Greenland?" *Foreign Policy*, 9/1/25

³⁶⁰ Lucio Caracciolo, "La guerra vista dalla pace," *Limes* no.7 (2024), p.27.

function as in the times of Kievan Rus. The relationship that will be established between the three powers, on which the war in Ukraine will have a great impact, will have a great impact on the alliances in the competition in the Arctic and if a bond between Russia and China were to be strengthened together with a greater practicability of the Arctic route, this could give Moscow a maritime dimension especially in the Asian quadrant but not full and with greater tension in the European area.

Instead, if Moscow were to be reinserted into the American-led Western camp, this alliance will also be reflected in the Arctic, where access to China will be denied, with Russia committed to playing an anti-Chinese defence outpost in the waters, in exchange for which the European powers could grant greater access to their seas, to allow Russia to meet its strategic needs. But this last scenario appears to be more imaginative, given the Russian ambition to restart its expansion to the West also for reasons such as imperial survival, in which Ukraine appears to be in the Kremlin's plans only the first stage of the reconquest process, which will obviously lead to an increase in tension with the Western front. Since in such a case of cooperation with the West, Moscow would be configured as a power subordinate to the US hegemon, this condition would be unacceptable for a community that wants to live off glory and domination and that, for the sole fact of being considered, after the collapse of the USSR, a regional power by the US hegemon, has acted violently several times on the international scene in order to be respected by the West, since, as discussed in the first chapter, due to its historical path, in the Russian psyche there is the idea that Russia is considered and respected as a great power only when it acts with force.

Existential goals of the Russian empire in addition to unique traits of its collective psyche that will make cooperation between Russia and the USA difficult, but not impossible. As seen in the second chapter, much will depend on how the Russian community, which has always had a centuries-old contempt for Asian communities, will react to a greater alignment with China, justifiable by the community only in an anti-Western function, but without too many concessions to the Chinese "friendly enemy"³⁶¹. What remains more likely is that Russia will continue to pursue its power goals, even in the Arctic, to remain an empire and not suffer new downsizing. This will bring Russia and China to the same

³⁶¹ Russian concessions towards China which are increasing with the start of the special operation since from 2022 China has become the leading importer of Russian hydrocarbons and wheat

line on many dossiers, in order to contrast American hegemony, but it will not eliminate the rivalry between two historic enemy empires in regional contexts³⁶². From the beginning of its parabola, what has distinguished the Russian Empire is continuity beyond the caesuras, continuity which is a typically imperial phenomenon, and so, despite the different imperial forms assumed by Moscow over the centuries, which at first glance may seem different from each other, at a strategic level, continuity reigns: from the beginning of its parabola to today, the Russian Empire has had the same dominant nucleus (ethnic Russians or *Russkij*) which has maintained over the centuries the same imperial centre in the boundless Sarmatian lowland, exposed both to the European plain and to the Asian steppes, which over the centuries have favoured invasions by adverse powers which have made the imperial nucleus particularly insecure and violent. This has meant that the Russian Empire, from the beginning of its parabola, has sought to expand its first line of defence in every direction in order to survive, becoming over time a boundless land empire and the fact of not reaching a full maritime dimension has led to its reduction several times. Resizing that, whenever it occurred, led at a superficial level to a change in the imperial mission and so from the Tsarist Orthodox empire we moved on to the empire with a Marxist-Leninist mission and, finally, the current one, with a Christian-conservative mission, but at a structural level what marked the Russian empire was continuity. Imperial continuity, whose symbol is the institution of the Orthodox Church itself, much more than a simple institution but a symbol of the messianic survival of Russian civilization, it is no coincidence that Stalin himself, "emperor" of the atheist and communist version of Russia, after having persecuted and repressed religious institutions for the purpose of control, invited the Russians to pray, in the darkest moment of the great patriotic war.

2.5.2 *The Soviet Russian Empire Far from the Sea and the West*

Russian imperial history appears to possess that temporal dimension forgotten by today's West but which the ancients believed in, namely the cyclical nature of time. Russian

³⁶² Flavia Lucenti, Giulia Sciorati, "Quale "alleanza"? Le relazioni sino-russe e la guerra in Ucraina, ISPI, (2023), pp. 37-42.

imperial history is a cyclical history of collapse and rise, of expansion and contraction of the first defensive line, a phenomenon more accentuated along the European plain.

This historical cyclical nature, as we have seen, derives from a territorial, geographical condition, namely that of having the imperial nucleus located on a lowland, surrounded by steppes and plains that, over time, have transported enemies towards its borders that have generated that violent saving instinct to expand the first defensive line in every direction so as not to disappear. Over time, they led to the formation of a boundless land empire that never managed to reach the full maritime dimension necessary to fill the structural problems resulting from the condition of having become a boundless land empire and, every time it failed in this vital objective, it went through a downsizing and a change of imperial mission, only to try again and fail again.

In this cyclical history where every Russian imperial version has been subjected to a downsizing for not having succeeded in the transformation into a maritime empire, the Soviet Russian empire is an exception, since, despite having achieved all the strategic objectives and having the tools after 1945 to achieve this transformation being a nuclear geographical superpower with a universal ideology, unlike its predecessor the Tsarist empire, it did not seek a transformation into a maritime empire, indeed during this imperial version possessing Marxist-Leninist ideology, unlike the previous ones, there was a mental distancing from the seas, which was accompanied by a distancing from Europe³⁶³.

Sea and Europe, which for the Russian community had become synonymous, since the seas not only led towards the West, but to gain full access to the ocean routes it was first necessary to defeat European armies and therefore undergo European-style reforms, to be able to defeat the modern armies of the old continent, when this happened with the tsars who attempted such a transformation in the 18th century such as Peter the Great and Catherine II, the Russians experienced such dynamics as an attempt at forced Westernization sought by the sovereign, which they opposed, leading to the failure of the sovereign's attempt to create a maritime empire and from that moment, in the minds of the Russians, transformation into a maritime empire became synonymous with Westernization.

³⁶³ Aldo Ferrari, *Russia. Storia di un impero eurasiatico* (Milano: Mondadori Libri, 2024) p.232.

Moved by this feeling, when the Russian Bolsheviks took power, they carried out a revolution, a revolution however in the original sense of the term, from the Latin “revolutio”, or a return to the starting point and so after the imperial centre had been moved in the 18th century by Tsar Peter to the new, modern and European St. Petersburg, with the Bolsheviks the centre of the empire returned to the original point of the imperial trajectory, in Moscow, the Third Eurasian Rome, a synthesis of the Slavic-Viking, Eastern Roman and Mongol empire heritage. St. Petersburg was the greatest symbol of Tsar Peter's attempt to transform the Russian Empire into a maritime empire, but at the same time in the minds of the Russians it was the symbol of the sovereign's attempt to Westernize Russia, since the new capital was not only built on the Baltic Sea overlooking the old continent, but also built in European style and, even worse for the Russians, named after the sovereign but in Dutch, to pay homage to the European maritime power of the Netherlands, as a sign of the beginning of an era of domination of the seas for the Russians too. This last mistake, unforgivable for a community that can't stand it when its "Caesar" appears enchanted by other people's culture and, for this reason, from that moment on, transformation into a maritime empire was linked to the idea of Westernization, therefore both had to be denied by the Russian community. Three other important historical events that occurred between the 19th and 20th centuries contributed to the Russian collective's estrangement from Europe and the seas before the Bolsheviks took power in 1917. Although they occurred during the Tsarist imperial form, they also had a significant effect on the posture of the subsequent Soviet imperial version. The first was the invasion of Russia by the French Empire, under the command of Napoleon in 1812. For the Russians, this was an invasion of a European nature, since Napoleon's army of 650,000 men included “Poles, Italians, Germans, Swiss and many others for a total of 20 nations”³⁶⁴. Another invasion suffered by a Western power, facilitated by the absence of natural barriers along the northern European plain, which had the effect of reawakening and reinforcing the historical Russian trauma of invasions, given the instability of its borders and, at the same time, of reawakening the adversity towards the European powers, a feeling that remained latent in the Russian community, despite the fact that throughout the 18th century, up until the time of the Napoleonic invasion, the political leadership of

³⁶⁴ Giovanni Sabatucci, Vittorio Vidotto, *Storia Contemporanea. L'Ottocento* (Bari-Roma: Editori Laterza, 2021), p.56

the Russian empire, in an attempt to reform the empire, looked to the Western model, and in particular to the French one, as a reference model. The invasion led by the French was confirmation for the Russian community of how the Europeans could not be trusted and how they still remained hostile towards the Russians. Following the not obvious Russian victory over the invader, obtained through the scorched earth tactic, that is, by retreating towards its own hinterland together with the elimination of resources, to hinder the supply of the enemies³⁶⁵, who nevertheless arrived near Moscow but, in their attempted retreat, were defeated by the arrival of "General Winter", the Russians demanded from the Tsar the cessation of relations with the West³⁶⁶ and to return to the historical path peculiar to "exceptionalism"³⁶⁷ of Russian civilization, without having to adapt to the foreign European canon. With the victory over Napoleon's troops, which took the name of "Patriotic War" due to the collective character that the resistance of the Russian people assumed against the invader, the contradictory relationship with the West was also strengthened. Since the invasion suffered rekindled Russian hostility towards Europe, the fact of having defeated the invader and, at the same time, of having given a decisive contribution to the liberation of the old continent from French hegemony, contributed to reinforcing in the minds of the Russians that messianic idea of having sacrificed themselves for the salvation of Europe.

Messianic idea of itself that was present in the Russian mind, since the rise of Moscow with the arrival of the Rurikid dynasty as a temporal guide and the seat of the Orthodox Church as a spiritual guide, both institutions endowed with a great salvific significance that contributed to conferring that messianic tone to the Muscovite will to expand, a characteristic that will be greatly strengthened in the 15th century, when Moscow will lead the various Slavic principalities to the victory that will decree the liberation of the territory of the Eastern Slavs from Mongol control and will allow Moscow to praise its own sacrifice for the salvation of the civilization heir of Rus. Messianism that had always been strengthened in the same century with the proclamation of Moscow as "Third Rome". While, as far as the Russian idea of having a saving mission towards the European populations is concerned, it was already present in the collective psyche since the Middle

³⁶⁵ Carolina De Stefano, *Storia del potere in Russia. Dagli zar a Putin* (Brescia: Editrice Morcelliana, 2022), p.28

³⁶⁶ Dario Fabbri, "Attento a cosa desideri", *Domino*, no. 7 (2023), p.8.

³⁶⁷ Pietro Figuera, "La Russia non vuole più salvare l'Occidente," *Domino*, no.7 (2024), p.110

Ages, as discussed in the first chapter, when the invasion of the Swedes and the Teutonic Knights in the 13th century, in the same time period in which the contemporary Mongol invasion took place, created in the proto-Russians an idea of hostility towards the Europeans who had until then been a reference model, but the subsequent victory of the Eastern Slavs over them highlighted at the same time both a feeling of self-perception as a civilization separate from the European one, but also a saving idea towards the defeated European populations. The same dynamics that were repeated and reinforced with the Russian victory over the Napoleonic army, which increased the relationship of ambivalence between Russia towards the old continent, since the Russian community, on the one hand, reinforced its own exceptionalism and asked the Tsar for a closure with the West, but at the same time, strengthened a "saving mission towards the West"³⁶⁸. Dynamics that are further strengthened, and will further amplify the contradictory relationship of Russia with the West, with the German invasion of Russia during the Second World War, for the Russians "Great Patriotic War". The name "patriotic war" of the collective Russian resistance against Napoleon was taken up, but the term great (*velikaja*) was added because this time the civil and military sacrifice to resist the three million German invaders (six times greater than Napoleon's troops) was even greater and Russia, to defeat the invader, sacrificed 28 million inhabitants³⁶⁹ between military and civilians, with permanent damage to its demographic structure, already weakened by the repressive and paranoid Stalinist purges in the years preceding the conflict. An immense sacrifice was made by the Russian people to resist the German invader, which occurred because the Russian community experienced this conflict as an existential war and was willing to make the maximum sacrifice, not for the defence of communism but of its own civilization, so much so that Stalin himself, to demobilize his people, had to invoke not the myth of the defence of the proletariat, but the myths of the legendary heroes of the Russian empire sanctified by the Orthodox Church, despite the repression carried out until a few years earlier by the regime against the Church and against anyone caught praising the glories of the Tsarist regime, who was promptly accused of nationalism³⁷⁰. Another element of imperial continuity beyond the caesuras. An invasion that, as happened with

³⁶⁸ Ibidem

³⁶⁹ Marzio G. Mian, *Volga Blues. Viaggio nel cuore della Russia* (Milano: Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore, 2024), p.48.

³⁷⁰ Ivi p.50.

the previous ones, strengthened the fear of the porosity of its borders and the aversion towards the European powers but, the fact of having defeated the Germans and then liberated a large part of Eastern Europe from the Nazi-fascist forces, allowed to strengthen the messianic vision of itself in a constant struggle against "dark" forces, as it did with the Mongols, Napoleon and now Hitler, and willing to make the maximum sacrifice for the salvation of the world and in particular for the old continent, thus maturing the idea of a West to be saved from the physical or moral self-destruction generated by it³⁷¹. Both victories over the French and Germans present the same dynamics: both invasions come within a whisker of the total conquest of the Russian Empire, which would have meant the end of the uniqueness of Muscovite civilization, but a heroic resistance of its own population, combined with the advantage of inhabiting a boundless and freezing territory in the winter months, allow them to first defeat the enemy and then liberate a large part of Eastern Europe. This peculiar dynamic of arriving at extinction at the hands of Europe, and then thanks to an immense effort to achieve existential salvation and then liberate the continent from the "bad guy of the moment" has amplified the contradictory Russian relationship towards Europe: hostility but at the same time the duty of salvation. Furthermore, the fact that such existential victories were achieved thanks to a large buffer territory, which allowed them to face the invading enemy and have the possibility of retreating towards the imperial nucleus where they could defeat it, thanks to the resistance that becomes existential on the doorstep and to the contemporary tiredness of the invader, weakened by the arrival of adverse weather conditions, explains today's Russian will to reconquer the Ukrainian territory, which in recent centuries has played such a vital role for the Russian Empire as a buffer on the western borders.

Historical path that explains the current contradictory Russian relationship towards the West that on one hand fights it militarily and on the other, in line with the new conservative mission, aims to protect its true values from the moral corruption brought to Europe by the American hegemon³⁷², therefore saving the West from itself. Propaganda to divide the Western bloc but, at the same time, real thought in the Russian collective psyche. Furthermore, the fact that after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, with the increase in tension between the West and the East, the Western "historical tribute" of recognition

³⁷¹ Pietro Figuera, "La Russia non vuole più salvare l'Occidente," *Domino*, no.7 (2024).

³⁷² Fedor Luk'janov, "La Russia si vuole riferimento della maggioranza mondiale," *Limes*, no.1 (2024)

towards the sacrifice made by the Russians during the Second World War has diminished, has provided Russian political leaders with the propaganda to consolidate the internal front in the challenge to the West, through the rhetoric of a West that has forgotten the Soviet effort and that is actually invading Russia again through the Atlantic Alliance to put an end to its existence and, hence, Putin's propaganda of the need for a new war to "de-nazify" Ukraine to save first Russia and then the West from itself. Rhetoric witnessed by the creation in 2020, two years before the start of the "special operation", in the city of Rzhev, where about 1 million Russian soldiers lost their lives, of the first statue depicting a Soviet soldier in the modern era, facing the West and with a pose not in combat but at rest, with the war concluded and won, but thoughtful for the immense sacrifice of his comrades: a message addressed to the West on the awareness of their own sacrifice and how it can be repeated again, if the very existence of Russia is called into question again³⁷³.

If the victory of Moscow over Napoleon's troops distances the Russian community from Europe, or rather, makes it rediscover its own exceptionalism, its own uniqueness, its own messianic strength, it makes it rediscover how its beacon for the future lies in its own past and not in Europe, indeed, it is itself that must become a model for Europe. Two other war events, subsequent to the success over Napoleon, which also occurred in the Tsarist period, modify the posture of the Russian community towards the sea. If the idea of transformation into a maritime empire was already associated with Westernism with the reforms of the 18th century, and therefore to be rejected, two defeats will definitively distance the Russians from the waters: the defeat at the hands of the English coalition in an anti-Russian function, in the Crimean War (1853-1856) and the annihilation of the Russian fleet, at the hands of the Japanese in the Pacific in 1905.

In the first case, the British Empire, hegemon of the time and first maritime power, constituted and led an offensive in Crimea, to prevent an expansion of the Russian empire in the Mediterranean, so as to stop the possible Russian conquest of Constantinople which, potentially, could lead to the transformation into a maritime empire and which, if it occurred, could undermine British control of the Mediterranean, a crucial hub of its empire that extended from Europe to Africa and India³⁷⁴. London feared the Russian

³⁷³ "Unveiling of the Rzhev Memorial to the Soviet Soldier," *en.kremlin.ru*, 30/06/2020

³⁷⁴ Aldo Ferrari, *Russia. Storia di un impero eurasiatico* (Milano: Mondadori Libri, 2024), p.171

Empire, since at the end of the 18th century, it had conquered the northern part of the Black Sea and now Moscow was strengthened by the victory over the French invader, a victory that in addition to rekindling enthusiasm, strengthened, as seen, the messianic idea of being the Third Rome which strengthened the ambition to start from its possessions in the Black Sea to conquer the second Rome (Constantinople) and the Balkans, inhabited by Slavic and Orthodox populations. To prevent such Russian expansion in the Mediterranean³⁷⁵, the British Empire led a coalition formed by the Ottoman Empire, France and the Kingdom of Sardinia³⁷⁶ and the confirmation of the British fear in the Russian maritime expansion can be found in the fact that this offensive was directed at Sevastopol in Crimea, home of the Russian Black Sea naval fleet, where it still remains today, and after a siege of the city in 1855, there was the capitulation of the same which sanctioned the Russian defeat, which represented a hard blow to the Russian will to expand in the seas to reach the oceans.

Furthermore, the fact that the British Empire managed to create a coalition of continental states to stop the Russian expansionist ambitions, represented for Moscow a further betrayal by the European powers. This coalition increased the anger of the Russian community towards the powers of the old continent, both because they interpreted this European intervention as a lack of gratitude towards the immense sacrifice made a few decades earlier by the Muscovites to free the continent from Napoleon and, even more serious for the Muscovites, was the fact that Christian powers, in order to stop the ambitions of the "Third Rome", were forming a coalition with the Muslims of the Ottoman Empire, in their eyes the "Asiatic and infidel power"³⁷⁷ par excellence and usurper of the "second Rome". Interpreting this act, therefore, as the crusade made in 1204 by Christian Catholic powers towards Eastern Christian Constantinople. A poem by Dostoevsky of the time shows the Russian feeling: "The Christian united with the Turk against Christ! The Christian defender of Mohammed! Shame on you, apostates of the Cross who extinguish the divine light!"³⁷⁸

³⁷⁵ Carolina De Stefano, *Storia del potere in Russia. Dagli zar a Putin* (Brescia: Editrice Morcelliana, 2022), p.32.

³⁷⁶ Participation of the Kingdom of Sardinia in the coalition formed by the British Empire to stop Russian expansionism, which earned it the consent of London to unify the Italian peninsula, which, if stabilized by a friendly country, would also benefit the English maritime empire for which the Mediterranean represented a central element of maritime hegemony.

³⁷⁷ Aldo Ferrari, *Russia. Storia di un impero eurasiatico* (Milano: Mondadori Libri, 2024), p. 174.

³⁷⁸ Ibidem.

This conflict, finally, represented the strengthening of the contrast between the English and Russian power, which had begun with the ambitious Greek project of Tsarina Catherine II, a contrast that was now growing stronger as the British Empire's aim to contain Russian expansionist ambitions grew ever more pronounced. A rivalry that continues today, to which has been added that of the hegemon United States, a maritime empire now the first interested in containing Russian expansionist ambitions.

The second defeat occurred at the hands of the Japanese fleet that in 1905 destroyed the "Russian Baltic fleet"³⁷⁹ in the Pacific. A defeat that, as previously addressed, reawakened that trauma of Russian fear towards an Eastern power, present in the Russian mind since the destruction brought by the Mongol invasion and, at the same time, produced that very strong anger towards the emperor for the defeat, anger that will become unbearable, with the Russian failures in the First World War that will lead the majority of the Russian community to support the Bolsheviks both in 1917³⁸⁰ and in the civil war, since the latter aspired to create a new imperial form. Two defeats, that of 1855 and 1905, which distanced the community from the seas. These three war events, victory over the French invasion led by Napoleon, defeat in the Crimean War and defeat against the Japanese empire, contributed to changing the posture of the Russian community between the 19th and 20th centuries and therefore also the relationship between Russians, Europe and the sea, during the Soviet imperial form. The victory over Napoleon relaunched in the community the historical Russian exceptionalism and the messianic idea of itself and therefore the idea that for its future it should not look to Europe but to its own peculiar identity while, the two defeats that had as protagonist the naval fleet, defeat in the city of the headquarters of the Black Sea fleet and destruction of the fleet by Japanese, contributed to distancing the community from the maritime dimension. The symbolic event that shows these changes in the posture of the Russian community is the shift of the imperial centre from St. Petersburg to Moscow, with the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks: distancing from the sea and at the same time from Europe and return to the Third Rome, the point of origin of its own exceptionalism.

For these reasons, even if the Soviet Russian Empire succeeded during the "Great Patriotic War" in obtaining a great territorial expansion towards the West, which gave it

³⁷⁹ Dario Fabbri, *Sotto la pelle del mondo* (Milano: Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore, 2024), p. 58.

³⁸⁰ Ibidem.

greater control of the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea, it did not seek further expansion towards the West starting from the major maritime outposts obtained, in order to gain control of the straits that until then had prevented access to the ocean routes. This was not an easy conquest which, to be carried out, required a further step with respect to coastal control, that is, the awareness in the community of having to launch into the seas to conquer these straits, in order to become a full maritime power.

While it is true that these "chokepoints", which blocked access to the oceans in the northern seas and the Mediterranean, were under the control of Denmark and Turkey respectively, both nations belonging to the Atlantic Alliance and therefore in the event of a concrete Russian expansion towards the oceans, that direct confrontation would have been generated in Europe that the two nuclear superpowers Russia and America tried to avoid on the European continent. At the same time, it should be noted that, despite the geographical disadvantage compared to the full American maritime power, the Soviet empire did everything possible to invest in a "red fleet"³⁸¹ of great respect to try to compete with the USA during the Cold War. However, the Soviet superpower was in control of a portion of waters sufficient to conduct policies capable of pacifying the Red Army, and therefore its own community, with the waves so as to achieve that anthropological transformation, already carried out by the Anglo-Saxon empires³⁸², essential to becoming a maritime power. This latter dimension could not (cannot) be achieved only with the construction of fleets and that, if it had been achieved, after the anthropological transformation of the community that would have made the population willing to make sacrifices to obtain conquests in the seas, would have provided the Soviet empire with that capacity necessary to try to challenge the hegemonic power for the conquest of its own area of control in the oceans, so as to fill its own limits deriving from being a boundless land empire. But these policies, aimed at achieving this anthropological transformation to make the sea the object of every strategic reasoning of the Russian community, were not implemented and the transformation of the USSR into a maritime empire never happened and, in the long run, at the end of the second millennium, the Soviet empire collapsed, since the condition of keeping a boundless land empire standing

³⁸¹ Errico De Gaetano, Andrea Lopreiato, *Il risveglio dell'orso russo. Le campagne militari della Federazione Russa dalla Georgia all'Ucraina* (Reggio Emilia: Diarkos editore, 2023), p.341

³⁸² Dario Fabbri, *Geopolitica Umana* (Milano: Gribaudo, 2023), pp.168-169

militarily and economically had become unsustainable, to which was added the lack of support from the community towards the Soviet imperial form, with the lack of success accompanied by the withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989³⁸³.

The fact that during the Soviet empire no policies were implemented aimed at an anthropological transformation of the collectivity, in order to transform Russia into a thalassocratic power, was already evident from the beginning of this Soviet imperial form, when the Bolsheviks, taking power, moved the imperial centre away from the sea and from Europe towards the Eurasian hinterland, which showed how, despite the investments in the construction of a respectable naval fleet that will be made later during the Cold War³⁸⁴, from the beginning of the Soviet imperial form, they wanted to move away from the project of transformation into a maritime empire, because in the Russian mind it was a dimension linked to the West, a dimension that would never be obtained in the course of the Russian imperial history having this communist mission. The move of the imperial capital with a return to the "Third Rome" was the symbolic example of the return to the original posture of the Russian Empire towards Europe with the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks, who, although on a formal level adopted a profoundly European imperial mission, on a structural level stopped the process of the Russian Empire's rapprochement with the European model begun with Tsar Peter the Great, returning to the original Russian imperial posture of "alienation to Europe"³⁸⁵.

If, at the level of imperial mission, the Russians adopted a deeply European doctrine adapted to the Russian context, Marxism, it was chosen not out of admiration for the West but because the heading of the defence of the proletariat as a universal mission simultaneously allowed the various ethnic groups and religions present in the boundless terrestrial empire to coexist under the command of ethnic Russians, thus managing to keep the empire together internally, avoiding disintegrations, and at the same time, allowed them to expand their control and influence externally, thus expanding their first line of defence and power, since this ideology was capable of attracting consensus potentially in every place on the planet³⁸⁶. The Russian community also supported this

³⁸³ Alberto Maria Banti, *L'età contemporanea. Dalla Grande Guerra a oggi* (Bari-Roma: Editore Laterza, 2009), p.390.

³⁸⁴ Errico De Gaetano, Andrea Lopreiato, *Il risveglio dell'orso russo. Le campagne militari della Federazione Russa dalla Georgia all'Ucraina* (Reggio Emilia:Diarkos editore, 2023), p.341

³⁸⁵ Aldo Ferrari, *Russia. Storia di un impero eurasiatico* (Milano: Mondadori Libri, 2024), p.233

³⁸⁶ Dario Fabbri, *Geopolitica Umana* (Milano:Gribaudo, 2023), p.48.

imperial mission of European origin, not because they shared these ideas, but because at the time of the civil war, the White Army wanted to re-establish the Tsarist power, a power that was guilty, however, for the majority of the Russian community, of the humiliations in the wars of the first decades of the twentieth century and, moreover, supported by European powers, because of which the support of the masses went to the Reds. With the establishment of the Soviet imperial form, the support of the masses continued, despite the harshness and repression of a totalitarian system, since, as George Kennan intuited in his "long telegram", the Soviet empire managed to guarantee a security response to the insecure Russian population, always terrified by the absence of natural barriers and, as the diplomat intuited, the Russians even during the Soviet empire remained profoundly Russian and the Soviet regime was nothing but "a new form of restless Russian nationalism"³⁸⁷ endowed with a profoundly universal messianic imperial mission that was well suited to the messianism of the Russian community. A Marxist-Leninist imperial mission that perfectly represented the historical ambivalent relationship between Russia and Europe, since this mission of European origin was adopted by the Russians to challenge the West but, at the same time, allowed them to offer the West itself an instrument of salvation. A synthesis of the historical oscillating relationship, which has remained even today, typically Russian, which, on the one hand challenges the West and sees in it the incarnation of absolute evil, globally propagating the need for a salvific "crusade" against it, at the same time sacrifices itself in a fight against it in order to redeem it from evil. Through the imperial mission possessing communist ideology, although of European origin, in the post-war period Moscow managed to place itself at the head of a global block of states, launching a challenge to the Western "capitalist" world led by the USA. With the configuration of this cold war scenario, with the competition and rivalry between the American superpower and the Soviet Russian one, Moscow returned to being fully the "Third Rome", or Constantinople, a fusion of the Roman and Eastern world that challenged Rome, for the conquest of the entire Roman Empire, two similar but opposing powers. Opposition between the West and the West mixed with the East that came back to life with the rivalry between Washington and Moscow, where the religious conflict was

³⁸⁷ George Frost Kennan, *The Long Telegram*, The White House, 1946
<https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/coldwar/documents/episode-1/kennan.htm>.

now replaced by the ideological one for the conquest of the old continent (Roman Empire) and the world.

Leadership in challenging the Western world during the Cold War, which not only increased Moscow's power, but reaffirmed the still valid principle, which will be underlined and indicated by the former Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation, Yevgeny Primakov, as a path through which to recover power after the downsizing that occurred with the collapse of the USSR³⁸⁸ which had led to a brief period of cooperation between Russia and the West, that Russia's strength increases at an international level when it challenges the West and its hegemon of the moment and, only in this context of challenge and test of strength, is it respected by the West³⁸⁹. Aware of this, the show of strength shown by Russia in Ukraine had as its objective to re-increase its power at an international level by trying to place itself, as it did in the Soviet era, at the head of the states, hostile to the US hegemon, being able to leverage having launched a direct challenge to the Western camp on the field and, at the same time, re-accredit itself as a great power in the West itself for having shown strength so as to be legitimized to possess a sphere of influence in its neighbouring countries, "*Russkiy Mir*"³⁹⁰, with Ukraine included. Objectives that are also contrasting, typically Russian. It is still difficult to assess whether the special operation will have the effect of allowing Moscow to return to lead a US-led block of states hostile to the West and to regain consideration as a great power among Western rivals, but what is certain is that this operation risks making Moscow a minority ally of Beijing, an unacceptable condition for the Russian community.

³⁸⁸ Agnieszka Bryc, "The Russian Federation in reshaping a Post-Cold War Order," *Politeja* 62, no.5 (2019), pp 161-174

³⁸⁹ The Russian doctrine of multilateralism was nevertheless revealed by the foreign minister during the 51st session of the UN General Assembly in 1996. Y. Primakov, *Russian Crossroads. Toward the New Millenium*, London 2004, pp 140-141.

³⁹⁰ Alfonso Giordano, *Limiti. Frontiere, confini e la lotta per il territorio* (Roma: LUISS University Press, 2018).

CHAPTER III

The double-edged sword of Russian energy resources. How the export of raw materials enabled the resurrection of the Russian empire after the collapse of the USSR and the current strategic risk of supply China after the start of the invasion of Ukraine

3.1 The Structural Limits of the Post-Soviet Russian Empire

As discussed in the previous paragraph, the great expansion and contraction of the Soviet Russian Empire during the twentieth century does not derive from the Marxist-Leninist imperial mission, but from the secular cyclical history of expansion and contraction of the Russian Empire due to its geographical condition of having the imperial nucleus located in an immense plain surrounded by other plains that, over the centuries, have facilitated invasions towards its territory by hostile powers that have made the Russian population particularly insecure and therefore interested in the expansion of the first line of defence in every direction, for the purpose of survival that led Moscow to become a land empire boundless and, in the long run, difficult to sustain. Every time it failed to reach a maritime dimension, which would have helped to compensate for the structural disadvantages of a huge land empire, it went towards a downsizing. The possible reasons behind the failure to transform the Soviet Russian Empire into a maritime empire have been analysed in the previous paragraph, a failure to transform that made the Soviet Empire unsustainable in the long run, leading the Russian ruling class at the end of the second millennium to choose a downsizing, abandoning the communist imperial mission with the subsequent configuration of the post-Soviet Russian Empire, subject however to a territorial downsizing that brought it back to a territorial dimension similar to that possessed in the seventeenth century (which consisted of a Muscovite imperial nucleus plus an extension to the south up to the Caspian Sea and to the east up to the Urals and part of Siberia) to which is now added the full control of Siberia up to the Pacific. Continuing to remain the first power in terms of geographical extension, however, this

downsizing has caused the loss of a territory equal to two million square kilometers³⁹¹, (more than the entire European Union) but, above all, it has led to the loss of the buffers in defense of the imperial nucleus in Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, thus leading to the loss of an excellent strategic depth, hard-won over the centuries and which had allowed the Russian empire to survive the invasions suffered by the Swedes, Napoleon and Hitler. Reason that had led the "contemporary Tsar" Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation, a new superstructural entity heir to the Soviet Russian empire³⁹², to admit in a speech given in 2005 that "The fall of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe in Russia's history"³⁹³.

Having the imperial nucleus in an area not far from the European borders and not having natural elements such as natural borders to protect from historically hostile European powers, the loss of defensive depth along the Northern European Plain was the most dangerous for Moscow, which returned to a condition of defensive weakness along the European borders. A condition that rekindled the historical Russian fear of being able to suffer new invasions, a fear that increased enormously with the simultaneous accession in the early years of the third millennium of the countries of Central Eastern Europe, until a few decades earlier allies of Moscow, to the Atlantic Alliance led by the United States. Fear of the Russian community that soon transformed into anger towards the United States hegemon, pointed out by the Russian community as being responsible for this advancement of the Atlantic Alliance towards the Russian borders, with the aim of wanting to significantly reduce the size of the Russian empire. The feeling of fear and anger was soon joined by that of feeling betrayal towards the Americans for not respecting the promise made in 1990 on the guarantee of non-expansion of NATO to the East beyond Germany, in exchange for the reunification and integration of a united Germany into the Western architecture³⁹⁴.

Despite the defeat in the competition with the USA in the decades-long confrontation (Cold War) for global hegemony, with the consequent collapse of the Soviet Union with a reduction in power, managing to maintain an imperial dimension, after a difficult

³⁹¹ Stephen Kotkin, "Russia's Perpetual Geopolitics: Putin Returns to the Historical Pattern," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.5, no.3 (MAY / JUNE 2016).

³⁹² Timothy J. Colton, *Russia. What everyone needs to know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

³⁹³ George Friedman, "Russia's Search for Strategic Depth," *Geopolitical Futures*, 16/11/20.

³⁹⁴ Marc Trachtenberg, "The United States and the NATO Non-extension Assurances of 1990: New Light on an Old Problem?," *International Security*, Vol.45, no.3 (2021).

stabilization of the internal front, in the third millennium there has been the progressive return of the Russian actor on the international scene eager to recover the lost power, an objective supported by a maximalist population, yearning for glory and with a great perception of itself, but at the same time deeply insecure for the loss of strategic depth along the European borders accompanied by the expansion of the Atlantic Alliance and angry towards the United States for having judged Russia a regional power after the collapse of the USSR³⁹⁵ and for having conducted policies aimed at reducing Moscow's power after 1991, therefore eager to return to demonstrate its imperial attitude to its American rivals. Despite the reduction in power that occurred after the collapse of the Soviet Union, continuing to possess a deeply imperial population, proud of its exceptionalism and eager to recover the lost power, turns out to be the greatest component of Russian power, a component not too obvious in the current global scenario, where even the US hegemon presents a divided society with increasingly post-historical ocean coasts and no longer able to tolerate the violence committed over the years to become number one. A component that allows the post-Soviet Russian empire, despite the geographical, demographic, military, and soft power reductions, to implement policies aimed at recovering power. The Russian community's desire to recover strategic depth to increase security and recover a status of great power and thus give a signal of revenge to the US empire are part of the various dimensions of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which therefore finds the support of the Russian community. This maximalist sentiment shared by both the imperial administration, of which President Vladimir Putin is the emblem, and by the population itself that leads Russia to implement violent policies to recover the power lost with the collapse of the USSR starting from the forceful action conducted in Ukraine, must however deal with the limits of the same Russian demographic structure that has aged and decreased in absolute numbers with the collapse of the Soviet Union. The greatest contradiction in the various contradictions of the contemporary Russian empire concerns its community, on the one hand its imperial and maximalist sentiment that leads it to undertake violent actions to recover power, on the other the structural limits of the population itself that slow down such power objectives.

³⁹⁵ Stephen Kotkin, "Russia's Perpetual Geopolitics: Putin Returns to the Historical Pattern," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.95, no.3, (MAY / JUNE 2016).

In addition to the limits of its own demographic structure, a greater limit to the dreams of Moscow hegemony is the one addressed in the previous paragraph, in the analysis of the great expansion and contraction of the Soviet Russian empire in the twentieth century, namely the unsustainability in the long term of a boundless land empire, an unsustainability that as addressed increases beyond measure when the Russian empire fails to transform into a full maritime empire. Therefore, in the event that the Russian empire were to recover part of the power lost with the collapse of the Soviet Union, thanks to the maximalism of its community, despite the limits of its own demographic structure, by achieving a new expansion of the defensive depth towards the West, which will lead to a new increase in geographical size, this will increase the administrative, political and military control by the imperial centre, to hold the empire together and at the same time compete with other powers at a global level, increasing the costs of a highly centralized and expensive system that finds financing mainly from the export of natural resources. The more the empire expands to increase its power, the more the extension of this centralized system will increase, and it will become unsustainable³⁹⁶. To ensure sustainability there are two alternatives. The first is a liberalization of the economy, but this would lead, as happened in the last decade of the second millennium after the collapse of the USSR, to an internal disunity of the empire, which to stay alive requires a strong centralized imperial power, essential to keep such a vast land empire standing. We cannot therefore ignore this strong centralization of central power which, to be sustainable, given the great territorial extension, in the long term requires full access to the ocean routes which, as discussed in the previous paragraphs, is not easy to obtain due to geography, if not through costly wars, with the Arctic route remaining an unknown, the control of which seems linked to the fate of the competition between great powers, given that the US no longer seems willing to grant great controls to Moscow and Beijing³⁹⁷.

Therefore, the post-Soviet empire will seek territorial expansion starting from Ukraine, to meet a strategic need to extend the first line of defense to increase the security of its community, and at the same time to reinvigorate the goal of returning to be a great power that competes if not on equal terms, then at least at good level, with the USA in global scenarios. But, in the long term, if it fails to conquer a full maritime dimension, it will be

³⁹⁶ George Friedman, "The Geopolitics of Russia: Permanent Struggle," *Stratfor*, 15/10/2008.

³⁹⁷ Lucio Caracciolo, "La Grande Componenda," *Limes*, no.1, (2025).

forced to a new downsizing, thus also inscribing itself in the cyclical history of the Russian empire. A cyclical history that has nothing to do with the current imperial mission and form, but with the geographical condition of being a boundless land empire with the imperial nucleus located in a boundless plain not far from adverse powers, which leads the community to desire expansion, which leads the boundless land empire to expand further and which, for its sustainability, requires full access to the maritime routes, difficult to conquer due to geographical conditions.

3.2 Factors that amplified the collapse of the USSR: the ability of the American empire to accelerate the crisis of the highly centralized Soviet system, isolated and dependent on raw material export. A case study to analyse how the strategic limitations of the Russian empire can undermine the ambitions of the post-Soviet Russian empire

To analyse the Russian empire in its current form, that is, the Russian Federation, at a structural level, we must start from the beginning, or rather from the end of the previous imperial guise, the Soviet Union, since the current territorial extension of the Russian empire, and therefore the strategic needs that derive from this current dimension, first of all the expansion in Ukraine, are a consequence of the collapse of the USSR, and at the same time also the current Christian-conservative imperial mission is the result of both the renunciation of communism, with the need to choose a new mission, but also of the current global scenario, since, to use Primakov's words, Russia is strong at an international level when it challenges the West and its hegemon of the moment³⁹⁸, thus the current imperial mission of post-Soviet Russia to defend order and stability at the international level, which for European countries translates into the defence of traditional European values (religion, identity, family, gender) from secular degeneration³⁹⁹, was chosen by the Russian imperial administration specifically because it is more suited to

³⁹⁸ Agnieszka Bryc, "The Russian Federation in Reshaping a Post-Cold War Order," *Politeja* 62, no.5, (2019).

³⁹⁹ Kristina Stoeckl, Dmitry Uzlaner, *L'internazionale moralista. I conservatori russi e la conquista dell'Occidente* (Roma: Luiss University Press, 2024).

challenge the West in the third millennium and therefore more effective in distancing the American hegemon from the old continent.

In the previous paragraphs we also discussed how the decision in the last decade of the second millennium to renounce the communist doctrine to downsize the empire is the result of the unsustainability in the long term of the boundless terrestrial empire, due to geographical and structural conditions amplified by the lack of full access to ocean routes. Although it has been made clear that every Russian imperial form, not reaching a full maritime dimension, has gone towards a reduction, making Russian imperial history a cyclical history of extension and contraction of its territorial dimension, in the analysis carried out on the reduction of the Soviet empire, although an attempt has been made to analyse why Moscow during the empire with a Marxist-Leninist mission did not seek a maritime transformation whose failure to achieve caused a non-sustainability in the long term and therefore a reduction, it has not been explored in depth what were the factors that specifically anticipated the unsustainability. Factors that for the most part derive from the geographical conditions of the Russian empire itself and therefore difficult to counter, and that were amplified by the great competition with the American empire during the years of the Cold War. Since these geographical conditions remain and at the same time Moscow invests in increasing its power to compete again with the American hegemon, such competition risks, as in the case of the USSR, amplifying in the long term the unsustainability of the boundless terrestrial empire and for this reason it is appropriate to analyse what happened in the case of the Soviet Union, since it can potentially be repeated in the case of today's Russian empire, and this represents the greatest obstacle to the ambitions of power for the Russian community and for its leader Vladimir Putin, the latter being a product of its population.

With the transition of the Muscovite kingdom to an imperial dimension, which occurred with the conquest in the 16th century of the kingdoms heirs of the Golden Horde inhabited by populations of Turkish ethnicity and largely of Muslim faith, which gave Moscow for the first time the control of large defensive areas along the steppes to protect its imperial nucleus, Moscow began to face that problem of imperial management, still current, of ensuring that the population of the buffer area⁴⁰⁰ was loyal to Moscow so as to use the

⁴⁰⁰ The population of the buffer zone is in most cases different in ethnicity, faith, and self-narration from that of the dominant Muscovite nucleus.

area as a defensive bastion of the empire and therefore place the "imperial militias" there⁴⁰¹. With the beginning of the imperial dimension, the central power began to be interested in keeping the empire alive and, to do so, it needed full control of the buffer areas so as to use them as a defensive outpost in the event of an invasion by hostile powers. To maintain full control of these buffer areas, the mere placement of military troops was not enough, but measures were needed by the imperial nucleus to gain the loyalty of the populations that inhabited these territories. This loyalty did not happen automatically and to obtain it, policies of seduction were necessary, such as economic expenditure also for the satellite states, but also repressive ones in the event of their rebellion. In any case, these policies entailed a great extension of central power in peripheral territories that were added to the extension of military power for defensive purposes, which together entailed a great centralization of central power, which increased more and more with the extension of the empire. Therefore, the more the empire expanded its territorial dimension, the more the control of the central power increased and the more the costs to maintain the empire increased, at the same time the difficulties also increased. This centralization was a constant in the different imperial forms and therefore also present in the Soviet Russian empire. Centralization of power that was perpetrated by the Bolsheviks after having managed to maintain firm control of the empire with the victory of the civil war against the White armies that ended in 1922, and the very harsh policies of internal repression under Stalin's power such as the "great purges", the "Holodomor"⁴⁰², forced collectivization, the great trials, which caused permanent damage to the demographic structure of the Russian empire, in their brutality were policies aimed at increasing the political, military and economic control of the central power. Strengthening of the central power that was also strengthened beyond measure by the Soviet imperial form⁴⁰³, since in addition to a great centralization of political and military power, in line with the communist ideology, the state took charge of the economic production and modernization of the country which determined an impressive centralization of central power. This increase in the powers of the state in the economy, however, was not a consequence of the communist doctrine, but it was the same Marxist-

⁴⁰¹ George Friedman, "The Geopolitics of Russia: Permanent Struggle," *Stratfor*, 15/10/2008.

⁴⁰² Alfonso Giordano, Flavia Lucenti, "Food as tool of geopolitical pressure: The Russian-Ukrainian case," *Bollettino della Società Geografica italiana serie 14*, no.1 (2018), p.169-180.

⁴⁰³ Odd Arne Westad, *The Cold War. A World History* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2017).

Leninist ideology that was chosen by the central nucleus to strengthen the power of the central nucleus on the boundless terrestrial empire and, at the same time, to possess a universal ideology with which to challenge the West. The centralization of central power was a characteristic, as faced, that did not depend on the current imperial ideology but derived from the geographical condition and obviously with the choice of the communist ideology, this centralization increased disproportionately, enormously increasing the costs of the empire and putting in greater difficulty the sustainability in the long term being already in itself a boundless terrestrial empire without full access to the ocean routes. With the choice and application of communist ideology in the economic field, long-term sustainability was called into question not only because of the great state control over the internal economy, but also because of the great control over exports and foreign investments, which were severely limited, since the presence of foreign "capitalist" private enterprises could undermine the cohesion of the community around the Soviet ideology of the empire. "In 1985 only 4% of the gross national product was connected to foreign trade with countries outside the socialist bloc"⁴⁰⁴.

A choice that contributed to further isolate from global trade a system already isolated by its geographical condition of not having full control of global routes, capable of compensating for the negative effects of a highly centralized boundless land empire. Elements that increased the costs and difficulties of control by the central power in the long term.

Although the Soviet empire was a very large land empire, continuing to possess the geographic core close to the insecure European borders, Moscow took advantage of the victory obtained in the "Great Patriotic War" over the German invader, an element that reinforced its messianism, to realize a large extension of the first defensive line along the Northern European Plain, managing to reach as far as Eastern Germany, so as to increase its security especially on the European side. However, this success in achieving an increase in the security of the imperial core entailed an extension in the satellite states of Central Eastern Europe, which constituted the socialist bloc, both of the imperial Muscovite military apparatus, since with the beginning of the competition with the USA after the Second World War these states represented the first defensive bastion for the Muscovite empire in the event of conflict, and of the political administrative apparatus in

⁴⁰⁴ Ibidem.

order to maintain control of these countries. Furthermore, since these Central Eastern European states had a long national history behind them and bordered on European states included in the US bloc and therefore subject to greater political, economic, social and civil freedoms, Moscow, in addition to extending its political and administrative apparatus, to maintain control over its European satellites, went on to implement a widespread "Orwellian" social control that obviously required many resources. This territorial extension of the Russian Empire in Central and Eastern Europe not only entailed a further centralization of power, but also entailed a further extension of Muscovite political, military and economic structures that contributed to increasing the costs of an already heavily burdened system. In addition to the harsh centralized control of the imperial centre over the periphery typical of the Russian Empire for geographical reasons, the Soviet imperial form meant that Muscovite control over European countries was even more rigid and costly, allowing Moscow to control these regions but without benefiting from it on an economic level⁴⁰⁵, unlike the case of the relationship between the USA and the states of Western Europe.

Furthermore, with the configuration of a difference, determined by their respective systems, between the Soviet and American empires in the management of the relationship with their respective satellite countries in Europe, based on rigid control in the Moscow case and on a strong value attraction in the American case, the foundations are laid for the future value attraction of the West towards these communities of Central Eastern Europe under Russian influence. Attraction that will play a major role in the fall of the socialist bloc and therefore of the USSR and in the choice of these countries, which became independent between 1989 and 1991, to be part of the Atlantic Alliance, which, by expanding, will reawaken the Russian fear of suffering new invasions. Fear has become maximum with the Western attraction of Ukraine, whose ever-increasing propensity to be part of the Western camp has led Russia to exercise increasingly violent actions, starting from the reconquest of Crimea in 2014, support for the separatist republics of Donbass up to the direct intervention in 2022, in order not to lose this strategic territory for Moscow.

In the years following the Second World War, with the beginning of the Cold War and therefore of the competition between the American and Russian empires for hegemony,

⁴⁰⁵ George Friedman, "The Geopolitics of Russia: Permanent Struggle," *Stratfor*, 15/10/2008.

the Soviet empire was already overextended and highly centralized and already required very high costs for its survival, unsustainable in the long term without full access to global trade.

At the same time, its American rival was the first maritime power, an element that allowed it to possess broad control of ocean routes and therefore of global trade, through which it could reduce the costs of its superpower, so as to be able to challenge Moscow without undermining the sustainability of its system. Furthermore, the fact of being a maritime superpower allowed Washington not only to militarily contain Soviet expansionism, but also to isolate it further from global trade, thus increasing the economic difficulties of an already isolated system.

Therefore, already from the beginning of the Cold War it was clear that in the long run a Soviet empire would not be sustainable. Furthermore, since the integration of the Central Eastern European states into Moscow's sphere of influence, perceived by Washington as a threat to its control of the old continent, was followed by the beginning of the American containment of Russian expansionism in Europe also from a military point of view with the creation of the Atlantic Alliance in 1949, which was also followed by greater Russian military involvement with the creation of the Warsaw Pact in 1955, thus triggering a military-technological competition that, if it did not produce a direct conflict, nevertheless entailed very high costs for both empires, in the Soviet case such military competition further overloaded an already overloaded system. Therefore, the intensification of the Cold War further undermined the sustainability of the Russian-Soviet empire. The turning point in the competition between the Russian and American empires for hegemony can be traced back to a specific time period, the 1980s, since in that period events occurred that accelerated the unsustainability of the Soviet system. In that decade, under the Reagan administration, the United States contributed to further expanding the global market with further support for the export of the capitalist model to more areas of the world⁴⁰⁶ and the great growth of the Asian economies that embraced this economic model and the very results of the American economy and the very perception of the Western community, seemed to be a proof of the triumph of the Western capitalist model⁴⁰⁷, since, at the same time, the Soviet Russian empire remained increasingly isolated on an

⁴⁰⁶ Odd Arne Westad, *The Cold War. A World History* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2017).

⁴⁰⁷ Ibidem

economic level and the communist ideology itself envisaged an overcoming of the capitalist model that was not happening. Since the Russian empire based its soft power on an international level on the communist ideology, this enthusiasm, which was being generated around the expansion of the global capitalist market driven by the USA, represented a hard blow to the communist model propagated by Moscow, both on an international level, but also on an internal level in the socialist bloc, especially in the satellite states of Central Eastern Europe, since these communities, bordering European states with a Western socio-economic model, were increasingly starting to look at the benefits of the Western model since the communist model applied in their societies was not providing benefits but a rigid and iron control of the central power. This would have favoured in a few years the Western attraction, both in terms of values and economics, of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe under Moscow which contributed to the crisis of the socialist bloc which in turn had a great impact on the collapse of the USSR.

In addition to a difficulty from the point of view of international soft power, in the same years, the very real sustainability of the Soviet Russian empire and its development model entered into crisis. It was faced as with the expansion of Central and Eastern Europe and the beginning of the Cold War for Moscow it was increasingly difficult to keep the empire together and at the same time compete with Washington for hegemony. The absence of a developed internal economic market like those in the West due to difficulties in internal connections due to the geographical boundlessness and the climate meant that the Soviet Russian empire imported goods from abroad necessary for the sustenance of its community despite being able to produce them internally, and to be able to do this it used the proceeds from the sale of energy resources to obtain hard currency to use to meet import credits⁴⁰⁸. Once the expenditure for the maintenance of the community was satisfied, the rest of the proceeds from the revenues obtained from the export of energy resources were invested in industry, especially for the military sector. Therefore, the Soviet system, in addition to being highly expensive, was heavily dependent on the export of gas and oil. For these reasons, the collapse of the price of oil in the 1980s⁴⁰⁹ seriously undermined the sustainability of the Soviet Russian empire⁴¹⁰ and undermined the very

⁴⁰⁸ Stefano Casertano, "Il petrolio fu l'arma finale contro l'Urss," *Limes*, 26/01/2015

⁴⁰⁹ Aldo Ferrari, *Russia. Storia di un impero eurasiatico* (Milano: Mondadori Libri, 2024).

⁴¹⁰ Odd Arne Westad, *The Cold War. A World History* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2017).

image of the Soviet communist model since the revenues from energy resources were used to buy primary goods and with the collapse of prices many citizens found empty supermarkets, with great damage to the image of the Soviet system at an international level⁴¹¹. Damage to the image both at an international level, but also for the stability of the empire itself, since the anger of the communities of the satellite states of Central and Eastern Europe increased for an increasingly rigid and less efficient system, while they were increasingly exposed to the image of greater well-being conferred by the Western model. Behind the collapse of the price of oil that strongly destabilized the Soviet economic system there was also a precise strategy of Washington, since knowing the "double-edged sword"⁴¹² of energy resources in the Russian case, capable at the same time of supporting an expansion of economic growth and of the geopolitical sphere of influence or of amplifying a crisis of the imperial centre if turned against it, the Reagan administration increased its oil production to favour the decrease in the price of Russian oil⁴¹³ so as to strike the first decisive blow to the already fragile Soviet system, weighed down by huge costs and the stagnation of the Soviet economy⁴¹⁴. Stagnation increased by the fact that, while Western economies, thanks to investments in technological innovation, entered the information economic model, the Soviet Union, relying on the export of raw materials to keep the boundless empire united and, at the same time, investing in heavy industry to compete with Washington, failed to modernize its economy, and its development model slipped more and more into the background compared to the Western one. Two other actions by the Reagan administration in the same decade contributed to accelerating the collapse of the USSR. The first was the huge increase in spending in the military and defence sector, relaunched by the US empire between 1981 and 1985⁴¹⁵ with the famous "Star Wars" program. An impressive expenditure, which came to represent 30% of the American federal budget⁴¹⁶ and that Moscow had to support, if it wanted to continue the competition with the American hegemon, but it was unable to do so due to the economic crisis of the Soviet system and, for this reason, the idea began

⁴¹¹ Ibidem.

⁴¹² Leonardo Bellodi, *Gas e Potere. Geopolitica dell'energia dalla Guerra Fredda a oggi* (Roma: Luiss University Press, 2022).

⁴¹³ Stefano Casertano, "Il petrolio fu l'arma finale contro l'Urss," *Limes*, 26/01/2015.

⁴¹⁴ Aldo Ferrari, *Russia. Storia di un impero eurasiatico* (Milano: Mondadori Libri, 2024).

⁴¹⁵ Odd Arne Westad, *The Cold War. A World History* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2017).

⁴¹⁶ Alberto Mario Banti, *L'età contemporanea. Dalla Grane Guerra a oggi* (Bari-Roma: Laterza Editori, 2009).

to grow in the Soviet ruling class that it was not able to compete with Washington and therefore that it was necessary to downsize the empire to compete at lower costs. Finally, the second US action, which contributed to giving the final blow to the Soviet Russian empire, was the support for the mujaheddin, the Afghan Islamic resistance groups, supported after the start of the Russian invasion of Afghanistan which began in 1979. This was a rollback tactic, aimed at stopping Russian expansion in Afghanistan, thus preventing further Moscow expansion into the Persian Gulf states, which would have provided Moscow with access to the ocean and vast oil resources with which to potentially obtain revenues to stop the empire's crisis, and at the same time aimed at making a Russian victory difficult so as to prolong Moscow's intervention, thus increasing the costs of the already fragile Soviet system and increasing dissatisfaction among both the Russian administration and the Russian community, thus hastening the collapse of the Soviet Russian empire. In fact, this American support for Islamic resistance groups was successful, since through American support, these groups made a Moscow victory difficult and what was supposed to be a rapid Russian intervention turned into the "Vietnam of the USSR", since given the context of the Cold War and the internal condition of the Soviet empire, the Russians needed a victory, and above all in a short time, but with an ever-increasing resistance from the mujaheddin, year after year the Russians increased their involvement until the presence of 200,000 soldiers, but despite the great involvement they were unable to impose themselves and in 1989, ten years after the beginning of the intervention, there was the Russian withdrawal. The Russian withdrawal from Afghanistan represented a very strong economic, but above all moral, backlash for the Russian Soviet empire. For the imperial political centre and for the Russian community, the Russian failure in Afghanistan represented the definitive proof of their inability to compete with the American empire for hegemony, hence the need for the Russian imperial administration to downsize the empire, to reduce the costs that had become unsustainable and for the Russian community the need to renounce the Soviet imperial form because it was incapable of leading to glory. For this reason, the Russian population neither opposed the will of the political centre to downsize the empire nor supported the 1991 coup d'état aimed at restoring the Soviet empire, but they did not even support Gorbachev's attempt at reform, because he was guilty of wanting to reform the system on the Western model, instead supporting Boris Yeltsin's project of the Russian Federation. Another proof of the

imperialism and exceptionalism of the Russian collective that renounces its own imperial form when it is incapable of leading to glory and hegemony, suffering humiliations abroad and that renounces its own leader when "he is enchanted by other people's culture"⁴¹⁷. The withdrawal from Afghanistan accelerated the irreversible crisis of the Soviet system, already largely underway, contributing significantly to the decision of the imperial centre to downsize the empire, formalized by the act of dissolution of the USSR signed by Russia, Ukraine and Belarus on December 8, 1991, followed by Gorbachev's resignation speech on December 25 with the historic replacement of the USSR flag in the Kremlin with that of the Russian Federation⁴¹⁸. The Russian Federation was the heir to the Soviet Russian Empire and, after a few years of stabilization, would return to the international scene as an imperial actor. Only the imperial form had changed, but Russia continued to be an empire, with the same dominant nucleus and the same geographical centre, located as always in that Sarmatian lowland that had always created anxiety and fear of invasion. As already discussed, the choice to downsize the empire generated a downsizing of power, first of all geographical, since the Russian empire returned to having a size similar to that of the 17th century, thus losing large areas to protect its imperial nucleus. This downsizing, which occurred at the end of the second millennium, arose from the unsustainability of a boundless land empire that was highly centralized and isolated from global trade in the long term. The conditions for this downsizing that occurred at the end of the second millennium, as we have seen, were already present at the beginning of the Cold War, whose competition would have only accelerated the disintegration, with the United States able to hit the Russian empire in its weak points: as in the case of hydrocarbons, undermining the strategic use of these by the Russian imperial centre, in the case of the socialist bloc of Eastern European states, attracted economically and in terms of values by Washington so as to undermine the relationship between the Muscovite imperial centre and the buffer states along the European plain and finally in the case of Afghanistan, favouring a Russian bog down so as to increase both the costs of an already unsustainable empire and the dissatisfaction of the Russian community, dissatisfaction that would have definitively distanced the Russian community from the

⁴¹⁷ Dario Fabbri, *Sotto la pelle del mondo* (Milano: Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore, 2024).

⁴¹⁸ Carolina De Stefano, *Storia del potere in Russia. Dagli zar a Putin* (Brescia: Editrice Morcelliana, 2022).

Soviet imperial form. The American empire was therefore able to accelerate the disintegration of the Soviet Russian empire. But if for the American empire this disintegration of the Soviet Russian empire had one meaning, for the Russians it had another. It was the origin of that misunderstanding between the two empires on the end of the USSR, still ongoing, and one of the main reasons behind the increase in tension between Russia and the USA in the third millennium. Tension that will increase in step and degree with the increase in Russian violence in its “near abroad”: from Georgia in 2008, to Crimea in 2014, up to the great current tension between West and East generated by the large-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. With Ukraine increasingly being the epicentre in the third millennium of local, regional, international tensions.

For the Russians, the decision to downsize their empire with the end of the USSR was a deliberate decision since, since the Soviet system had become unsustainable from a cost point of view, through downsizing, Moscow wanted to create a more sustainable system, but continuing to be an empire and a great power, with the idea of temporarily suspending the rivalry with the USA but resuming it as soon as its internal and regional scenario had stabilized and there was no idea at all of losing influence over the space that had until then been under the control of the Soviet Union⁴¹⁹. The problem was in the very structure of the Soviet Russian Empire created in 1922, since the Bolsheviks, having won the civil war in 1920 and gained control of the imperial centre, in order to reconcile the management of an empire with an anti-imperialist ideology, structured the empire as a federation composed of ethno-national republics on paper "sovereign and with the right to withdraw"⁴²⁰ and with the collapse of the USSR in 1991 these fifteen republics, including Russia, which made up the USSR became truly independent. In Moscow's plans, the independence of the ex-Soviet republics in 1991 could, and should, be reconciled with the idea of a more sustainable empire, since by becoming independent these states would weigh less on the finances of the Moscow centre but had to return to the Russian sphere of influence. Confirmation of this Moscow desire to maintain control and leadership of the former Soviet space can be found in the project launched by Moscow in the same year as the collapse of the USSR to create a supranational body to lead the

⁴¹⁹ Alfonso Giordano, *Limiti. Frontiere, confini e la lotta per il territorio* (Roma: Luiss University Press, 2018).

⁴²⁰ Carolina De Stefano, *Storia del potere in Russia. Dagli zar a Putin* (Brescia: Editrice Morcelliana, 2022).

new independent states, the Commonwealth of Independent States⁴²¹. For Moscow, it was crucial that the states that constituted the first ring of protection, such as the Baltic states, Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Kazakhstan, were part of this supranational community led by Russia. But, from the very beginning, Moscow's plans clashed with the will of the new states to maintain their independence.

In any case, in Moscow's head remained the idea of having remained a great power, of not having lost the confrontation with the United States, but of having chosen a downsizing and a reconfiguration to be able to return in the future to challenge the great American rival.

An idea different from that of the Americans who interpreted the collapse of the Soviet Russian empire as a sign of their victory in the bipolar confrontation with Moscow, which gave Washington the status of the only global power. Furthermore, Washington interpreted the new post-Soviet Russia as a actor greatly reduced in size compared to the USSR and therefore as a regional and no longer global power. This led to different interpretations between the two actors at the time of the expansion of the Atlantic Alliance, which occurred at the end of the second millennium and the first years of the third millennium in the states that until a few years before had been part of the socialist bloc, since the Americans, considering themselves the only global power, felt they had the right to reconfigure the security architecture of the European space without consulting Moscow since the latter was now considered a regional power by the Americans. While the Russian community, which wanted to maintain a strong influence on the post-Soviet space and in its mind remained the idea of itself as a world power, interpreted this Western expansion towards its borders as a hostile act⁴²²: both because the Americans betrayed their promise of non-expansion of NATO ⁴²³, and because it reawakened the idea of a new invasion, and because Moscow was considered a regional player and not a great power. This represented the origin of a new tension between the United States and Russia, which has gradually increased with the progressive return of Moscow in global relations as a great power.

⁴²¹ Alfonso Giordano, *Limiti. Frontiere, confini e la lotta per il territorio* (Roma: Luiss University Press, 2018).

⁴²² Alfonso Giordano, "Relazioni UE- Russia, Energia e Politica Internazionale," *Europae – Quartely of European Affairs*, (2009)

⁴²³ Serdar S. Guner, "Geopolitics, Geography, And Ukraine-Russia War," *Transatlantic Policy Quartely* 21 (2022), pp 83-92.

3.3 The Post-Soviet Russian Empire. Putin's Thesis and the Imperial Renaissance Based on the Control and Export of Energy Resources. The Strategic Danger of Having Replaced China with Europe as a Trading Partner Following the War in Ukraine

The analysis of the collapse of the Soviet Russian Empire has shown the unsustainability in the long term of a boundless land empire, with a highly centralized development model, with a huge state expenditure in the economy, isolated from international trade and heavily dependent on the export of energy resources for the functioning of the system and for competition on a global scale. But as discussed in the previous paragraphs, if the huge presence of the imperial center in the economy was amplified by the communist ideology, specifically chosen to hold the empire together and challenge the Western powers, however, the strong political and economic control of the central power and a strong dependence on the export of raw materials to support power policies are characteristics that have remained in the post-Soviet empire. They have remained since they are connected to the same structural condition of continuing to be a boundless land empire and to keep the empire alive, the central power needs a strong control over politics and the economy to prevent centrifugal forces from crumbling the empire again, composed of a multitude of ethnic groups and confessions. Furthermore, since Russia possesses a large amount of raw materials, the large revenues from the export of these resources have allowed the Russian Federation, reborn from the collapse of the USSR, to face the historical and not simple geopolitical problem of holding together a boundless empire and at the same time defending it and therefore expanding the first line of defence to increase the security of the imperial core and thus also regain the status of a great power. And so, despite a partial liberation of the economy, the political-administrative elite of the Russian Federation, reborn from the collapse of the USSR, after the failure of the neo-liberal and privatization policies of the nineties of the twentieth century, has regained strong control over raw materials, and therefore over the revenues from the export of these, to maintain control of the empire and at the same time to massively reinvest in the defence sector to be able to carry out military actions aimed at maintaining leadership in the ex-Soviet space and returning as a global power.

The symbolic figure of the ambition of the post-Soviet ruling class of the third millennium of an imperial rebirth, based on a strong control of the central power over the export of raw materials is the one who became President on 31 December 1999 and is still at the top of power⁴²⁴, Vladimir Putin. This model of the revival of Russian power, based on state control of energy resources, which will characterize his presidency, was already clear to Vladimir Putin even before becoming president of the Russian Federation and clearly emerges in his doctoral thesis at the St. Petersburg Mining Institute, published in June 1997 and dedicated precisely to the methods of obtaining geopolitical and geo-economic benefits from strategic control of raw materials by the state⁴²⁵.

This thesis of the candidate Putin assumes great importance, since the specific indications by the graduate present in the thesis on how to best organize the control of the Russian raw materials market in order to maximize the profits to be allocated to the increase of Russian power, in the space of a few years, with his rise to the top of power on the last day of the second millennium, will be actually implemented and will have a decisive role in the rebirth of Russian power⁴²⁶.

Among the most relevant indications that will actually be implemented is the recommendation to the state to create multinational companies on the Western model, while maintaining control over them, so as to be considered reliable by countries with a high level of industrialization, such as the European ones, which need a stable energy supply at a good price, so as to maximize profits and allocate them to measures aimed at increasing power, such as policies to support birth rates or the strengthening and modernization of the military sector⁴²⁷.

In fact, this choice of creating companies on the Western model to give an idea of credibility to the European states, which needed a large quantity of cheap energy from a reliable country for the functioning of their industrial system, proved to be a wise choice, since Moscow, already in the early years of the new millennium, managed to obtain important investments so as to have the monetary funds necessary to stabilize the internal

⁴²⁴ Alfonso Giordano, *Limiti. Frontiere, confini e la lotta per il territorio* (Roma: Luiss University Press, 2018).

⁴²⁵ Leonardo Bellodi, *Gas e potere. Geopolitica dell'energia dalla Guerra fredda a oggi* (Roma: Luiss University Press, 2022).

⁴²⁶ Ibidem

⁴²⁷ Vladimir Putin, "Vladimir Putin's Academic Writings and Russian Natural Resource Policy," *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol.53, no.1, (January/February 2006), pp 48-54.

scenario of the country, disastrous after years of uncertainty due to the collapse of the USSR, and lay the foundations for the return as a great power. The idea already contained in Putin's paper to create companies on the Western model for the export of resources, such as the most famous Gazprom, to be perceived in Europe as a credible country turned out to be spot on, since in the West, especially in Europe, in the early years of the third millennium and of Putin's presidency, not only were these companies considered reliable, but also thanks to their Western form and elements of market economy, the idea of a Russia that was increasingly looking to the Western model was gaining ground and that in the years to come would behave not as an empire but as a nation-state that was no longer maximalist, also because many academics foresaw an abandonment of maximalism by the Russian community with the demographic reduction that occurred with the collapse of the USSR⁴²⁸.

If Europeans believed that, with Western-style companies and simple forms of market economy, Russia at the beginning of the third millennium was preparing to become a quiet European country, attracted by the Western model and denying the Soviet past of hyper-statism, in reality, behind the Russian energy multinationals was hidden the control of the central power and the management of resources aimed at supporting the goal of returning to being a great empire. If post-Soviet Russia had renounced Soviet hyper-statism because it was unsustainable in the long term, on the other hand it could not completely liberalize the economy, because continuing to be a very large terrestrial empire, an economic liberalization would have crumbled the empire and a hyper-liberalization of the economy was denied by the same population that, faced with the economic chaos caused by the wild privatizations of the nineties favoured by the West, had associated the idea of great economic liberalization with the West intent on downgrading Russian power. Furthermore, the wild liberalization of the economy in the 1990s following the collapse of the USSR meant that control of raw materials, in many cases, had passed from the state to individual subjects, the oligarchs, with the risk that they might not satisfy Moscow's interests. What Putin indicates in his thesis and that will be favoured in his administration is a simple principle, namely that the state had to regain control of resources, a very immediate means to immediately get money back, so as to

⁴²⁸ Jennifer D. Sciubba, *8 Billion and Counting. How Sex, Death and Migration Shape Our World* (New York: W. W. Norton e Company, 2022).

heal the system and return to power in the shortest time possible. The choice of the post-Soviet administration of a Western business model for companies controlling the export of raw materials, can be compared to the policies of Tsar Peter the Great or Tsarina Catherine, to modernize the system looking at the Western model to be able to compete with the Western powers and the same happened with Putin: draining knowledge from the West to fill its technological backwardness, to return to challenge the West and, energy resources would have represented a simple but effective means to return to compete as a great power with the American-led West in a few years.

By doing so, however, unlike the case of Tsar Peter the Great or Tsarina Catherine, Putin is not accused of being too Western, because through the proceeds of the resources Putin from the beginning of his administration will respond to the simple needs of his community: to restore internal social order after the chaos that followed the collapse of the USSR and to return to acting in foreign policy, to obtain greater defensive depth capable of restoring security and at the same time regaining power. The fact that Putin from the beginning of his inauguration will respond to these needs of his community will ensure that he will receive consensus from it.

The ever-increasing supply of Russian gas and oil to European countries in the third millennium has represented a win-win solution. For the states of the old continent, Russian hydrocarbons have represented a large, constant flow of low-cost energy ideal for their own market economy, while for Russia, Europe has represented a certain, safe and profitable market⁴²⁹, with the possibility of obtaining constant profits with which to refinance its power. Since energy relations also convey geopolitical relations, in addition to the economic advantages for both, this commercial relationship responded to the geopolitical needs of both. For Russia, the supply of gas, and above all the construction of gas pipelines connecting Russia with the countries of the old continent, as in the case of the North Stream built in 2005⁴³⁰ which directly connected Russia and Germany, represented a tool to increase its geopolitical influence in Europe. Furthermore, the fact of having European countries as the main outlet market for its raw materials represented a strategic commercial alliance also from a geopolitical point of view since most

⁴²⁹ Alfonso Giordano, "Relazioni UE-Russia, Energia e Politica Internazionale," *Europae – Quartely of European Affairs*, (2009).

⁴³⁰ Cristoph Hasselbach, "North Stream: Gas, politics and war", *Deutsche Welle*, 15/8/24.

European countries did not have ambitions of conquering Russian territory and if there were historical rivalries as in the Polish case, and in any case given the present geographical distance, they did not represent a vital threat to Russia. While the replacement market for the European one for Moscow is represented by Asia, first and foremost by China, but the latter, if it were to replace the European countries, as happened after the beginning of the conflict in Ukraine in 2022, would represent a strategic threat⁴³¹ to Moscow, as China is a cumbersome neighbour for Moscow given Beijing's demographic advantage and China's ambitions to control the neighbouring regions under Russian control in Siberia and Central Asia in order to obtain large territorial resources and raw materials with which to support the already large demographic structure of the Han empire so as to strengthen itself as a great power. For the European countries themselves, the commercial link with Moscow represented a strategic opportunity to balance the excessive dependence on Washington on other fronts, such as the military one. But it is precisely this last element, namely the fact that European countries are located within the American sphere of influence, and the fact that Russia, even after the collapse of the Soviet empire, remained a rival power to Washington, which has undermined closer cooperation between European countries and Russia and this has prevented greater Russian insertion into the European energy distribution market, which has precluded a modernization of the Russian hydrocarbon processing and transportation industry⁴³². In fact, since the beginning of the third millennium, with the progressive increase in imports of Russian energy resources by European countries, accompanied by the ever-increasing strengthening of Moscow as an imperial player financed by the proceeds of raw materials, Washington has simultaneously increasingly seen this commercial relationship between Moscow and Europe as a factor destabilizing its control of the old continent, control of the old continent which remains for Washington crucial to continuing to be the global hegemon.

In 2021, one year after the start of the conflict in Ukraine on a larger scale, we had arrived at the scenario in which for Russia the European market represented three-quarters of total gas exports abroad and two-thirds of total oil exports⁴³³.

⁴³¹ Alfonso Giordano, "Relazioni UE-Russia, Energia e Politica Internazionale," *Europae- Quartely of European Affairs*, (2009).

⁴³² Ibidem

⁴³³ Alexander Etkind, *Russia Against Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023)

For the European Union states, Russian gas accounted for 40 percent of total gas imports and oil for 15 percent⁴³⁴. The beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 represented for the United States a perfect opportunity to sever this relationship, much more than a simple commercial relationship, between Russia and Europe. Impossible to eliminate completely, however in response to the invasion, the European countries, at American urging, began a massive wave of sanctions against Russia which led to a strong reduction in trade and therefore also in the purchase of raw materials and Moscow replaced the European market with the Chinese one, with Beijing becoming from 2022 "the first importer, below the market price, of Siberian hydrocarbons and wheat⁴³⁵", with the realization of the strategic risk for Moscow of having in the cumbersome Chinese neighbour its first commercial partner. The realization of this scenario has allowed the United States to hit several goals at the same time. First of all, Washington knowing how the control and export of raw materials plays a primary role in the stability of the Russian system and in strengthening its power and knowing well from direct experience how in the case in which it was possible to undermine this relationship between the sale of raw materials and the increase of Russian power, such a break would have devastating consequences for the stability of the Russian system, as discussed in the previous paragraph when the Americans in the 1980s by increasing their oil production caused the price of Russian oil to collapse which dealt a great blow to the Soviet system already in crisis.

Knowing the Russian system, Washington took advantage of this historical juncture following the invasion of Ukraine to break again the relationship between raw materials and Russian power. They encouraged European allies to sanction Russia, so that there would be a decrease in the trade relationship between Russia and Europe, so that Moscow, due to the need for funding to support an empire at war, would replace the European market with the Chinese one, with the consequence of becoming more dependent on Beijing. A scenario that, when it occurred, began to expose Moscow to a double strategic problem: not only becoming more dependent on a cumbersome neighbour with the ambition of acquiring control of Russian lands and resources to support its own empire, but also that given by the fact, as discussed in previous chapters, that for historical

⁴³⁴ Ibidem

⁴³⁵ Dario Fabbri, "Biglietto per la storia," *Domino*, no. 1 (2025).

reasons, if the Russian community were to realize that it had become a minority partner of an Asian participant, it would cause it a trauma with unpredictable consequences. As discussed, due to the great idea of itself, for the Russian community the awareness of its own reduction of power would already be a huge trauma, which would increase considerably if the awareness of reduction were to be accompanied by that of becoming a minority partner of an Asian power. These latest strategic risks have held back further Russian involvement in the war in Ukraine compared to that shown on the ground, since a greater involvement than that shown would have required additional resources, which would have been obtained from greater exports of raw materials to Beijing, which would have made Moscow more dependent on its Asian neighbour, with the risk that if the Russian community had realized such a crushing towards an Eastern participant it would have had unpredictable consequences. However, the Americans, continuing to have China as their main rival and after having favoured a rapprochement of Russia towards China, after three years of conflict in Ukraine, have begun to worry about an excessive Chinese strengthening from the obtaining of Russian resources, which would increase more and more as the war drags on.

For this reason, the American apparatus, in addition to not intervening directly on the field in defence of Kiev and granting Kiev sufficient military aid to avoid losing, so as not to bring the conflict with Moscow to a level beyond that already underway, after three years of conflict is pushing for a conclusion to the conflict, so as to try to carry out the not simple operation of tearing Moscow from Beijing and using Russia in an anti-Chinese key, since for Washington the first rival remains China. A not simple operation for Washington, given the historical rivalry with Moscow and the contemporary frictions on many global fronts deriving from Russia's desire to be a great world power, but which could lead to a dialogue with Moscow, since Russia itself is aware of the strategic risk of having become too dependent on its cumbersome neighbour China and of the unpredictability of reaction, if the community were to notice this slide toward the Asian actor. Moscow's use of North Korean troops in the conflict in Ukraine could also be read as a signal to Beijing as evidence of a potential Russian-Korean rapprochement, with an anti-Chinese function in the event of excessive Chinese power⁴³⁶.

⁴³⁶ Lorenzo Maria Ricci, "Aprire alla Russia senza perdere la faccia, il dilemma degli americani," *Domino*, no.1 (2025)

Reasons that have led to greater dialogue between Russia and the US, with the entry into office of the re-elected US President Donald Trump. The future of trade relations between Russia and Europe will also depend on this not simple outcome of the American attempt to tear Moscow away from China, and above all the future of the relationship of the supply of energy resources between Russia and Europe, since in the event of a Russian-American rapprochement with an anti-Chinese function it is not excluded that the supply could return to pre-war levels, also because Moscow, in the event of a closure with Beijing, would need an outlet market to finance its empire and its ambitions. Russian imperial ambitions that at any moment risk breaking the dialogue that is emerging with Washington.

In any case, the future of the energy relationship between Russia and Europe will depend on Washington's choice whether to allow a resumption of the relationship or not. If we were to base ourselves on the US behaviour from the beginning of the war in Ukraine to today, the signals are not positive. The Americans, as faced, took advantage of the conflict in Ukraine to favour a break in the energy supply between Russia and Europe, once again able to undermine that Russian relationship between the sale of raw materials and the increase in power, making sure that by hooking up with China, the sale of resources was now connected to a strategic risk for Moscow. Furthermore, Washington immediately replaced Moscow, albeit to a lesser extent, in the supply of energy resources to the old continent, with "the opening of the European market to American producers of liquefied natural gas"⁴³⁷. Finally, a few months after the start of the large-scale conflict in Ukraine, on September 26, 2022, under still unclear circumstances, where the German government accuses Ukrainian individuals ⁴³⁸, the sabotage of the Nord Stream gas pipelines occurred, which represented the direct gas supply link between Russia and Germany, the main symbol of the energy supply of Russian gas to Europe.

Because of this uncertainty, it is impossible to make predictions about the future of the energy supply relationship between Russia and Europe, but what is certain is that Moscow needs control of its resources to support its empire and its ambitions, also because in recent decades Putin has failed to modernize the economy and build a system that is not

⁴³⁷ Leonardo Bellodi, *Gas e potere. Geopolitica dell'energia dalla Guerra Fredda a oggi* (Roma: Luis University Press, 2022).

⁴³⁸ Chiara Azzarini, "La Germania s'affida allo stellone," *Domino*, no.12 (2024).

dependent on energy resources. Failure due to the very structure of the boundless terrestrial empire, where the central nucleus needs a strong central power to hold the empire together and, unable to liberalize the economy to avoid disintegration, has leveraged the sale of resources, to stabilize the chaotic internal scenario after the collapse of the USSR and therefore keep the empire alive and, at the same time, to recover strength and power on the international scene.

3.4 The Conservative Christian Eurasian Empire: Ideology and Ambition of the Post-Soviet Russian Empire, a maximalist actor limited by its strategic limits that has returned a great power through the exploitation of its resources and challenges American hegemony with asymmetric wars

In the previous paragraphs we have addressed how the long-term unsustainability of the Russian Soviet empire, as a boundless land empire isolated from international trade with great control of central political and economic power and excessively dependent on the sale of raw materials, led to its downsizing at the end of the second millennium. But in the last paragraph it was explored in depth how due to structural geographical conditions, although reducing the scope compared to the Soviet imperial form, even the post-Soviet Russian empire could not do without great political and economic control of the central power to keep the empire alive. Furthermore, it was analyzed how the great availability of raw materials in the territory of the empire, and their sale, represented an ideal tool for the central government to rebuild in the space of a few years both an internal social order, lost after years of chaos following the collapse of the Ussr and therefore keep the empire alive, and at the same time have the means to refinance and rebuild an army capable of carrying out military operations in foreign policy to avoid losing further territories of the empire (Chechnya) and to increase the defensive depth (Georgia, Ukraine) and therefore to recover the lost power. It was also addressed how these violent operations of the reborn Russian empire in the third millennium were supported by a community, which despite having suffered a strong imperial downsizing with the collapse of the Ussr, remained profoundly maximalist and eager to recover a defensive depth to protect the imperial nucleus, both for fear of suffering a new invasion, a fear amplified by the territorial

reduction suffered and by the contemporary expansion of the Atlantic Alliance, and because it was eager to reaffirm its power against the United States, guilty according the Russians of having taken advantage of the Russian difficulty in the moment of the imperial restructuring following the renunciation of the communist ideology to amplify Russian weakness and to seek a further downsizing of the Muscovite empire.

In the post-Soviet Russian empire of the third millennium the very fact of having maintained, despite the downsizing it has suffered, a profoundly imperial community, proud of its exceptionalism and yearning for glory, constitutes, together with the maintained geographical greatness, the true strength of the Russian empire.

In fact, compared to other empires relevant in contemporary global dynamics, Russia presents a highly limiting demographic structure both in terms of absolute numbers (estimates range between 143-146 million) and in terms of a high average age typical of post-historical European countries (44.6) and a limited economy that is based on the extraction and sale of raw materials to finance empire. But compared to other empires, the fact of continuing to possess a cohesive community in the search for imperial ambitions remains a great strength since this element remains increasingly rare and even the American global hegemon in the second decade of the Third millennium presents a fractured and divided society with a good half of the community wanting to renounce the empire.

Since the rebirth of the post-Soviet empire, the political-administrative elite and the community have been cohesive in the reaffirmation of Russia as a great power and in fact the imperial center has spent an impressive amount of financial resources, obtained from the sale of raw materials, to restructure the military apparatus and in the decade 2000-2020 it spent an amount greater than a trillion dollars⁴³⁹ in the restructuring of the defense sector, an immense figure if compared to the economic and demographic structures of the empire and in the first twenty years of the third millennium the funds allocated to the military budget grew by a factor of seven compared to the 2.5 in the United States⁴⁴⁰.

However, despite the large amount of money spent to modernize and expand the army to carry out actions to recover defensive depth and status as a great power, the Russian empire in the Third millennium compared to the Soviet Empire, although maintaining

⁴³⁹ Alexander Etkind, *Russia Against Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023).

⁴⁴⁰ Ibidem

nuclear deterrence, no longer appears to be a military superpower, as also highlighted by the difficulties encountered in the attempt to conquer Ukraine, where Moscow had to give up a conquest of the entire country and concentrated on the conquest of Donbass regions and coastal strip of the Black Sea to create a hinterland to Crimea to consolidate great control of the Black Sea to aspire to access vital ocean routes.

But ever since Vladimir Putin came to power and with Russia's progressive return to global dynamics and therefore with Moscow's return to violent actions in foreign policy to regain greatness, it immediately emerged that Russia recognized its limit and developed military tactics that took these limitations into account also in the military sector, making great use of asymmetric warfare operations, no longer having a huge military army as in the case of the Soviet empire. In fact, in the third millennium, in every violent action by Moscow in its near abroad or in international scenarios, the clash on the field has been accompanied by asymmetric operations, such as cyber-attacks and informatic wars.

Of these asymmetric operations, the most famous are the use of mercenary military troops, with the Wagner company the most famous of these, under Muscovite control, but not possessing Russian military uniforms which allowed Moscow to carry out war actions either in neighboring abroad countries, or in Syria or in the African continent, so as to recover power and at the same time not be accused of direct involvement. Other famous Russian asymmetric warfare operations include the use of cyber attacks or information wars through social media aimed at dividing public opinion in Western countries or aimed at countries opposed to the Western camp to inflame their anti-Western anger as done in Africa.

To keep the empire united and simultaneously carry out operations aimed at recovering lost power, the post-Soviet Russian empire of third millennium has embraced ideologies in line with its objectives. To keep the empire united and not suffer new downsizing, Moscow in the third millennium, taking advantage of the fact that it has elements of the steppe populations in its identity, has increasingly relaunched the concept of Russia as a beacon and guide of Eurasian civilization, in order to keep the ethnically non-Russian minority of Central Asia origin located in the Muscovite empire under its control and not undergo new downsizing, so as to relaunch a Muscovite exceptionalism to unite all these populations of the empire under the command of Moscow in the reconquest of the ex-Soviet space. And also for the objective of maintaining the empire internally cohesive to

regain the territories lost with the collapse of URSS, Moscow has relaunched the ideology of being by history and divine will called to regain control of the space historically under the control of Moscow, the *Russkiy Mir*. When these violent actions in the near abroad are undertaken as in Georgia (2008), Crimea (2014) and recently in Ukraine, Moscow exploits the presence of ethnic Russians or only Russian speakers to justify ambitions of conquest with the will and duty to protect Russian minorities in neighboring countries. Finally, as already addressed in the previous paragraphs, the post-soviet empire, having abandoned the communist ideology and having to find a new imperial ideology to unite the community and to challenge the West to recover power, found a new imperial mission in Christian conservative and in the defense of stability and order from chaos. A mission no longer with a universal scope but which is adapted in every global context to challenge American hegemony. In the West this mission translates into a defense of conservatism and Christian traditionalism against American liberal degeneration. A mission that adapts to the historically contradictory relationship with the West where Russia sacrifices itself for the salvation of the world to save West from itself by fighting it. At the same time, the new traditional ideology, like the great importance given to family, is a tactic to revive its demographic crisis and thanks to the fact that this ideology allows to relaunch a close relationship with the Orthodox Church, which for Russian is a political religion symbol of their millenary civilizations, the new ideology allows the Muscovite political elite to unite Russian collective in the fight against external forces.

At the same time, this new ideology is a tool to regain credibility at an international level and create a bloc of alternative powers to the West by leveraging the defense of order from chaos produced in the years by Americans and the war in Ukraine is also a Russian attempt to demonstrate at an international level that it can sacrifice itself for the salvation of the world and of the West itself from the evil produced by the West.

New imperial mission that shows how a Russian-Usa rapprochement in an anti-Chinese key is undermined by the same Russian characteristic of increasing power at an international level when it challenges the West.

In any case, even if with its demographic and economic limits Russia will succeed in an imperial expansion that will allow it to recover power, in the long term its sustainability is undermined as addressed in this chapter by its structural conditions, amplified when

Moscow fails to access global maritime trade and competes internationally to increase power.

Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to study the Russian participant in depth, in particular to delve into the greatest contradiction that concerns its community, namely the strong contrast given by the fact of having a deeply imperial and maximalist community but having a demographic structure typical of a deeply aged society, and to analyse how this relationship influences Moscow's actions in foreign policy and how Moscow uses the technological sector to pursue power objectives, given the contradiction of its population. In conducting this analysis, a contemporary historical event was chosen as a point of reference that embodies these relationships and at the same time influences them, namely the large-scale invasion of Ukraine, started by Russia on February 24, 2022. For this reason, in the various strands of the paper we also tried to reconstruct the historical relationship between Russians and Ukrainians from the origins up to the complex current relationships between the two communities. The specific case of the analysis of the war in Ukraine was useful for the purposes of understanding the research question, since the reasons for the Russian invasion can be traced back to the maximalism and imperialism of its community, but in designing the military tactics to be conducted on the field, Moscow had to deal with its own structural demographic limits and these limits created many difficulties for the Russian army, since the initial objective of conquering the entire Ukrainian territory was not achieved and a heroic resistance of an army, decidedly reduced in size, created many problems for the troops of the Muscovite empire. Furthermore, by encompassing a local, regional, continental and international dimension, this conflict has and will have a great impact on the relations between the great global powers and on the very destiny of Russia as a great power. Furthermore, the importance of this event is reinforced by the fact that, in addition to representing an attempt to reassert the Russian imperial center over a people historically under its dominion, it also represents a Russian attack on the US-led Western sphere of influence, creating a hot spot for a new Cold War between Russia and the US-led West, where the conflict takes on different nuances: military, geopolitical, ideological, political but also technological. But this dualism is part of an international context where the United States is still the first power, but Russia is not the first power among the challengers, and this conflict, unlike the Cold War, does not create a global bipolarism, but fuels a lot of uncertainty and the

Russian attack on this US global order creates a dangerous precedent for the Western world.

Furthermore, the choice of the Ukrainian conflict as the reference event of the investigation is also linked to the fact that the analysis of the conflict has allowed us to delve deeper into the consequences of power politics on its own technological sector, thus allowing us to answer the research question of analysing how Russian imperial ambitions, supported by its own community but limited by its own demographic structure, impact the technological sector, and how the latter is used to respond to expansion needs.

In fact, the beginning of the conflict in Ukraine has led to a major reduction in the commercial relationship of energy supply between Russia and Europe, a geo-economic relationship without strategic risk that had provided Moscow with funding for the reconstruction of its empire in the first decades of the third millennium. The need to find revenue to finance the empire at war has led Moscow to replace the European market with the Chinese one, with the strategic risk, however, of providing cheap raw materials to a cumbersome neighbour, which has ambitions of controlling neighbouring regions under Russian control. A scenario that after three years of conflict is also starting to worry the US empire, still the first uncontested power of our times, which, having Beijing as its first rival, fears an excessive Chinese strengthening with an increase in its access to Moscow's resources. A Russian crushing towards Beijing which however in recent decades has been favoured by the United States themselves, since having a problem of strategic asymmetry, that is, having in Europe the crucial continent to maintain global primacy and in Asia the continent of the first rival, has not opened up to Russia, while the geopolitical strategy suggests dividing the enemies, for fear that a Russia free to act in Europe could undermine American control in the old continent, thus favouring a rapprochement between Russia and China. These latter empires have been rivals for centuries, rivals in regional contexts and in the fight for the leadership of the bloc of states alternative to the Western camp, but which in the challenge to American hegemony find a common ground.

The research began with a historical analysis to understand the origins of the feelings of the peculiar Russian collective, that is, trying to understand the origins of their maximalism, their exceptionalism and their messianism. Feelings that, over the centuries, have and continue to influence the actions of the Russian collective also in foreign policy. To study this, a historical analysis was carried out, starting from the first proto-state

kingdom of the Eastern Slavs, Kievan Rus, analysing its collapse, the affirmation of the Muscovite Kingdom, one of the heirs of the kingdom of Rus, and the transformation of the Muscovite kingdom into an empire. An analysis that returned not only the origin of the maximalism and exceptionalism of the Russian collective, but also the history of the complex relationship between Russians and Ukrainians and between Russians and European collectives.

It was precisely the dynamics that occurred in the collapse of the medieval Slavic-Viking Orthodox Christian kingdom of Kievan Rus that had a significant impact on the formation of Russian maximalism, since this collapse occurred due to multiple simultaneous invasions, Mongols, Germans and Swedes, favoured by the flat nature of the territory and internal divisions. It was the great devastation, carried out by the Mongols that caused the collapse of the kingdom and, in this moment of devastation, the population gathered around the only institution left standing, the Orthodox Church, which from then on would be configured as a strong symbol of salvation of the Eastern Slavic communities. These dynamics of the collapse of the kingdom of Rus created a strong trauma in the proto-Russian population, not only linked to the invasions suffered, but also to the fact of having been surrounded by multiple populations at the same time due to the flat nature of the territory, surrounded by other plains.

A traumatic event that will lead the Muscovite kingdom, one of the heirs of the Rus kingdom, as soon as it achieved independence, to seek expansion to increase the defensive depth that, over the centuries, will lead Moscow to be a boundless empire. An expansion of the first defensive line, sought through violent actions, which are based on a fear, that of suffering new invasions and every attempt to expand the borders has been experienced by the Russians over the centuries as a saving fight to save their existence. A fear that remains today, the Russian empire continuing to have its core in a boundless plain surrounded by other plains. Fear that has been reinforced by the reduction of the first defensive line on the European side, which occurred with the collapse of the Soviet empire, and by the beginning of the expansion of the Atlantic Alliance, perceived by the Russians as a hostile invasion towards their own borders. For this reason, the Russian invasion of Ukraine was generated by the maximalist sentiment of the Russian community, a sentiment generated by a deep fear of suffering new invasions that could undermine the very existence of the empire and, for this reason, the Russian community

claims control of the Ukrainian territory as a defensive outpost for the expansion of the Atlantic Alliance, perceived by Moscow as an existential danger. The study of the dynamics of the collapse of the medieval kingdom of Rus and the subsequent affirmation of Moscow has been useful for understanding the historical relationship between Russians and Ukrainians, since the foundations for the current conflict between the two communities are laid at the very moment of the collapse of the kingdom of Rus, since at that precise moment the principalities that composed it take on different destinies that will lead on the one hand to the formation of the Russian empire and on the other to entities in which historiography traces the continuity of the Ukrainian state and both will perceive themselves as the legitimate of the Slavic-Orthodox kingdom of Rus.

This uniqueness of feeling both the only heirs of the Kievan kingdom still characterizes the relationship between the two communities, between the Russian imperial one and the Ukrainian national one, which both perceive themselves as the only heirs of the medieval kingdom of Kievan Rus excluding the other and, the ongoing conflict can also be read as a conflict for the full ownership of the legitimacy of the Rus. Furthermore, with the collapse of Kievan Rus, the principalities that compose it take different paths with two main groups: the northern ones, where Moscow will emerge, which will suffer more from the Mongol domination and the southern ones, where historiography traces the genesis of the Ukrainian nation, which will suffer more from the domination of European powers. These different paths explain why despite the common origin, and both being Slavic and Orthodox communities, there still remain profound differences between Russians and Ukrainians. A peculiarity that emerges especially in the case of Moscow, due to its particular path.

It is precisely the peculiar path of Moscow's affirmation as the main entity in the northern space of the medieval kingdom of Rus that explains the deep exceptionalism and messianism of the Russian community. In the same year in which Kiev was razed to the ground by the Mongols, causing the end of the kingdom of Rus, the northern principalities led by the Rurikid prince Nevsky defeated the Swedish invaders and, two years later, would defeat the Teutonic Knights. Crucial victories, since they not only relaunched the saving mission of the northern principalities to have saved, and therefore continue to save the civilization of Rus, but the fact of having defeated the European invaders created peculiar feelings towards the European communities and, in the same years, the

submission of these northern principalities to the Mongol empire took place, which entailed the entry of these populations into a boundless land empire, with the knowledge of the vast Eurasian spaces and of imperial management techniques. This is an element that is present to a much lesser extent in the southern principalities of Rus that will later merge into the Ukrainian identity, since they will suffer much less from Asian domination. In this peculiar path of the northern principalities heirs of the kingdom of Rus, the Muscovite principality emerged, reinforced by the arrival of the son of Nevsky of the Rurikid dynasty as prince and by the arrival in 1328 of the central seat of the Orthodox Church, two institutions with a great saving value for the eastern Slavic populations of the northern area and which gave Moscow a great hold on the surrounding area and which favoured Moscow's heading of the saving mission of liberating the Orthodox Slavs from Mongol subjugation, which will arrive in 1480 and which will significantly relaunch Muscovite messianism. In the same years, in 1478, the conquest of Novgorod took place, which allowed Moscow a notable expansion and the reconquest of a good part of the territories that made up the kingdom of Rus and which allowed the sovereign to be called "Tsar of all the Russias" and, in 1472, a few years after the fall of Constantinople, Moscow was proclaimed "Third Rome", thanks to a dynastic marriage, which significantly relaunched the universalism of Moscow. Events that together gave Moscow an enormous hold on the surrounding principalities and allowed it to begin that process of conquest, to expand the first line of defence in the steppes and surrounding plains, to remove the danger of new invasions and which led it to conquer in 1562 the kingdoms heirs of the Mongol empire that had subjugated it. With this conquest, Moscow merged with the Eurasian space and now having populations under its dominion foreign to its dominant Slavic-Orthodox canon, Moscow became an empire. Not only was it the beginning of an expansive expansion process both towards Asia and Europe to push away the first defensive line still underway, but with the conquest of the kingdoms, heirs of the Golden Horde, Moscow now brought together in itself the legacy of multiple empires and kingdoms that gave it a unique identity. Moscow now possessed a Rurikid temporal power and an Orthodox religious spiritual power, deriving from the Christian Slavic-Viking kingdom of Kievan Rus; the fact of having liberated the Slavs and the Mongols allowed it to claim the path of salvation of the civilization of Rus begun by Nevsky, the proclamation of the "Third Rome" and allowed it to inherit Roman universalism,

furthermore having conquered the populations of the steppes allowed it to inherit the legacy of the Eurasian Mongol empire. The figure who synthesized this triple legacy was the sovereign, "Tsar", who was configured as the symbol of a Mongol-Byzantine model of power, who inherited universalism and messianism from the Eastern Roman Empire and despotism and a strong central power from the Mongols. Characteristics that made the Russian empire a Eurasian empire from its beginning. An empire that reflected the characteristic of being geographically between Europe and Asia and presented elements of Europe, the legacy of the largest European empire (Rome) and Asian elements, inheriting characteristics of the largest Asian empire, but configuring itself from the beginning as neither European nor Asian, but Eurasian.

The research has addressed how from that moment an expansion began driven by a violent maximalism of its population. Maximalism that hid a fear of suffering new invasions.

In the research, after completing this historical analysis that has returned the genesis and the beginning of the Russian imperial parable that has returned the essence and the origin of its peculiarities and its maximalism, the expansion of the Russian empire has been analysed from the beginning of its imperial trajectory until today and the various imperial forms assumed by Moscow over time. In-depth analysis of the Muscovite imperial trajectory from its beginning until today that has sought to understand the origins of the current limits to maximalism and the desire for greatness of the Russian community, represented by an aged demographic structure with a high average age, since this limit is largely a consequence of an imperial downsizing, which occurred at the end of the second millennium with the collapse of the Soviet empire. There have been several imperial downsizings with accompanying changes in form throughout the Muscovite imperial trajectory since then, from the Tsarist imperial form to the Soviet one, up to the current conservative Christian one, an attempt has been made to understand the origins of these cyclical imperial downsizings.

Studying the trajectory of the Russian Empire over the centuries up to today, it has emerged that, despite the different imperial forms it has assumed, the dominant imperial nucleus has always remained the same (ethnic Russians), as has the imperial geographical nucleus, which has always remained in the Sarmatian lowland, an element that has always provided a great fear of invasion and which has led the imperial nucleus to extend the first line of defence both towards the West and the East even when the empire was already

configured as a geographical giant, becoming a boundless empire. To keep this boundless empire alive, the imperial centre had to apply a strong centralization of central power, which became increasingly difficult and costly with the progressive increase in imperial size and it emerged that, every time the empire failed to reach a maritime dimension, which would have allowed it to compensate for the limitations deriving from the fact of being a boundless land empire, the empire went through a downsizing and, every time a deeply maximalist and glory-seeking population materialized, it demanded a change in the imperial form.

For this reason, it has been highlighted how Russian history is configured as a cyclical history of expansion and contraction, deriving from the geographical condition of having the imperial nucleus in a flat and unstable area exposed to dangers, which leads the community to desire a new expansion after the downsizing to regain security. And it has emerged, therefore, how the greatest limit to the desires of reconquering a new greatness nourished by the post-Soviet Russian community are not only constituted by the demographic limits, but above all by this insertion of the Russian empire in its own cyclical path deriving from the geographical condition of having the geographic nucleus in an unsafe area, which leads the community to act violently to seek expansion, which leads it to be a boundless empire, which in the long term, without an imperial dimension becomes unsustainable. The Russian attempt to conquer Ukraine is an attempt to regain control of the Black Sea, to gain access to the ocean routes, to survive as an empire and the conquest of Ukraine represents only the first step towards regaining full control of the Black Sea and this represents the reason for great future tension with the United States and the entire West that undermine a Russian-American rapprochement in an anti-Chinese key. Washington, after three years of conflict, needs to detach itself from Moscow and Beijing and Moscow needs to get out of the greater dependence on Beijing, caused by the war in Ukraine, but the problem of rapprochement between Moscow and Washington is undermined by the fact that Moscow, to stay alive as an empire, needs to expand into the seas, and therefore start from Crimea to continue an expansion to the West towards access to the Mediterranean, which if carried out will be hindered by the Western powers.

The current scenario where the Russian Empire seeks expansion in the Black Sea towards the Mediterranean, after having failed to conquer the ocean routes via the Baltic Sea, recalls the scenario of the 18th century where the failure of Tsar Peter's project of a

northern maritime empire led Catherine to the realization of the Greek project of conquering the Black Sea first and then conquering Constantinople, so as to have direct access to the Mediterranean. Moscow conquered the entire northern strip of the Black Sea and aspired and had the means to conquer Constantinople, but this conquest was not achieved due to the intervention aimed at containing Russian expansionism carried out by the maritime hegemon of the time, the English Empire. More than two centuries have passed but we have returned to the same scenario, where American maritime power contains Russian expansionism in the Black Sea.

As highlighted with the case study of the Soviet Union, it will be impossible for the post-Soviet Russian empire to sustain in the long term a boundless, centralized empire, dependent on the sale of resources and competing to challenge the hegemon. To continue to stay alive, and not suffer a new downsizing, it needs to expand into the seas and the lack of access represents the greatest limit to the maximalism of its community. Expansion into the seas which therefore represents a vital objective for Moscow, but which in its implementation will find a harsh Western reaction. An element that represents a limit for a possible Russian-Western rapprochement in an anti-Chinese key.

With the difference, compared to two centuries ago, represented by the increasingly practicable use of the Arctic, but whose use for Moscow will depend on the fate of the competition between the great powers.

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