

# RUSSIAN AMERICAN DREAM

As the climax of Russian neo-imperial Reconquista comes to an end, it is possible to compare its results to the initial plan. Subsequently, it permits to formulate an assessment of an evolution of Russia's place in the international system: how close or how far it is from reaching its objectives.

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**A**s a result of the collapse of the USSR, Russia lost not only territory, population and military might. It lost its international status of a superpower, the only one capable of challenging the USA. To make a try to recover its international prestige, Moscow started the war in Ukraine and as it comes to an end, it is possible to recapitulate the results.

## Introduction

During the Cold War Russia was never equal to the USA in any other domain than territory and military might. Its economy, social system, standard of life, material and mental freedom were never compatible to the Western ones. That fact finally led to the implosion: people in the Soviet Union simply refused to live under the Soviet system – the USSR first become unmanageable internally and then lost its external possessions. At the same time, Russian military potential of destruction was parallel to the Western one and never defeated. Russian army was dismantled by two factors: the secession of its parts relocated to the republics that gained independence and the refusal of the newly independent Russia to maintain what remained in the heartland.

For the generation of Vladimir Putin, the one that witnessed the implosion of the USSR, it was logical that the restoration of Russia's position in the world is unrealistic through economy, technology or culture and can only be realised by reestablishing military might. And this required to reverse the two abovementioned aspects:

rebuilding of the army inside Russia and recapturing Russia's "strategic depth" to the West from its borders together with its demographic and economic potential as a bonus. The first objective has been realized since Putin came to power. The second one started in a hybrid mode in 2014 with a conventional culmination in February 2022. As the climax of Russian neo-imperial Reconquista comes to an end, it is possible to compare its results to the initial plan. Subsequently, it permits to formulate an assessment of an evolution of Russia's place in the international system: how close or how far it is from reaching its objectives.

## Results of the War

**Militarily**, Russia performed much below the general expectations, both inside Russia and by international experts. Evgenii Prigozhin famously said, "Russian Armed Forces started this war as a second army in the world, then became second army in Ukraine and finished as a second army in Russia". The war demonstrated the fact that Russia is incapable of realizing its ideas of reintegration of Ukraine, the key-element of the post-Soviet space by force. Therefore, it stands before a fundamental dilemma: either it has to scale down its ambitions of becoming a regional hegemon or it needs assistance of an external force to realize them. Either option is equal to Moscow's resignation from being an independent centre of power. Moreover, the fear factor that traditionally played a substantial role in Moscow's relations with its former and to-be satellites is to a great extent lost. Threatening post-



Soviet republics or NATO's Eastern Flank countries with a military solution could have worked only when those countries perceived Russian Army as an ultimate instrument of imposing Russian political will. They do not any more: if Ukraine managed to resist it for three years and still remain a sovereign country, it is all the truer for countries with better geographical location, more efficient organization and formal powerful allies.

**Territorially**, even taking into account the maximally favourable post-war delimitation, Russia did not manage to enlarge itself in a way to fundamentally modify its internal potential and its position for external projection of power. The initial plan was to suppress an independent Ukrainian statehood and to functionally transform its territory into a part of Russian strategic depth with full military control and no-interference from any external forces. The annexation of three or even five Ukrainian regions without eliminating Kiev as an independent decision-making centre does not fundamentally change Russia's strategic position vis-à-vis any of its major partners. Moreover, if what rests of Ukraine remains an actively anti-Russian state, if it reforms itself and starts integrating into European economic and political entity, the Russian-controlled 20% of pre-war Ukraine may easily transform into a major factor of its own destabilization if not disintegration. The same is true for the **demographical** factor: as a result of war, Russia not

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only reduced its own potential in numbers but seized vaguely emptied territories whose population moved to other Ukrainian regions or abroad.

**Strategically**, isolated Moscow is more than ever in the last three decades from its partners in Europe, who, during the pre-war period of Putin's rule, were ready and apt for a compromise division of Eastern Europe based on a pragmatic and mutually assured stability. Germany, France and other Western European countries more than once showed their readiness to consider the post-Soviet states a part of a Russian zone of influence, if only the peaceful business is assured by Moscow. But when Russia showed itself a factor of destabilization instead of a factor

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of stability, Western Europeans have no interest in a partnership that can break off in a conflict at any moment. And even, if theoretically they wanted, Moscow's immediate neighbours located between Russia and the West declare it an existential security threat and invest substantial means in what is in fact a new Iron Curtain. The strategic awakening of Europe, that started after the outbreak of the war and has all the chances to continue and produce results, is probably the most unexpected, paradoxical and lamentable – from the Kremlin's point of view – result of this war. Before 2022, Russia's European partners were composed of two groups: Western Europe, that had potential to contain it but did not want it and Eastern Europe that wanted it but had

no potential. As a result of the war, Europe goes through a double adaptation: the West adapts Eastern mentality (towards Russia) and the East adapts its armies to the Western technological standards.

**Economically**, Russia showed itself not able to pursue a military intervention without a fundamental harm to its financial, infrastructural and social structure, in the way that the USA did during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. The war in Ukraine became a perceptible, if not the major factor for a vast majority of Russian citizens, modifying basic parameters of their everyday life, starting with interest rates and inflation and ending with travel plans limited by sanctions. If Russia engages in ceasefire negotiations before reaching any one of its initial strategic objectives, it is not because it does not want to achieve them, but because it cannot. The size, structure and dynamics of Russian economy simply does not provide enough potential for a war designed to realize strategic objectives set up by Vladimir Putin.

**Ideologically**, Russia has lowered its image among Western societies and political elite to a lowest point for decades without any tangible compensation of a growth of its reputation among the Global South. Apparently, by describing its attack on Ukraine as an attempt to halt the Western expansionism, Russia intended to position itself as a leader of global anti-occidental counter-culture. But a more than modest military performance did not give it





a strategic boost and therefore compromised Moscow in the eyes of anti-Western part of the world as a force that can't change the global balance of power in favour of them.

All abovementioned results represent a net loss from the point of view of Russian national interests and its operational potential to realize them. But from the Kremlin's point of view, all that is a price worth paying for one single objective that seems to be reachable as the war comes to an end: Recognition of Russia by the United States as a great power.

### **Russia's Motivation**

Russian American Dream, that is to say a search for USA's acceptance of Russia 'as it is' consists of a recognition of the Putinist system as a legitimate element of national and international reality. Achieving this approval was the driving force of Russian foreign policy for last two and a half decades. In a larger sense, the claim for an approval has been Russia's leitmotiv since it has started to play a major role in European and then global politics. And the lack of that approval was a source of a deep and lasting insecurity, not only for the actual ruling elite but for the Russian statehood in general.

The fundamental objective of Vladimir Putin since the very beginning of his rule was to receive a double security guarantee: inside Russia (security of the internal order) and outside of it (state security in the classical sense). And the only force capable of giving Russia such a guarantee has been and remains the only global superpower: the USA. As the war comes to an end Putin seems to be closer than ever to receive it. And this uncovers his and therefore Russian rationality that stands behind the decision to launch this war and to prolong it regardless of the evident cost it implies.

Russian sense of insecurity has deep objective reasons. In the material sense, the country has no naturally marked borders and therefore could (an in fact several times in history was) easily attacked, especially from the West. In the non-material sense, the regime (of an authoritarian nature, missing a democratic legitimacy and a formal mechanism of power rotation) has no borders to secure itself from potentially destructive ideological influences that could (and indeed several times did with previous Russian regimes) provoke its ideological and organizational erosion and collapse. Democracy, human rights, accountability of the state and good governance practice, market economy and freedom of speech are not only appealing slogans but a marker of a quality of life that Russian citizens were aware of and could potentially

claim for. And, as the practice of Putinist rule demonstrated over the last twenty years, those standards are incompatible with the existence and prolongation of the actual regime. Between the West and its standards on one side and Russia and its reality on the other exists a relation of a zero-sum game which makes a confrontation inevitable.

What Putin intended to gain by attacking Ukraine was obviously not this or that territory but establishing a border between outside world (especially the West) and Russia to secure not only national borders, but first and foremost its internal political order. And, as the ceasefire seems to approach, it seems that those two objectives which are for Putin, for Russian ruling elite and for Russian society are the United States will be, at least formally, accepted at the last resort. If Russian borders and Russian regime are accepted by Washington, its legality and legitimacy can hardly be challenged by anyone inside or outside Russia. And, being a pragmatic realist, Putin does not expect from this war anything more.

### **American Response**

Being a pragmatic realist as well, Donald Trump seems to be ready to put an end to this war by accepting Russia's conditions. Firstly, by declaring an ideological non-interference in Russia's internal affairs, that is to say the sovereign right of Russian ruler to organize and run the country according to his own norms. Secondly, by admitting the existence of a Russian zone of privileged interests and exclusive responsibility down the perimeter of its national borders. The exact parameters of Russia's zone of influence, a minor question from the Kremlin's point of view – may be and seemingly are actually subject to negotiations. But the confirmation of an absolute sovereignty and untouchability of the regime is a 'must' – a non-negotiable red line – and will not be revised by the Kremlin at any price as the basis of Russia's future that the regime and its leader equate to their own.

The actual American administration seems to be ready to recognize Putin in his right to organize Russia according to non-Western norms and values. From Trump's point of view, it is a concession worth making in the context of a possible Russia's *désintéressement* in the approaching Sino-American confrontation. Especially that in reality, declaring Russian disclaimer from Western norms does not really make Russia immune to their impact. The Soviet Union collapsed because its citizens did not believe in the official ideology and did not accept the model of life proposed by the Kremlin. If the USSR collapsed, it can also be true for Russian Federation (and

much more so given the impact of the actually existing and developing mass communications). Trump can guarantee to Putin anything, but he simply has no technical means to assure him the loyal comportment of Russians, let alone of other post-Soviet nations. If Ukraine – a deeply corrupt and dysfunctional state with demoralized society – was motivated enough to fight Russia for three years in the name of being a part of the West (as they imagine it), the others, including Russian citizens (especially those of non-Russian nationality) may one day decide that opposing the regime represents for them a rational choice compared to a passive submission required by the Kremlin. In the sense of a real and durable security of the regime, neither Trump nor any other external force can guarantee anything to Putin, simply because of the fact that no policymaker in the world controls what people – in this case Russian people – feel and think. Therefore, the non-interference in the internal affairs, a fundamental concession, as it is seen by the Kremlin, represents in fact a purely formal declaration realization of which cannot be assured by any technical means. Any undemocratic regime lacking a popular support will remain insecure by its nature and not because of any “plots” aimed at her. Putin’s regime is on its own the main destabilizing factor of Russia’s political order and this will not change independently of what the USA, Europe or Ukraine will commit themselves in the form of a ceasefire.

### Regaining the “Near Abroad”

The structure and dynamics of a possible future Russian zone of influence in the post-Soviet space may also be easily put into question independently of any guarantees given by the USA to Russia. The peaceful and durable international order in Eastern Europe may only be based on a solution respecting objectively the existing factors that both Moscow and Washington seem to ignore. During this war, the will of Ukrainian nation demonstrated its validity as a factor of international relations. The will of other nations surrounding Russia may become a factor as well. If the Heads of States agree to a solution, it does not mean automatic implementation. The formally established international

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order could be in practice shattered by sub-national factors even without an active and intended interference from other countries. Attack on Ukraine was a part of Russia’s strategy to impose itself on its Western partners as an indispensable element of the international system – if not constructively, then by destruction. The fear of troubles coming from Moscow in the post-Soviet space and beyond, were to motivate Europe and the USA to leave Russia alone with its internal regime and its zone of influence around it. In the present phase Moscow is likely to succeed in convincing the West that granting autonomy to Russia is a cheaper, safer and more rational option than trying to oppose it.

Russia seems to be exiting the war with its internal sovereignty and external buffer zone represented by Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia and Moldova granted. Successful it may seem in the short term, this victory may be a trap in a long one exactly because it ignores non-state sub-national factors. Russia’s ‘realistic’ approach simplifies reality and ignores factors that are not controlled by state actors: even the president of the United States has no power to decide what Ukrainians and other objects of Russian expansion are to feel and think. Therefore, a regional order based on a relation between Moscow and Washington does not take into consideration a potentially destructive national and social dynamics coming from within the zone of influence attributed to Moscow. The USA may agree for this or that ‘oblast’ to change its sovereign affiliation, but it cannot prevent people living on that territory to oppose the choice. And given the economic, social, infrastructural and moral condition of Russia nowadays, those forces have all the chances to disturb the order established by a Trump-Putin agreement.

Eastern Europe has been an object of this sort of imperial deals for many centuries and each time ignoring national aspirations of peoples who populate it resulted in the annihilation of the empires that colonised them. If the Soviet Union collapsed under the national movements of peoples it occupied, the much smaller, weaker and globally isolated Russia takes a great risk to its territorial integrity by following the same path. If Moscow did not manage to subjugate Ukrainians by three years of military intervention, it will hardly do by administrative manipulations or ideological coercion, especially given the fact that an independent Ukraine supported by at least a part of the West will remain a point of reference for the people living in the “new territories”. And the actual tendencies do not predestine Russia to become a champion of a civilizational competition with Europe, even if the latter is evidently not in its best condition compared to previous periods of the history.



## The Great Deal

The uncertain future of Moscow's agreement with Washington over the future of Ukraine, does not discourage Russia to engage all its forces and resources to achieve it. Moscow's American Dream, being a fundamental emotion, defines Russian way of thinking about winning and losing this conflict. What is more, an almost achieved 'great deal' with America will, not only for Putin personally, but for the elite and a large portion of Russian nation, as well, compensate all losses of the war and humiliation of last three decades. In fact, Donald Trump may demand almost anything, and he will get it, if only the USA agrees to symbolically admit Russia's great power status.

What the USA should technically agree from Moscow's point of view was described by the Lavrov's ultimatum in December 2021 right before the decision to enforce it by a military intervention. From Moscow's point of view, the ideal peace between Russia and the West shall be based on three elements: absolute sovereignty of Russian regime, Russian zone of exclusive interests in the post-Soviet countries and a demilitarized buffer zone in Central-Eastern Europe ('post 1997 NATO territories'). This is the framework of 'Putin's Doctrine'

for the Eurasian Heartland – a Russian analogue of Monroe's Doctrine in the Western Hemisphere.

Putting aside the question of an American political consent for such an exclusive zone (and the price of it) and Russian technical ability to control and organize it, the appearance of such an enlarged and empowered Russia gives way to the question: what shall be its international identity and the role in international system? If not being a leader of a global anti-Western counter culture, then what?

Basing Russia's international identity on anti-Western and specifically anti-American principles granted Moscow a certain international appeal and subsequently, a space to manoeuvre in its relations with allies and sympathizers, both state and non-state, including in the anti-American *milieu* in the West. Logically, basing Russia's place in the world on an alliance with Washington, narrows its decision-making corridor to the extreme. If Russia is an American ally, its lieutenant and subcontractor, what sense does it make to count for it as a defender against America? In the world where the USA is the strongest power, it is the simplest thing to become American client. If Russia is not an alternative to the USA, there is no rationality for other players to invest into building

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autonomous relations with Moscow because dealing with its new 'older partner' is easier, faster and more efficient.

If Russia, as a result of the Trump-Putin deal becomes a part of an American order, all countries and non-state actors who perceived it as a potential balancer against the USA will lose hope and immediately start looking for an alternative. All anti-American forces will automatically become anti-Russian and given Moscow's already uneasy position, this will substantially add to the challenges. The same is true for the USA: if Washington renounces its role of a defender of smaller states against powers including Russia, willing to gain an imperial control over them, all anti-Russian forces will start looking for an alternative. In short, the deal elaborated by Moscow and Washington will have the potential to make both sides weaker.

### **A Chance Lost Twice**

Given its territorial, energy and military potential, Russia could have been, and in many parts of the world (including in Europe) indeed was perceived as a potentially interesting partner ready and apt to help limiting boundless American global ambitions. Russia could construct its identity and functionality in the international system as a challenger of American hegemony. But if Russia's role consists in defending Pax Americana (in its new, Trumpist version), it will confront challenges that its state and social structure may not be ready to resist. And, if it fails to defend the regional order around its borders as well as its internal integrity, it is hardly imaginable, that the USA will be willing to actively support it when the troubles begin. Any attempt to change sides again will result in American pressure supported by a strategic blackmail: either Moscow continues to comply to American interests (towards Europe, China, Iran and the rest of Muslim world), or America lifts its support and then Russia stays alone. So much so that the hope and trust of all forces sceptical to American order will be gone. This can happen even

without any major shifts in the international relations by a simple force of internal factors in the USA during the next electoral cycle: sooner or later Trump will be replaced and Moscow has no warranty that the following American president will not denounce Washington's acquiescence to Russian claims about strategic autonomy in the post-Soviet space and ideological sovereignty at home.

If this war ends up with a Russian-American deal, it may be perceived as a personal success of Vladimir Putin in securing the stability of his rule over Russia as well as Russian interests in the immediate neighbourhood (the so called 'near abroad'). But this deal will not be accepted not only by Ukraine, but also by a plethora of other international actors for whom an appearance of American-Russian alliance will mark a change for the worse. Durability and persistence of an order based on Trump-Putin deal will not be guaranteed by the international community and at least by a half of American political, diplomatic and military establishment. Not only not accepted but actively disputed. In fact, it will represent no more than a gentlemen's agreement between two individuals and will most probably lose its relevance once one of them is not in power any more.

### **Conclusion**

A new quality of relations with the USA is the only tangible positive result of this war to Russia under President Trump. Moscow's American Dream seems to come true as a result of the negotiations with the Trump administration. Finally, after losing the Cold War, losing control over Central Europe, losing post-Soviet territories and almost losing grip over its own internal structure, Russia has a chance to be admitted in a status of a great power and an equal partner of America.

The great material and moral price to be paid for that purely symbolic achievement demonstrates a psychotherapeutical nature of a deal proposed to Putin by Trump. No single Russian postulate is guaranteed, all the gains may easily transform into problems making Moscow's position worse than before the war. Nevertheless, Russia pushes towards destruction – not only of Ukraine but of the post-bipolar world order, the one that represents for it a period of national humiliation. In Moscow's view, the revision of the borders is just a first step towards a new order but no one, including Donald Trump, may guarantee that it will represent a better one for Russia.