Russia's Anti-Colonial Strategic Narrative Towards the Global South

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ABSTRACT

Since the start of the full-scale attack on Ukraine and the imposition of Western sanctions, Russia has sought to minimize their impact by deepening relations with the Global South. Its 'charm offensive' among developing countries has the purpose of aligning them with the interests of Moscow. Its diplomatic push is based on a carefully constructed, albeit deeply false narrative representing Russia as an anti-colonial power and true friend of the Global South. The narrative's purpose is to persuade former European colonies that – unlike Western powers – Russia has never pursued a colonial agenda and has always supported the independence of nations across the world. Its goal is to draw non-aligned countries into the Russian orbit and neutralize Western efforts of isolation. The aim of this paper is to debunk Moscow's anti-colonial narrative and expose it as a segment of Russian propaganda. It will do so by tracing Russia's imperialist/colonialist policies from the 16th century until today and by unmasking the intentions behind Moscow's recent patronization of Africa.

Keywords: Russia, Global South, anti-colonialism, charm offensive, disinformation

INTRODUCTION

On 24 February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The West reacted by imposing far-reaching economic sanctions and attempted to isolate Russia internationally. Moscow responded with a reorientation of its diplomatic and economic activity towards countries collectively known as the Global South. Geographically, the term Global South is an obvious misnomer, given that most countries grouped under this name are located north of the equator. Joseph S. Nye (2023) describes it as "more of a political slogan than an accurate description of the world". According

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to him, "it seems to have gained traction as a euphemism to replace less acceptable terms" such as the Third World or developing countries (ibid.). Inaccuracies notwithstanding, we have chosen to use the term Global South as it is the prevailing idiom in political communication when talking about non-Western countries with a history of dependency to European powers or the United States of America.

Terminology aside, Russia's pivot towards the Global South was motivated by the need to secure alternative markets and vital natural resources as well as garner much needed support within international fora. Russia uses 'memory diplomacy' to curry favor with former European colonies in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Its outreach is based on an anti-colonial strategic narrative which can be summed up as follows: *Unlike the West, Russia has never been a colonial power, the Soviet Union assisted liberation movements across the world; therefore – the Russian Federation is a true friend and ally of the Global South.* The narrative is partially true and can be viewed as the central component of a 'charm offensive' (soft power interpretation). But, it is also partially false and can be understood as belonging to a broader disinformation campaign (sharp power interpretation).[1] Whatever the ratio between truth and falsehood in Russia's anti-colonial strategic narrative, Moscow clearly made a pragmatic choice of turning towards the Global South and is opportunistically exploiting segments of Russian history (while obscuring others) in order to surpass and potentially eliminate Western influence in that part of the world.

However, Russia's recent involvement in the Global South isn't merely utilitarian. It is part of Russia's self-understanding of being 'charged with special responsibility for the salvation of all humanity' (Rose, 2022: 2). These are the words of 16th century Russian monk Philotheus who proclaimed Moscow as the 'Third Rome', warning that there won't be a fourth (ibid.). In other words, after the sacking of original Rome in 410 AD, Constantinople became the 'Second Rome', but it too fell in 1453, so Moscow has been perceived as the last stand in saving Orthodox Christianity. The Russian messianic mission in the world became a central focus of the Russian identity quest, as evidenced not only in politico-theological writings but also in Russian literature. One of the paradigmatic examples that became emblematic among the Russian elite is Nikolai Gogol's view on Russia's chosenness from his novel 'Dead Souls'. In it, he uses the 'metaphor of *troika* – a carriage with a team of three horses at a gallop – for a powerful symbol of unstoppable Russia on its historical imperial mission' of overtaking the whole world (Cvijanović, 2024). This messianic consciousness became one of the very characteristics of the Russians that hardly any other people can be compared with, except the Jews, as Berdyaev (1948: 8) claimed.

[1] Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig's sharp power concept posits that authoritarian regimes are incapable of projecting soft power which is a prerogative of democratic governments. The notion of sharp power is based on the premise that authoritarian values are generally unattractive and that – therefore – states like Russia or China do not seek to charm or win hearts and minds, but rather to manipulate or poison the information that reaches target audiences. According to Walker and Ludwig, sharp power is merely an outward projection of the means authoritarian regimes use to keep their own populations under control (Walker and Ludwig, 2017: 13).

Hence, Russian messianism has been a driving religious and ideological force behind Russia's expansion in the past as well as in the present. During the past, Russian eastward expansion went hand in hand with the Christianization of pagan indigenous peoples. In the South, Russia's enlargement proceeded in tandem with the orthodox *reconquista* of lands that had belonged to the abode of Islam for centuries. Finally, in the Western direction, Russian aggrandizement was seen as a push-back against Polish-Lithuanian 'papism' or the godless revolutionary ideas imported from France (Nowak, 2023: 11-14, 51-57).

Today, clearly operating outside its (Schmittian) *Großraum*, Russia is infiltrating the Global South with its own version of multipolarity. For Aleksandr Dugin (2014), multipolarity as a concept is part of the Russian Eurasian mission – a project of multipolar anti-liberal globalization. This project is fundamentally directed against 'Western modernity in general' (Dugin, 2021: 69-70). As such, it fits perfectly into the Russian Global South narrative against theso-called 'Western neo-colonialism' utilized for Russia's political agenda set toward the 'fragmentation of the global order into "civilizational" centers of power', where 'Russia uses "anti-imperialism" as its main propaganda theme and as an ideological basis for its global engagement' (Sabanadze, 2024). This can be particularly seen in the context of Russia's advocating for the enlargement of BRICS.

The instrumentalization of the Global South for advancing Russia's own imperialistic interests, under the agenda of the so-called struggle against the imperialism of the West, is a version of communist internationalism 2.0. In the aftermath of the Bolshevik coup of 1917 Russian messianism persisted, albeit in a secularized form. The Soviet Union, a reincarnation of the Russian Empire, was charged with spreading communism across the globe. When a world revolution failed to materialize in the 1920s, more traditional means were employed to advance the communist cause: partition of neighboring lands or outright military aggression. Party leaders claimed that any Soviet conquest of another nation 'can only be liberation, and can only lead to the establishment of true liberty and social justice' (Seton-Watson, 1971: 130). Soviet Cold War interventions in the Global South were missionary as well. Their goal was not merely abolishing colonial rule by the 'rotten West' but 'legitimizing dominance and turning the world into the image and likeness of the Soviet Union' (Curanović, 2021: 2).

After the fall of the USSR, and especially with the political rise of Vladimir Putin, this historical mission has been rearticulated both within the political-cultural domain in the concept of the 'Russian World' (Bajtand Buzar, 2023) , as well as within the religious-eschatological domain, with ultranationalist intellectuals like Dugin articulating Russian aggression in Ukraine through the idea of Russia standing against the forces of evil and Ukraine as the field of Armageddon. On the one hand, Putin's adoption of the 'Russian World' concept has shown that Russia aims at redefining its political and geopolitical agenda by trying to revive the empire lost. Even before the very introduction of the 'Russian World' concept in 1999, as the project that extends beyond Russian borders in order to bond together all Russian-speaking people, Moscow started its imperial military campaigns in Moldova and Georgia during the early 1990s. On the other hand, Dugin defends Russian messianism through eschatological vocabulary in a way to justify Russian expansionism. His views are backed with Carl Schmitt's

politico-theological concept of the '*katechon*', as the power able to withhold the arrival of the Antichrist, thus assigning *katechonic* identity to Russia and in that respect viewing Ukraine as the field of the last battle between good and evil, the Behemoth and Leviathan, between the terrestrial Russian civilization and the Anglo-American civilization of the sea (Cvijanović, 2024). Having all this in mind, Russian anti-colonial strategies towards the Global South are, one the one hand, interest-driven, both geopolitically and economically, while on the other hand, they should also be viewed via Russia's imperial self-understanding carrying out its universal and transhistorical mission beyond its national borders.

The purpose of this paper is to document the almost unbroken continuity of Russian imperialist/colonialist policies from the 16th century until the present, encompassing very different regimes and state ideologies. This is necessary to question or debunk Moscow's official anti-colonial narrative which is the basis of Russia's ongoing political and economic reorientation towards developing and non-aligned countries. After a historical analysis of Russia's territorial, but also religious and ideological expansion, the attention will be directed to Moscow's current endeavors in the Global South, with a special focus on Africa. Through content analysis, the paper will delve deeper into the anti-colonial discourse of Russian decision-makers and diplomats, exposing inaccuracies, omissions, exaggerations and misinterpretations that reveal a fundamental weakness in Moscow's grand strategy toward the developing world.

TSARIST RUSSIA – A TELLUROCRATIC EMPIRE

Throughout its history, Russia almost never had overseas colonies. The only exception to the rule is Russian Alaska – a short-lived (1784-1867) Russian colony across the Bering Sea.[2] However, the Tsardom of Russia (Muscovy), renamed as the Russian Empire in 1721, had been a continental, land or continuous empire since the early 16th century. Instead of overseas holdings, it acquired colonies and dependencies[3] across the Urals, the Caucasus and the Central Asian deserts. It was the largest land-based empire of all times and Russia remains the largest country by area in the world today. Moscow's official account is that the territorial enlargement of Russia proceeded peacefully and in agreement with the native populations it has encountered in the process. However, serious historiography is unequivocal about the bloody history of Russian expansion.

Sabine Dullin (2023: 2) describes Russia's eastward push with the following words: 'Military violence and violence against civilians accompanied the conquests. The contact unleashed epidemics and undermined the indigenous communities with alcohol,

[2] It could be argued that the Kaliningrad exclave (formerly German Königsberg) is a Russian overseas territory.

[3] Russian economist Vladislav Inozemtsev (2017) rightly insists on the distinction between 'colonies – territories conquered by the European powers and consequently populated mostly by Europeans – and dependencies – states forcibly subjected to European rule and controlled without a huge resettlement of European populations'.

money and weapons'.[4] Kara K. Hodgson's seminal article on 'Russia's Colonial Legacy in the Sakha Heartland' (2022) informs us about the violent suppression of several uprisings against Tsarist rule in the 17th century. After the Sakha people (called Yakuts by the invading Russians) had been thoroughly subdued, Yakutia became a resource colony, primarily exploited for its furs. The booming fur trade drew in Russian colonists – trappers and merchants, and later – as imperial authorities started using Siberia as a giant penal colony – criminals and the politically undesirable.[5] The Speransky Code of 1822 classified the Yakuts as 'nomadic aliens', even though they were the native population of East Siberia, and Russia embarked on its own 'Civilizing Mission' by educating and Christianizing the aboriginal Siberians.

But nowhere was Russian conquest as devastating and deadly as in the North-West Caucasus. Wanting to secure strategic access to the Black Sea, the Russian Imperial Army unleashed mass killings and deportations of native Circassians in the 1860s, all but eradicating this group's presence in their ancestral homeland. The emptied land was subsequently repopulated with Russian and other Slavic settlers (Atanesian, 2022). The notorious scourge of the Circassians – general Grigory Zass (a Baltic German in the service of the Russian emperor) – today has a monument in his honor in the Russian city of Armavir. The energy drink 'General Zass' is also named after him (Abkhaz World, 2023).

In short, Russia's enlargement outside the original territory of Muscovy was as violent as the overseas expansion of Spain, Britain, France and other Western European colonial powers.[6] Also, it had the same objectionable effects: the subjugation of native groups, the disappearance of entire cultures, and – in certain cases – outright genocide of aboriginals. The only difference being the geographical fact that Russia's territorial aggrandizement proceeded almost exclusively over land. The absence of colonies and dependencies outside Eurasia granted Russia not only immunity from the legacy of Western colonialism, but also enabled Moscow to hold on to most of the lands it had conquered over the centuries, even after the break-up of the USSR.

[4] Epidemics introduced by Iberian conquistadores are often mentioned as the number one cause of the skyrocketing mortality of indigenous populations in Mesoamerica, and alcohol is known to have had a devastating effect on natives in North America.

[5] A comparison can be made between Siberia and Australia, the latter also having been used as a distant penal colony by the British Empire.

[6] Yermak Timofeyevich was to Russia what Hernán Cortés and Francisco Pizarro were to Spain. A few decades after Cortés and Pizarro conquered the Aztec and Inca empires, Timofeyevich captured the Khanate of Siberia, opening Russia's expansion towards the Far East.

REVOLUTIONARY IMPERIALISM OF THE SOVIET UNION

'When Russia became the Soviet Union in the 1920s, the old imperial legacy blended with the new Communist ideology, with each dominating in different periods', Vladislav Inozemtsev writes in his article 'Russia, the Last Colonial Empire' (2017). According to Botakoz Kassymbekova (2023), 'the Bolsheviks proclaimed the end of the Russian monarchy and Russian imperialism, but they fought brutally to preserve the Russian imperial borders. They reconquered newly formed independent states, such as Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, which emerged after the collapse of the Russian Empire'. The new Soviet authorities adopted the *korenizatsiya* policy of enfranchising various ethnic and national groups within the USSR. Its main goal was to strengthen support for the communist regime among non-Russian populations and on the peripheries. Many left-leaning intellectuals in the West interpreted this as sincere Bolshevik anti-chauvinism. However, with Joseph Stalin the old Russo-centric policies returned. The new 'Friendship of the Peoples' doctrine 'granted the Russian people a position of ideological, political, and cultural leadership within the Soviet family of nations' (Brandenberger, 2023: 3). Imperial Russia's historical record was revised (again) to imply that non-Russian ethnic groups chose to join the Empire, as opposed to being violently annexed through conquest. Also, the 'positive' outcomes of subjugation were emphasized, such as Russian military protection from other would-be conquerors, or the introduction of agriculture to nomadic populations (Hodgson, 2022).

With the Second World War approaching, the USSR under General Secretary Stalin once again turned to imperial expansion. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact signed on 23 August 1939 partitioned Central and Eastern Europe among Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. On 30 November of the same year the Red Army invaded Finland, annexing even more territory through the Moscow Peace Treaty of March 1940. Finally, in August 1945, the Allies granted East Prussia to the Soviet Union, more precisely – to the Russian SFSR. Königsberg was later renamed as Kaliningrad and ethnically cleansed of its surviving German-speaking population. All of this led the American-Armenian historian and political scientist Ronald Grigor Suny to call the Soviet Union 'an Empire in denial' (Dullin, 2023: 3). His colleague, the Canadian-Ukrainian historian Ivan Lysiak Rudnytsky, considered the USSR to be at heart a colonial empire, even though it promoted an anti-colonial ideology (Atanesian, 2022).

So, where does the anti-colonial discursive weapon come from, where is it grounded (if at all)? Russia's strongest argument in favor of its anti-colonial track record comes from the Cold War period when the USSR did in fact support several national liberation and revolutionary movements in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Between 1954 and 1962 Moscow assisted the National Liberation Front during the Algerian War of Independence. From 1955 to 1975 the USSR was involved in the Vietnam War on the side of North Vietnam and the Viet Cong. Between 1975 and 1989 the Soviet Union supported the communist MPLA during the Angolan Civil War. In the late 1970s it backed the Sandinista overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua.

However, Soviet interventions can be viewed from a very different perspective – as efforts to reduce Western influence and increase the global clout of the Soviet Union.

Whereas these endeavors had a glaring revolutionary aura in the developing world, in Central and Eastern Europe (Hungary 1956, Czechoslovakia 1968) the notorious Brezhnev Doctrine manifested itself as reactionary coercion reminiscent of Imperial Russia's role in the 19th century Holy Alliance.[7] The Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan in 1979 was clearly aggressive and hegemonic and destroyed what was left of the USSR's soft power.

RUSSIAN FEDERATION – THE THIRD EMPIRE

After the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 Russia had a chance not only to democratize its political system and embrace free market economy, but also to wrap up its 444-year long imperial tradition and transform into a nation-state (threefold transition). At the time, Russia was not sure what road to take - the empire was lost, democracy was something distant. During these years Zbigniew Brzezinski stated that 'Russia can be either an empire or a democracy, but it cannot be both' (Plokhy, 2017: 349). The opportunity for Russia to establish itself as a nation-state, by allowing the self-determination of ethnic groups living on Russia's peripheries, was squandered with the Second Chechen War (1999-2000). The war was launched by Moscow in order to reaffirm control over the North Caucasus, but even more so to prevent a domino effect which could have led to other non-Russian republics proclaiming independence from the Russian Federation. The crisis in Chechnya clearly demonstrated that the dissolution of the Soviet Union had been a partial or unfinished decolonization process, and that several republics with non-Russian ethnic majorities remained confined within the newly formed Russian Federation.[8]

Having consolidated control over Chechnya, the new Russian autocrat Vladimir Putin soon turned his attention outwards. In 2008 Russia invaded neighboring Georgia and fortified Russian military presence in the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Six years later, following the pro-European 'Maidan revolution' in Kyiv, unmarked Russian soldiers seized the Crimean Peninsula in a text-book example of hybrid warfare.[9] In doing so, Moscow basically executed Brzezinski's notion from 1994 that 'without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire' (Plokhy, 2017: 349). After a mock referendum on the region's status, Crimea was illegally annexed to Russia. Soon afterwards, an armed rebellion in the eastern Ukrainian region of Donbas was fomented by Russia. Two quasi-states in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts were formed, leading to a prolonged low-intensity conflict between Ukrainian government forces

[7] The Holy Alliance was a coalition of three absolute monarchist powers – Austria, Prussia and Russia – created after the defeat of Napoleon in 1815. Its principal aim was to quell revolutionary movements in Europe.

[8] Besides Chechnya these are: Chuvashia, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Kalmykia, Karachay-Cherkessia, North Ossetia-Alania, Sakha, Tatarstan and Tuva. Almost all of them are in the North Caucasus and Siberia.

[9] The term hybrid warfare refers to the combined use of military and non-military means in a conflict that is intended by the aggressor state to remain below the threshold of open war.

and Russia's proxies. Finally, in February 2022 Russia launched a full-scale attack on Ukraine, this time openly surpassing the threshold of war.

The post-Soviet history of Russia can be divided in two periods. The first one, lasting from 1991 to 1999, was a democratic interlude marked by economic backsliding and a dramatic loss of influence and prestige on the world stage. The second period covers the time span from 1999 until the present and is characterized by a return to authoritarian rule and a revisionist foreign policy which has become openly imperialistic at least since the illegal annexations of Ukrainian territory in 2014 and 2022. Already in the aftermath of the short Russo-Georgian War, Jan C. Behrends (2008: 38) wrote of Russia's 'Imperial Syndrome' and concluded that the Soviet revolutionary-imperialistic paradigm was replaced by the authoritarian-imperialistic identity of Putin's Russia.

This continuity in imperial thinking through different political systems was symbolically confirmed in June 2023 when Russian state-owned energy corporation Gazprom erected the 175 m tall Saint Petersburg Flagpoles carrying the flags of the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation. During the opening ceremony, which was attended by President Putin, Gazprom Neft's deputy general director Elena Ilyukhina aptly emphasized that 'the trinity symbolizes the continuity of our history' (The Russian Reader, 2023).

RUSSIA AND AFRICA – A TOXIC 'LOVE STORY'

It is precisely during this new peak of Russian imperialism that Moscow promotes its anti-imperial and anti-colonial strategic narrative among foreign audiences. As already mentioned, the narrative represents a discursive weapon against the 'collective West' as well as a soft/sharp power tool of attracting/luring developing countries into the Russian extended sphere of influence. Ostracized from the West, Russia needed alternative markets for its exports – primarily energy and agricultural products, but also weapons. After the *Blitzkrieg* against Kyiv failed, Russia had to secure new venues for economic cooperation in order to be able to conduct its long war in Ukraine. Other concerns are involved as well: Russia wants to garner support or at least neutrality of as many countries as possible within the United Nations.[10] Russia is also seeking to dismantle Western influence wherever the opportunity arises, and Africa was detected as a particularly fertile ground for Moscow's advances. Already in 2019 Russia hosted the first Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi. Its alleged purpose has been furthering economic cooperation, but also pushing back against Western 'neo-colonial practices' and strengthening the sovereignty of African states (Vayez, 2020).

On 31 March 2023 President Putin signed the new 'Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation'. The document explicitly accuses the West of seeking 'global domination' and of 'neo-colonial and hegemonic ambitions'. Russia's priority in Africa is to show 'support in securing sovereignty and independence' threatened by the

[10] Africa is the largest voting bloc in the United Nations, with 54 out of 193 voting member states.

'sophisticated neo-colonial policies of a number of the developed states' (Rodkiewicz, 2023: 2-4). The new foreign policy concept is fully in line with Putin's speech held on the occasion of the illegal annexation of four Ukrainian regions to the Russian Federation. On 30 September 2022 Putin said:

> The West is ready to cross every line to preserve the neo-colonial system which allows it to live off the world, to plunder it thanks to the domination of the dollar and technology, to collect an actual tribute from humanity, to extract its primary source of unearned prosperity, the rent paid to the hegemon… This explains their aggression towards independent states, traditional values and authentic cultures (Putin, 2022).

Putin accuses the West of neo-colonialism. Furthermore, he criticizes Western interventions towards independent states regardless of the fact of Russia has started its full-scale aggression against Ukraine:

> In certain countries, the ruling elites voluntarily agree to do this, voluntarily agree to become vassals; others are bribed or intimidated. And if this does not work, they destroy entire states, leaving behind humanitarian disasters, devastation, ruins, millions of wrecked and mangled human lives, terrorist enclaves, social disaster zones, protectorates, colonies and semi-colonies (ibid.).

The list of horrors attributed by Putin to Western interventions in the section above could easily be associated with Russian warfare in Chechnya, Georgia, Syria and Ukraine.

> It is worth reminding the West that it began its colonial policy back in the Middle Ages, followed by the worldwide slave trade, the genocide of Indian tribes in America, the plunder of India and Africa, the wars of England and France against China… While we – we are proud that in the 20th century our country led the anti-colonial movement, which opened up opportunities for many peoples around the world to make progress, reduce poverty and inequality, and defeat hunger and disease (ibid.).

Putin starts this segment with the words 'it is worth reminding the West'. But the West does not need reminding. It is aware of its past crimes and has dealt with them extensively. The same cannot be said of Russia that suffers from 'colonial allergy' (Morrison, 2016) and refuses to admit its own crimes against the people of Siberia, Central Asia, the Caucasus and elsewhere. Also, when referring to the Soviet Union's role in the anti-colonial movement, Putin explicitly calls it 'our country'. But the USSR was as much Ukrainian or Georgian as it was Russian and its impact – good or bad – on the Global South by no means belongs to Russia alone.

Putin isn't the only spokesperson of Russia's anti-colonial agenda. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov is equally engaged in this endeavor. In February 2024 his ministry organized a 'Forum of Supporters of the Struggle Against Modern Practices of Neo-colonialism'. In the opening speech, Lavrov made the following comments:

> After the Soviet Union departed the world stage, the West began to impose its 'rule-based order', in fact, its undivided dominance in economics, finance, politics and culture… Abusing the trust of the world majority, the aggressive minority led

> by the United States improved colonial practices and did not hesitate to use force – as it happened in Yugoslavia, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and other countries of Asia and Africa (Lavrov, 2024).

The message here is that the Soviet Union served as a bulwark against Western dominance and hegemony. Today, Lavrov claims, it is the Russian Federation which protects the interests of the 'world majority' against the 'colonial practices' of an 'aggressive minority led by the United States'.

> The shaping of multipolarity is a historically natural and irreversible process. This is a world order that will reflect the cultural and civilizational diversity of the modern world and have regard for the right of every nation to determine its own destiny. New power centers, including the SCO, BRICS, the leaders of the African Union, ASEAN, SELAC and other integration unions of the Global Majority, play a key role in its context (ibid.).

Multipolarity has become a buzzword in the Russian propaganda vocabulary, yet its leadership has so far failed to provide details about its actual content. How many poles of power will exist in the world order envisioned by Russia – three, ten, a hundred? Will the distinction between great, medium and small powers still apply, or will countries like Egypt, Ethiopia and South Africa become Russia's equals? Finally, if Russia champions 'the right of every nation to determine its own destiny', as proclaimed by Lavrov, then why is a peace deal between Moscow and Kyiv conditioned – among other things – by Ukraine abandoning the idea of NATO membership?

The promotion of Moscow's anti-colonial strategic narrative is a vast undertaking involving Russia's entire diplomatic service in the Global South, which leads to occasional blunders. This is exactly what happened in April 2020, when the Russian embassy in the Republic of Botswana published its 'Press release on the USSR role in the adoption of the UN Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples'. The press release opens with the following lines:

> The Russian Empire has never participated in the colonial division and always supported African peoples and their desire for independence throughout the colonization of Africa by Western powers… In 1898, diplomatic relations were established by Russia with the Boer Republic of Transvaal with Russian volunteers fighting alongside during the Second Boer War in 1899-1902 (Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Botswana, 2020).

While it is true that the Russian Empire has never participated in the colonial division of Africa, it was not for a lack of trying. In January 1889, a Russian ship carrying more than 100 settlers, including the adventurer and self-styled Cossack Nikolai Ashinov, landed in the Gulf of Tadjoura, in today's Djibouti. The would-be colonists settled in the old Ottoman fort of Sagallo and hoisted the Russian imperial flag over it. However, contrary to the assurances that a local chief had given to the Russian newcomers, the entire coast had already been claimed by France. Only a month later, after a few attempts to convince the Russians to surrender, French gunboats shelled Sagallo, killing several settlers. The rest were collected by the French and dropped off at Port

Said in Egypt, where a Russian steamship picked them up and took them home. Thus ended the Russian colonization efforts in Africa (Polianichev, 2023). Even more problematic is the second part of the paragraph, extolling Russian support for the Boers. The Boers were Dutch colonists who settled in Southern Africa in the 17th century. In addition to occupying farmland, they also used African slave labor until the late 19th century (Eldredge and Morton, ed., 2019: 1-7). In the 1880s and 1890s they fought the British in two wars for control over Southern Africa. This means that the Russian Empire backed one group of European colonists against another group of European colonists, with the purpose of weakening Britain – its foe in the 'Great Game' that occurred simultaneously in Central Asia.

Besides glossing over the colonial nature of the Russian Empire and appropriating the actions and achievements of the Soviet Union in Africa, Moscow has been engaged in other, more direct forms of power projection. Figures show that Russia is only a marginal economic partner in Africa. Russia's trade volume with the continent in 2022 (US$ 18.4 billion) was lower than that of China (US$ 199 billion), Italy (US$ 76.3 billion), France (US$ 67.8 billion), the US (US$ 65.7 billion) and Germany (US$ 45 billion). Even more telling is how low the figures are for African imports from Russia – fewer than 2% – compared to 20% from China and 6% from India. However, Moscow makes up for these deficiencies with bilateral security agreements. The Kremlin's openness to unconditional partnerships helped position Russia as a favorite and, sometimes, the only international partner for countries facing isolation and sanctions. This is the case in the mostly francophone 'Coup Belt' stretching from Guinea in the West to Sudan in the East. The newly formed Alliance of Sahel States, comprising Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, has been the most recent focal point of Russian activity in Africa. The confederation of three former French colonies has become an important supplier of gold and uranium to Russia, while Moscow has provided a 'regime survival package' to the juntas, including weapons and military instructors (Sacchi, 2024).

Russian Deputy Defence Minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov is now responsible for Africa Corps (formerly Wagner) operations. Under new management, Africa Corps has been pursuing Russian strategic objectives more effectively, emphasizing formal economic and security cooperation. The specific intent is to displace Western political influence in Africa by establishing alternative security cooperation agreements (Reva, 2024).

Bilateral deals with Russia won't tip the global balance of power in Africa but will make African states more cautious about their stance on the war in Ukraine, or criticism of Moscow. This was evident in the limited participation of African countries in Switzerland's 'Summit on Peace in Ukraine' held in June 2024. Before the event, Russia and Ukraine lobbied Global South countries, especially in Africa. Russia criticized the summit and campaigned to dissuade countries from participating. Ukraine sought to ensure participation, with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy personally inviting several African leaders. Even though the summit's agenda focused on soft humanitarian issues such as prisoner exchange, the return of Ukrainian children and food security, only 14 African countries participated. Only 11 signed the final declaration (ibid.).

Beside their pragmatic benefit, how did such attitudes become entrenched in Africa? Edyta Bojanowska (2022) offered an interesting explanation: 'From the zoomed-out perspective of half a world away, Russia's imperialistic injustices fade from view. If your historical experience tells you that a sharp racial antagonism is the cornerstone of colonial oppression, the Russians' attempts to "reunite" with what they claim to be their Slavic kinfolk lacks the optics of an imperial usurpation'. Or maybe it's something as plain as fearing assassination or a military coup should a political decision by an African leader enrage Moscow – as suggested by former Ukrainian foreign minister Dmytro Kuleba (Financial Times, 2024).

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have demonstrated imperial continuity in all variations of Russian statehood from the 16th century onwards (with a short intermezzo in the 1990s). In Siberia and parts of the Caucasus and Central Asia the imperial expansion of Muscovy/Russia was followed by intensive colonization and resource exploitation that continued well into the 20th century. Nevertheless, due to geographical factors – Russia was a terrestrial empire with no overseas colonies – and Soviet involvement in national liberation movements of the Cold War era, Putin's regime was able to devise and disseminate a rather successful anti-colonial strategic narrative intended for audiences in the Global South. Its immediate purpose has been to enable Russia's reorientation toward new partners and markets after the rupture with the West following the full-scale invasion on Ukraine. Its long-term goal is tied to Russian messianism and has the objective of saving the world from the twisted value system of an allegedly decadent West.

Africa in particular has turned out to be susceptible to Russian proselytism. This is a continent that suffered most severely under Western colonialism and profited most directly from Soviet interventions in the 1950s, 60s and 70s. If the West intends to reverse Moscow's diplomatic gains in Africa it must debunk Russia's anti-colonial strategic narrative but also adopt a policy of more parity and less parenting towards its former subjects.

In the end, while presenting itself to the Global South as a leader of anti-colonialism, Russia actually acts as a neo-colonial power exploiting 'mostly people from the Global South, from poor countries' (Sokolova-Stekh, 2024) like Nepal, Yemen, Sri Lanka, India, Tajikistan, etc., to fight for Russian imperial interests in Ukraine. Unlike the relatively small number of foreign nationals from the far-right or far-left of the political spectrum who come to fight for Russia based on their ideological views, individuals from the Global South join the Russian military as mercenaries in large numbers. While North Korea officially sent 12,000 military personnel to engage in combat against Ukraine, it went largely unnoticed that at the beginning of 2024 there were approximately 15,000 mercenaries from Nepal fighting on the Russian side. Therefore, Russia's anti-colonial strategic narrative towards the Global South is a way in which Moscow attempts to exploit the difficult past of Western imperialism. At the same time, it is part of Russia's

neo-imperial project where vulnerable populations of the Global South are manipulated and used in Russia's geopolitical struggles.

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Ruski antikolonijalni strateški narativ usmjeren prema Globalnom jugu

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SAŽETAK

Od početka sveobuhvatnog napada na Ukrajinu, te nametanja sankcija Zapada, Rusija nastoji umanjiti njihov učinak produbljivanjem odnosa s Globalnim jugom. Njena ofenziva šarmom u zemljama u razvoju ima za svrhu uskladiti ih s interesima Moskve. Njen diplomatski pritisak temelji se na pažljivo konstruiranome, iako duboko pogrešnom narativu koji Rusiju predstavlja kao antikolonijalnu silu i pravog prijatelja Globalnom jugu. Svrha narativa jest uvjeriti bivše europske kolonije da – za razliku od zapadnjačkih sila – Rusija nikada nije provodila plan kolonizacije, te je uvijek podržavala neovisnost nacija diljem svijeta. Njen cilj jest privući nesvrstane zemlje u rusku orbitu i neutralizirati zapadne napore za izolacijom Rusije. Cilj ovoga rada jest osporiti moskovski antikolonijalni narativ i razotkriti ga kao dio ruske propagande, na način da istražimo ruske imperijalne/kolonijalne politike od 16. stoljeća do danas te razotkrijemo namjere iza moskovske nedavne patronizacije Afrike.

Ključne riječi: Rusija, Globalni jug, antikolonijalizam, ofenziva šarmom, dezinformacije