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The Russo-Ukrainian War: a World-system Theoretical Approach

The article follows the perspective of the World-system and aims to reveal the factors determining Russian foreign policy. In response to the neo-realistic interpretation of Russia's behaviour in the international system, based on the logic of maintaining the balance of powers, an alternative interpretation is formulated: Russia's foreign policy is influenced by structural geo-economic factors – belonging to the 'semi-peripheral' geo-economic zone. It leads to socio-economic tensions and political instability within the state and forces the Russian regime to use various domestic and foreign policy instruments to mobilize the society. One such instrument is military aggression in foreign countries, including Ukraine.

Introduction

The unprovoked Russian military invasion of Ukraine has changed the European security architecture. One of the most striking changes is the decision of Sweden and Finland, two northern European countries, to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Moscow's official response to the initial public pronouncements regarding the Finns and Swedes' changing perspectives on joining the Western military alliance was unexpected. Dmitry Medvedev, Deputy Head of Russia's Security Council, stated that the membership of Finland and Sweden in NATO 'does not pose any particularly new threat to Russia'. Meanwhile, Ukraine's accession to NATO, according to Medvedev, could provoke the Third World War (ELTA, 2022; Delfi.lt, 2022). Russian President Vladimir Putin took a similar position: "The membership of Sweden and Finland in NATO will not cause problems for Russia" (LRT, 2022).

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The Kremlin's passive reaction to NATO's expansion towards Russia's borders calls into question the neo-realistic interpretation of Russia's behaviour in the international system.

Depending on the prevailing theoretical assumptions, Russia's behaviour is explained through the prism of relations between the major and small states and the regional position of states. For example, neo-realist John Mearsheimer emphasises that the great powers always seek to influence the behaviour of smaller neighbouring states. They implement this goal by forming spheres of influence at their borders (Mearsheimer, 2001). As the United States and its European allies tried to pull Ukraine out of Russia's sphere of influence in order to integrate it into the West, now they have to take responsibility for the crisis in Ukraine. "The West has moved the game into the Russian courtyard threatening Russia's strategic interests. <...> Putin and his compatriots think and act on the basis of the logic of realism" (Mearsheimer, 2014; The Economist, 2022: 1–2). This Mearsheimer's interpretation essentially describes the dynamic of relations between Russia and Ukraine emphasised by the external, or in this case Western factor, and is repeated in the research of the analysed field by applying a neo-realist perspective.

Another analytical aspect that dominates the research of neo-realists is the concept of regional power illustrated by Elias Götz's approach. Based on the neo-realistic paradigm, Götz asserts that every regional power is under external pressure caused by the anarchy of the international system. In other words, the regional power seeks to influence the foreign policy of its neighbours in such a way that the latter does not 'approximate' towards other great powers or military alliances led by them. Following this interpretation, regional power can use rough measures (such as military power) to disrupt or terminate this cooperation. "Russia's behaviour in Ukraine should not be surprising. It is simply an attempt by the regional great power to maintain the sphere of influence in the face of increasing external pressure. <...> As soon as Kiev flirted with external powers, Russia used rough measures to control Ukraine. On the contrary, when Kiev showed the signs of closer cooperation with Moscow in foreign and security matters, Russia pursued a less strict policy and sought to attract Ukraine by providing cheap energy and other economic benefits. However, the fundamental goal to establish the influence on Kiev's foreign policy orientation has not changed essentially" (Götz, 2019: 3–4).

Thus, in line with the logic of neo-realism, Russia invaded Ukraine under systemic pressure to prevent it from becoming a member of the military alliance (NATO) led by the United States. Russia is presently attempting to turn Ukraine into a neutral buffer zone to reduce external pressure.

Nevertheless, the neo-realistic interpretation is inconsistent. Finland

and Russia are separated by a 1,300-kilometre-long border with its large part unguarded. The border is next to Russia's second-largest city, Saint Petersburg. Finland's geographical location makes the country almost ideal for a military action against Russia. It is also impossible to ignore the economic-military potential of Finland and Sweden, which undoubtedly surpasses that of Ukraine. Finally, Russia constantly stresses that NATO's expansion towards its borders threatens national security. Therefore, following a neo-realist interpretation, it becomes unclear why the membership of Finland and Sweden in NATO does not pose a problem for Russia.

Consequently, the following question is to be asked: what factors influence Russian politics if not the ones to maintain the balance of power?

The World-system perspective (Wallerstein, 1974, 1979, 1984.) is used to search for an answer to the question. In response to the neo-realist interpretation of Russia's behaviour on the international scene, an alternative interpretation is formulated. It says that Russia's foreign policy is influenced by structural geo-economic factors – belonging to the 'semi-peripheral' geo-economic zone. It leads to socio-economic tensions and political instability within the state and forces the Russian regime to use various domestic and foreign policy instruments to mobilize the society. One such instrument is military aggression in foreign countries, including Ukraine.

The first part of the article briefly presents the main provisions of the perspective of the World-system focusing on the discussion of the characteristics of the 'semi-peripheral' geo-economic zone to which Russia belongs. In the second part of the article, the empirical definition of Russia's position in the world-system is determined based on exceptional theoretical assumptions. The third part deals with the implications of Russia's 'semi-peripheral' geo-economic zone for its foreign policy.

The empirical parts of the work involve two cases. The first one is the global economic-financial crisis of 2008–2009 followed by the *Bolotnaya* protests (2011–2013), and the second one is the oil price crisis of 2014–2015 and the subsequent protests in various regions of Russia (2018–2022).

The qualitative content analysis focuses on the selection and examination of qualitative data revealing the specifics of the context. When organising research aimed at defining specific significances (in the analysed case: significances that allow the understanding of Russia's behaviour in the international system), it is important to form a methodology of analysis focused on the dynamics of formation of the significance emphasising the need for specific time, place and contextuality (Shwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012: 10–11). Therefore, in terms of context, specific significances are identified by collecting and analysing qualitative content, i.e. the data related to the specific course

and dynamics of defined analysis cases dictated by the specifics of selected cases and the events that define them.

1. The Semi-periphery of the World-system

Following Wallerstein, states can be divided into three geo-economic zones: 'core', 'periphery' and 'semi-periphery'. The article focuses on the 'semi-periphery', which is attributed to Russia according to previous studies (Babones, 2013, Beržiūnas, 2020).

The 'semi-peripheral' countries are characterised by the production of industrial products of both lower and higher added value or by the factor that they are suppliers of raw materials to the 'core' countries. Thus, relatively cheap industrial production or simply raw materials are exported to the 'core' countries from the 'semi-peripheral' ones, and relatively expensive (high-tech) production is imported. This imbalance leads to the economic retardation of the 'semi-periphery' from the 'core' (Shannon, 1996: 37).

A significant characteristic of the 'semi-periphery' is the existence of technologically advanced or 'core-like' industries. Due to excessive production costs and falling production prices, the latter occurs when certain economic activities lose their profitability in the 'core' countries, and production is brought to those geo-economic zones where the labour force is cheaper (Norkus, 2015).

Economic factors affect the socioeconomic and political situation within the 'semi-peripheral' states. The economies of these countries do not accumulate enough capital to ensure relatively high standards of socioeconomic well-being for all or at least most of the population. As a result, the 'semi-peripheral' countries are characterised by higher levels of poverty and social exclusion compared to the 'core' ones, uneven regional development, emigration and other socioeconomic tensions. The latter leads to instability, i. e. escalation of ethnic, religious and regional conflicts, increasing tendencies of decentralisation, protests, polarisation of society, formation of far left or right political movements (Chase-Dunn, 1989: 121–129, 213–214). In order to stabilise the situation, the ruling regimes of the 'semi-peripheral' states, ranging from the so-called 'formal democracies' to authoritarian regimes, are forced to strictly control social processes. For this purpose, different instruments covering both domestic and foreign policy are used, starting with the ones introducing the ideology of nationalism, marginalisation or persecution of regime opponents and leading to military aggression in foreign countries (Shannon, 1996: 108–117).

To sum up, 'semi-peripheral' states are politically unstable, often repressive internally and aggressive internationally. This is due to the insufficient economic development and uneven distribution of capital in the society causing tensions.

2. Semi-peripheral Russia

Russian industrial production is not in demand in domestic and international markets. Therefore, a significant part of the high value-added production is imported from economically more powerful 'core' countries using the funds received from the export of raw materials for import payments (OEC, 2022).

Russia is one of the largest exporters of resources in the world. The majority of exports consist of energy raw materials, such as natural gas, oil, coal, etc. The energy sector accounts for almost 40% Russia's federal budget revenues, 60% of exports and 25% of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) (Davydova, 2021). Fluctuations in hydrocarbon prices in global markets significantly affect the macroeconomic processes in Russia (Depersio, 2022; Vladimirovna et al., 2017: 225–230). In fact, any drop in oil and gas revenues immediately puts the Kremlin's budget under strain. For example, in 2013–2016, when the world's oil price dropped, the Russian economy fell into recession. The value of the national currency, the Russian ruble, fell by half, and the banks faced solvency problems. At that time, the Russian government even had to use the available international currency reserves to rescue the financial sector. Since 2016, when oil prices hovered around 70 USD per barrel, Russia's economy had been growing by nearly 2% annually until the COVID–19 global pandemic in 2020. However, this growth did not match the 2000–2008 (2013) period when Russian GDP had been growing by 7% annually after the average price of an oil barrel exceeded the limit of 100 USD per barrel (World Bank, 2021).

Like many 'semi-peripheral' countries, Russia has a high level of corruption. Economic sanctions imposed in response to the Kremlin's geopolitical aggression contribute to the unfavourable business climate (The Moscow Times, 2018). State-owned companies, which are not characterised by competitiveness or innovation, dominate strategic branches of the Russian economy: energy, finance, defence industry, etc. Their decisions are often based on political rather than economic considerations (Azatutyun, 2015; AP, USA Today, 2015). There is a 'brain drain'. For example, since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, more than 150 thousand people have emigrated from

Russia, including artists, scientists, businesspersons and professionals having technology skills. Although the declining population is compensated by an influx of people emigrating from Central Asia, they are mostly unskilled workers (Cabot, 2022).

Many Russian factories still use technologies inherited from the Soviet period as little attention is paid to science. In the last years of the Soviet Union, scientific research and experimental development (R&D) was allocated 5% of GDP annually, whereas today Russia allocates 1.1% of GDP to R&D (The World Bank, 2022). This is a particularly low funding compared to the ones in the developed and developing countries[1].

Although Russia boasts several innovative economic sectors, including information technology, defence, space and nuclear energy, the industry is generally characterised by a relatively low level of innovation. Russia's industrial development is largely driven by foreign capital investments and imports of more advanced technologies that Russia does not produce, such as semiconductors. Since Russian companies use foreign technologies to develop their business, tensions in relations with the West hinder economic growth.

The war in Ukraine and economic sanctions imposed on Russia have a significant impact on its economy. While rising energy prices generate billions of dollars, Russia's economy has slowed sharply since its invasion of Ukraine. The country's dependence on Europe, which purchased 83% of the Russian energy exports, is also at risk. If Western Europe manages to distance itself from Russian natural gas, Russia will face an unsolvable situation, as it will run out of markets for its energy exports (BNS, AFP, Lrytas.lt, 2022).

Economic challenges directly lead to the deterioration of the socio-economic situation in Russia. For example, the share of GDP per capita in Russia reached 12.1 thousand USD in 2021 (The World Bank, 2021). In comparison, Estonia's GDP per capita in 2021 reached 27.2 thousand USD (The World Bank, 2021a). At the beginning of 2022, 12–14% or 18–21 million of Russia's population lived below the poverty line set by the Russian government (Statista Research Department, 2022).

According to forecasts, the conflict in Ukraine and the sanctions imposed by the West will further deepen the problem of poverty (Duffy, 2022). Russia has a relatively high *Gini* coefficient, which measures social exclusion in the society (Statista Research Department, 2022a). The level of economic development varies in different cities and regions throughout Russia. The capital, Moscow, and the second largest city, Saint Petersburg, are developing

[1] For example, the United States spends 3% on R&D GDP, China – 2%, Japan – 3.2%, and the EU (average) – 2%. (Eurostat, 2022).

fastest. In addition, relatively higher living standards are in the regions where resource extraction capacity is concentrated. However, moving away from these economic centres, the employment rate of the population is decreasing as well as investment and infrastructure (Rudenko, 2021).

The tight socio-economic situation causes tensions in the society. In response, the ruling regime is forced to suppress them by means of domestic and foreign policy measures, such as marginalisation and persecution of the opposition, censorship, propaganda, introduction of imperialist ideologies, narratives about the 'fortress surrounded by enemies' and geopolitical aggression in a form of military actions and chaos in neighbouring countries.

In summary, Russia meets the characteristics of a 'semi-peripheral' state. Despite several advanced economic sectors inherited from the Soviet period, its economy is dominated by a resource industry that is insufficient to ensure the well-being of all or at least a large number of the population. It is the uneven distribution of capital in the society that causes socio-economic tensions leading to political instability. In order to stabilise the situation, the Russian ruling regime uses domestic and foreign policy instruments, including military aggression in foreign countries.

3. The Implications of Russia's Socio-economic Situation for Domestic and Foreign Policy

To reveal a connection between the socio-economic processes in Russia and the domestic and foreign policy of the ruling regime, the following two cases are analysed: the global economic-financial crisis of 2008–2009 followed by the *Bolotnaya* protests (2011–2013) and the oil price crisis of 2014–2015 and the subsequent protests in various regions of Russia (2018–2022).

From 2011 to 2013, Russia was gripped by its largest protests since the collapse of the Soviet Union. They were provoked by discontent with the socioeconomic situation and the lack of political reforms. Demonstrations emerged after the allegedly rigged election celebrated by the Kremlin's party *Yedinaya Rossiya* and further fuelled by the power castling between Medvedev and Putin (BBC, 2011). The scale and intensity of the protests raised fears that Russia is experiencing the so-called 'colour revolution' that had previously toppled regimes in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and Kyrgyzstan (2005) (Devitt, 2014). In response, the Kremlin not only brutally repressed the demonstrations but also carried out large-scale disinformation and propaganda campaigns identifying protesters as Western agents and conspirators seeking to carry out a coup in Russia (Faulconbridge & Tsvetkova, 2011).

The *Bolotnaya* protests and the propaganda campaigns have highlighted the Kremlin's main goals of shaping public opinion: to intimidate the Russian society that the regime change will bring chaos and calamity to the Russian land, and to mobilise citizens around the regime and against the 'common enemy', i. e. the West (the United States, NATO, EU), thus diverting people's attention away from socio-economic problems in the country.

Based on geopolitical aggression, the propaganda tactic was actively used in the context of the events of 2014 in Ukraine, i. e. the Maidan revolution. The Kremlin's propaganda mouthpieces constantly announced that the Western-backed 'fascist junta' had taken over the power in Ukraine aiming to physically eliminate the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine. The society was threatened that the same tragic fate would also befall the Russian population if a Western coup were to take place in the country.

With the help of nationalist and imperialist slogans, a picture of the Kremlin regime was formed as a guarantee of stability in Russia and the entire post-Soviet space. In other words, a story was created about the power that restored Russia to the greatness lost after the collapse of the Soviet Union and returned Russia to the ranks of the great powers. A force that protects Russian-speaking people from the terror of the *Banderovtsy* legalised in the West and the one that has carried out 'historical justice' by returning Crimea to Russia (Lee & Barry, 2014; Radio Free Europe, 2015; Dreyfuss, 2014).

Despite the regime's fears that the unrest in Ukraine could be heading to Russia, the Kremlin used the Maidan revolution to its advantage. The latter statement is confirmed by a strong increase in Putin's personal popularity rating compared to the period of 2011–2013. According to the Levada Centre, in February 2014, just before the invasion of Crimea, Putin's popularity reached 69%, while in April 2014, the general public favour of the president rose to 82%. Putin's recent surge in popularity has come despite Russia's global condemnation and economic sanctions that have led to the devaluation of the Russian ruble and the rise in living costs for many Russian people, especially those belonging to the middle and lower classes (Levada Center, 2014).

Thus, the experience of 2014 shows that the Russian regime, with the help of domestic and external 'enemies', nationalist and other narratives, is able to significantly increase its popularity in a relatively short period of time. However, as later events showed, the unity of the society was temporal. In 2021 and 2022, the Kremlin regime again had to take time-tested and proven tactics of public mobilisation.

Between 2018 and 2022, a new wave of anti-government protests erupted in Russia triggered by a referendum in 2020 that allowed Putin to remain in office until 2036 (BNS, LRT, 2021) as well as Alexei Navalny's film 'Putin's

Palace. The History of the World's Largest Bribe' published on *YouTube*. It was viewed by millions of people in Russia and around the world (BNS, Delfi.lt, 2021).

In 2014, the Russian leader's growing rating did not show signs of growth for some time. Furthermore, as regular State Duma elections approached, the Kremlin-controlled party *Yedinaya Rossiya* failed to strengthen its weakening positions. It was confirmed by the Russian regional elections in 2020. Despite different formal voting restrictions, *Yedinaya Rossiya* lost its majority in Tomsk, Novosibirsk, and Tambov (Радио Свобода, 2020).

The first example of societal unrest began in Khabarovsk in the Far East. Public outrage was provoked by Sergei Furgal's removal from office and arrest. Furgal was a popular governor in the region, and the conflict was aggravated by the Kremlin's decision to appoint Mikhail Degtiariov, who had no ties to the Khabarovsk region whatsoever (Giri, 2020).

The Khabarovsk region was not the only place where demonstrations took place. Protests on different issues sparked in Yekaterinburg, Arkhangelsk, Ingushetia, and other regions of Russia. As they focused on non-political issues (e.g., in Arkhangelsk, the protest was prompted by plans to build a landfill where waste from Moscow was to be treated (LRT, 2019), and the Ingush protest was in opposition to the transfer of part of their territory to Chechnya (15min.lt, 2018)), the federal government was criticised for it and for respecting the will and interests of the people of the regions.

In 2020, the protests demanding the resignation of Alexander Lukashenko spread across neighbouring Belarus. Russia's political leadership closely monitored the situation fearing similar demonstrations again in Russia (Walker, 2020). However, the Kremlin failed to avoid the unrest. The imprisonment of Navalny, who returned from Germany where he was treated for poisoning, brought hundreds of residents of Moscow, Saint Petersburg and other cities to the streets (BNS, LRT, 2021).

As the protests did not stop, the regime took a wide range of tactics to suppress them, including the use of force structures. Similarly, social networks were censored under the guise of the COVID–19 pandemic, all mass gatherings were banned, students were intimidated by expulsion from universities, cases were filed against everyone who participated in the demonstrations (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Some measures showing that the regime is becoming more repressive deserve separate attention. For example, in February 2022, a Siberian military court sentenced Nikita Uvarov, 16, to a five-year custodial sentence in prison for allegedly plotting to blow up a virtual building of the Russian Federal Security Service (*Lubyanka*) in a computer game (Radio Free Europe, 2022).

As concerns the Russian foreign policy, in 2021, the Kremlin began to mobilise military forces at the border with Ukraine and the Crimean Peninsula. It was the largest mobilisation of the Russian army since the annexation of Crimea in 2014. However, in June 2021, a part of the military was withdrawn from the border claiming that the concentration of troops was only part of a military exercise. In October 2021, the second concentration of military forces began. By December, troops and military equipment, including armoured vehicles, missile systems and other equipment, were deployed surrounding Ukraine from three sides.

The Russian military concentration was accompanied by various provocations at the border, including cyber-attacks accusing Ukraine of carrying out terrorist attacks in Crimea and genocide against the people of Donbass (BBC, 2021). The recruitment of personnel and equipment took place until February 2022, when Russia launched a military invasion of Ukraine. Justifying the necessity of 'demilitarisation' and 'denazification' of Ukraine, in his address to the Russian people, Putin used substantially analogous rhetoric that previously justified the annexation of Crimea and the escalation of the conflict in eastern Ukraine (Bloomberg, 2022).

In conclusion, after reviewing the processes in Russia in the periods of 2011–2014 and 2020–2022, a clear connection can be seen between the military aggression undertaken by the Kremlin regime and the unrest of the society in Russia caused by the socioeconomic situation. The latter correlation supports the argument that the Kremlin regime uses foreign policy as a means of suppressing domestic unrest rather than pursuing strategic objectives, one of which is maintaining a balance of power.

Conclusions

Following the theoretical perspective of the World-system, the article aimed to show that the reasons for Russia's aggressive behaviour on the international front, including the military invasion of Ukraine, are not strategic in nature as the representatives of the neo-realism claim. Rather, they are rooted in the Russian economy.

In line with the criteria of the World-system, Russia meets the features of socioeconomic development that are characteristics of the countries belonging to the 'semi-peripheral' geo-economic zone. It creates conditions for the formation of socioeconomic tensions that turn into political unrest. To stabilise society or, more precisely, to divert its attention from socioeconomic problems, the Russian regime is forced to use different mobilisation measures against the

society, e. g. military campaigns in neighbouring countries.

To empirically reveal the relationship among the processes caused by socio-economic factors in Russia and the domestic and foreign policies of the ruling regime, the article uses qualitative analysis of the content of two cases: the first one is the global economic-financial crisis of 2008–2009 followed by the *Bolotnaya* protests (2011–2013); and the second one is the oil price crisis of 2014–2015 and the subsequent protests in various regions of Russia (2018–2022).

The analysis of the above cases shows some parallels between the deteriorating socio-economic situation and the political unrest in Russia, as well as the aggressive actions of the regime. These could be conceptualised by the following examples. After the rigged elections of the State Duma in 2011 and the castling of Putin and Medvedev in 2012, which triggered the famous *Bolotnaya* protests, the Kremlin 'reassured' the society by using realistic and imperialist slogans as well as aggression by annexing Crimea and escalating the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Similar behaviour is also noticed in 2014–2015 when Russia experienced another crisis in the decline of oil prices on global markets unbalancing Russia's political system once again. As before, the Russian regime suppressed the new wave of anti-government protests that erupted in 2022 by tightening political control over the society. The following measures to mobilise and repress the society were used: brutal suppression of protests, persecution of regime critics, promotion of nationalism, construction of a narrative about the 'fortress surrounded by enemies', and military campaign in Ukraine.

These correlations support the thesis that the regime uses foreign policy as a means of stabilising the internal situation rather than achieving strategic objectives. Therefore, the significance of defining Russia's behaviour in the international arena may be related not only to the structural-external factors dominating current research but also to the domestic socio-economic factors of the state. They determine the regime's necessity to neutralise the impact of socio-economic deterioration on the society or to divert public attention from the deterioration of these conditions to eliminate the preconditions for destabilisation of the society.

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