Pavlo Kazarin

THE WILD WEST OF EASTERN EUROPE

A Ukrainian Guide on Breaking Free from Empire

With an introduction by Dominique Hoffman

UKRAINIAN VOICES, VOL. 61

ibidem

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Content

Preface

At the start of 2022, Pavlo Kazarin was the host of a popular morning television show in the Ukrainian capital. His book *The Wild West of Eastern Europe* had come out a few months earlier and he had recently done the first presentation of the book in Mariupol. Throughout February, the capital was anxious. Russia was massing troops again along Ukraine's borders, Western intelligence services were warning of an imminent invasion, Russia mocked the idea, and Ukrainian politicians tried to be reassuring.

Then, on the morning of February 24, Kazarin was awakened not by his early morning alarm clock but by the sound of explosions outside Kyiv. He got up, put on a T-shirt that read *Ukrainians will resist*, and left for work. Kazarin writes, "I was scared, but I knew I couldn't transmit that fear to our viewers. Of course, none of the material our producers had prepared the previous day was relevant anymore. And so, for the first time in my life, I spent almost two straight hours speaking directly with the viewing audience. It was the longest live broadcast of my life. It was the most difficult live broadcast of my life." The following day, Kazarin enlisted in the Ukrainian armed forces where he continues to serve, defending his country from the Russian invasion.

The Wild West of Eastern Europe traces Ukraine's journey toward self-awareness from the perspective of one person who followed a similar trajectory. In the introduction, Kazarin writes, "This book is my attempt to make sense of the people and circumstances that have changed us."

The Ukraine of today is a nation that took shape on the Euromaidan of 2013–14, was strengthened through the trials of the Revolution of Dignity and hardened through 10 years of war against invading forces. Kazarin makes it clear that Russia invaded in order to stop Ukraine's developing sovereignty.

He devotes an entire chapter here to the media and Russian methods of hybrid warfare. As a journalist and a cultural observer, he is acutely aware of Russia's hybrid warfare. Increased military budgets will not solve this problem. Our naivety, our will-

ingness to be manipulated, our apathy, and our longing for peace—all become weapons in the hands of the aggressor.

The alternative to this passivity is a sense of personal responsibility. A willingness to make difficult choices. He calls out infantilism, passivity, and both-sides ism. He emphasizes that passivity and empathy for the aggressor are not moral stances and that "neutrality" is a choice with consequences.

Commentators have written that one of the Kremlin's mistakes in February of 2022 was to imagine that they were invading the Ukraine of 2014. They were wrong. This book traces the developmental path that led to the fierce Ukrainian resistance that surprised both Western observers and the invaders.

Kazarin's book is addressed to Ukrainians. It is tempting to view the content as primarily topical—a window into some events in recent history in a distant country. Indeed, Kazarin writes in the epilogue that he looks forward to the day when the book will become irrelevant because Ukrainian independence and sovereignty are taken as a given.

That epilogue was written before the full-scale invasion. We are further than ever from the day Ukrainian independence can be taken for granted. In fact, is has only become more clear that the relevance of the book extends well beyond Ukraine's borders.

When I first read this book in 2022, the war had already been going on for some time. I felt that Kazarin had captured essential information about Ukrainian identity and also that he described it in a way that was important for Western readers to understand not just Ukraine, but ourselves and the moment in history we find ourselves in. Kazarin writes at one point in the book that his generation was fated to live at the center of history. The same reality is gradually dawning on many people outside Ukraine. I knew I wanted to translate this book to bring it to an English-language readership.

In 2014, many people outside Ukraine chose to look away from Russia's acts of war. They preferred to imagine that Russia's imperial ambitions would be satisfied with Crimea. And maybe the Donbas. And so we awakened in the world of 2022, with a nuclear-armed dictatorship determined to reassert control and

return the world to an earlier time, when the only rule was to take what you could. A world in which spheres of influence drew the map of the world to suit the most powerful, a map in which individual lives held no relevance.

Russia's ambitions are not limited to Ukraine. Russian propaganda outlets have repeatedly made it clear that it does not stop with Ukraine. The airwaves have been filled with anti-US, anti-Europe, anti-Western propaganda for well over a decade now. Russia has been at war with us for a long time: we just chose not to notice. Will we notice now? Or continue to watch as the war plays out in Ukraine and Russia learns the lessons it will need for the next phase. Because there will be a next phase. In his infamous Munich speech in 2007, Vladimir Putin called the collapse of the Soviet Union the "greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century." Russia is now intent on correcting that mistake—and the effort will not be limited to Ukraine.

Ukraine's ferocious defense of its sovereignty has bought time for the West to prepare. Putin was clear already in 2007 that he rejected the current world order. In the years following, the Russian airwaves were flooded with anti-American and anti-European sentiments. Diagrams of Russian missiles striking American cities were broadcast on the popular weekly "news" program. Russian intelligence agents utilized radioactive agents against their enemies on foreign soil. Russian troll farms exacerbated conflict in communities across the planet to undermine political and social cohesion. Russian forces invaded a sovereign nation, annexing part of their territory, fomented armed conflict elsewhere, and even shot down a passenger jet with 298 people on board. Still, the democratic nations of the world thought the threat could be contained.

Even now, there is wishful thinking that calls for "peace" and "negotiations." Why do Ukrainians respond so negatively to calls for peace? As Nobel Prize laureate Oleksandra Matviichuk has reminded us, Ukrainians want peace more than anyone. But most of those calling for peace in the face of a brutal war of conquest accompanied by widespread war crimes, seem to be calling for capitulation. Stop arming Ukraine, they say. You're just prolong-

ing the war. This is incorrect. Capitulation would only leave Russia with a larger, more experienced army and it's imperial appetites unquenched. When you feed imperial appetites, they only grow.

It is time that people outside Ukraine faced the reality of the current moment. We too must learn that passivity and wishful thinking are not an option. The divisions within our societies that make it difficult to take coordinated action were not invented by Russia, but they are definitely manipulated by external actors. Ukrainians have important knowledge for us in how to resist. The Ukrainians have been in the direct line of fire for Russian information warfare for a very long time. They understand how it works.

Ukrainians are living, thinking, writing, speaking and analyzing what is happening now. They understand the historical moment, at the global perspective, better than the rest of the world. It's time we listen more closely. Not only because, as the victims of a virulent aggressor they deserve that. But also because we need their hard-fought knowledge.

The next Great War has already started. Ukrainians just happened to get there first.

Introduction

I'm not claiming to be a saint. I drive too fast. I talk on the phone while driving. I park in the loading zone.

I could say I pay my taxes, but let's be real. My job pays them for me. I've never actually had to choose whether to give my hard-earned cash to the government or keep it for myself. My strong ethical stance comes for free—I wasn't given an opportunity to cheat.

Yes, I've refused to work for unethical employers. But I also don't have any sick relatives or major debts to pay off. I haven't had to make difficult choices with someone else dependent on me. So it wasn't all that hard to turn down big money.

I don't go to neighborhood meetings or join community organizations. I don't ask for receipts and I'm happy to pay cash when asked. I don't spend a lot of time volunteering: I spend my time as I see fit without excess effort.

I didn't join the army in 2014. For a long time, I hid behind my regional Crimean identity. I accepted the occupation documents and identity cards that allowed me to stay in Crimea after the annexation. My inner Crimean wasn't replaced by an inner Ukrainian right away.

Lots of my friends turned out to be more principled than me that year. While I tried to preserve my own little world, they went to the frontlines. While I tried to stay under the radar, they dedicated themselves to volunteering for the war effort. I have nothing to be proud of in 2014. My friends just bought me time—time I spent on reflection.

There's no way I'm going to blame my circumstances. I write my own story, that means the mistakes are mine, too. Of course, without those mistakes, that former Kazarin could hardly have become the current Kazarin. I'm not planning to touch up my biography retroactively.

It took me quite a long time to arrive at my current views. I don't always recognize myself when I read my older texts. I know people can change and I know that judging the past from the per-

spective of the present is pointless. We were different people in the past.

I try not to harbor illusions about myself. Or others. I also have no illusions about my life. I get what I deserve.

I don't believe in miracles and I don't like it when politicians pose as miracleworkers. I keep in mind my own limitations and I don't trust anyone who claims to have all the answers. I earn my own money and react badly when politicians make promises to spend my tax dollars to further their own ambitions.

I don't believe in the "wisdom of the people," because I'm one of "the people." And I have some pretty significant doubts about my own wisdom. I've made some poor choices and I'm not inclined to forget it. I've made incorrect predictions and my opponents have ample material to use against me. I've also been to a few soccer matches in my time and I know how easily a crowd can transform into a mob.

I don't like talk about the "simple folk" I prefer people who aren't so simple. People who know more than me, can do things I can't, and understand life better than me. I'm happy to take advice from people who are competent to give it and I can't stand dilettantes. I know their value because I'm a dilettante myself in plenty of things.

I don't like talk about prophets and messiahs. I don't think politicians have to be saints. I've accepted the fact that I'll often be marking my ballot for the lesser of two evils. That's because I know that in some situations I'm the lesser of two evils, and in others I may even be the greater of two.

I'm not inclined to complain about my fate. I've built my life out of the blocks I made the effort to gather. I don't intend to take anyone else's blocks, and I don't like it when someone starts eyeing mine.

I also don't like people looking at me with sad hound-dog eyes. My life is what I make of it through my own successes and errors, my own laziness and self-discipline. If I don't like something, I don't go looking for who to blame. That person is looking right back at me in the mirror every morning.

This book is my attempt to make sense of the people and circumstances that have changed us.

1 Crimea

Not Blood or Soil

It's easy to feel Ukrainian if your mom's from Lviv and your dad's from Poltava. If your lullabies were in Ukrainian, if you had hand-embroidered towels hanging in the kitchen and Shevchenko's *Kobzar* standing on the shelf. In that case, you've understood your own identity since childhood and you know exactly where you fit into your country.

That wasn't Crimea.

When I was growing up in Crimea, almost none of our parents were born there. We were a generation of immigrants. The Crimean peninsula's "Golden Age" was the Soviet 70s and 80s. The most popular Soviet resorts were in Crimea back when we were still living behind the Iron Curtain and under the command economy. After 1991, it lost that status and went on to suffer decades of nostalgia.

The nostalgia was omnipresent and the link between cause and effect was severed. Many of my neighbors failed to recognize the collapse of the Soviet system either as the logical result of losing the Cold War or as a natural consequence of ineffectual socialist economics. They saw independent Ukraine as the source of all their problems instead. Independent Ukraine, whose trident had come and tacked Crimea to the seafloor of society.

The fact that Crimea was Russian-speaking wasn't the problem. The bigger problem was the peninsula's preference for living in the past. People longed for the past. They idealized everything Soviet. It was hard to find yourself in those conditions. Nonetheless, some people did try to find common ground. Common ground that could link the peninsula with mainland Ukraine.

Then came the Maidan in 2013–14.

The Maidan was about values. On the Maidan, the individual choice of Ukrainian identity was more important than "blood and soil." The Ukrainian nation would no longer focus on ethnic categories.

For me, the Maidan was about the Ukrainian train trying to pull out of the post-Soviet station. Our Crimea should have been one of the wagons on that train. Crimea might have pulled the "stop chain" every so often but would have eventually arrived together with all the other wagons at the "West" station.

But then Russia arrived. Russia uncoupled my native wagon and hooked it up to a train headed straight for the past. A past that had no more real long-term prospects than a Spanish galleon: that is to say, none.

One difference between Crimeans and residents of the Donbas and Luhansk is that we left occupied territory for political reasons. We weren't forced out by shelling, we weren't fleeing actual war. When we meet another Crimean here in mainland Ukraine, we immediately know that person shares our beliefs—pro-Russian Crimeans don't come to Ukraine. The address on our ID doesn't suggest allegiance to Russia.

It's a cruel irony. The annexation of my home served as a defibrillator for Ukraine, forcing it to stumble out of its post-Soviet stupor. While the occupation of the peninsula stole our small homeland from Crimeans, it also gave us the gift of the greater homeland. The one in which what matters isn't "blood" or "soil," or the sound of your last name, or the language of your lullabies. Ukrainians aren't only born. They can also be made.

There's one thing I know for sure: the future can't be held hostage by the past. It took me thirty years to figure that out. It took me long enough.

Better late than never.

Strictly Personal

In February, Russia took over the Crimean peninsula by force. In March, they officially annexed the peninsula. I stayed until October, then I threw my things in the trunk and left for Kyiv.

Occupied Crimea was like the eye of a hurricane then. On the mainland, MH17 had been shot down, the battle for Ilovaisk had been fought, the first Minsk Accords were signed. On the peninsula, all was quiet.

From February to October 2014, I wrote about Crimea. The fact that I'd spent thirty years living in a remote province by the sea was no longer a problem. In early 2014, the peninsula was transformed into a global hotspot and everyone wanted to know more about it. The reserve of pro-Soviet sentiments I knew so well had suddenly become journalistic gold.

In February, Russia's "little green men" in unmarked uniforms invaded the peninsula. In March, they held a pseudo-referendum at gunpoint and suddenly the Russian flag was flying over Ukrainian Crimea.

By that October, the first shock had passed. The first tragedies had taken place. The first wave of immigrants were settling in on the mainland. But our cell phones still worked on both sides of the new border and the trains still reliably crossed the peninsula to the mainland.

Even the visual changes were few. The monopoly of Ukrainian goods was gradually diluted by items from Russia. Prices were still recalculated into Ukrainian hryvnia out of inertia. The remaining residents were divided into three groups. People getting ready to leave, people preparing for the internal exile of life under occupation, and the people who had finally stopped lying.

The latter frantically waved their new flags and filled social media with their ranting. Before long, their voices became the only ones to be heard from the peninsula. Everyone else either moved away or made their social media accounts anonymous. Even today, they rarely press "like" and almost never comment, but they read everything.

Expectations of a global war came to nothing. Russia stopped talking about "the Russian Spring," settling for a "Crimean" one instead. NATO didn't show up. There were fewer and fewer foreign reporters on the peninsula and more and more Russian accents.

My friends from the mainland called every day. I heard "How are things going over there?" less and less often. Now I was the one asking. Social media became our main source of information—that's where I heard the echoes of the battles from the constantly shifting front lines in the Donbas.

It's funny looking back. Before the war, someone who hit the limit of five thousand friends on Facebook was considered a top blogger. Then, after the war started, Ukraine suddenly had a lively blogosphere. Traditional media couldn't keep up with the demand for information and Zuckerberg's brainchild suddenly became our own CNN.

As I packed up, I thought about the fact that I didn't know a damned thing about my own country. My entire knowledge of the geography of the mainland was limited to the Maidan, a little bit more of Kyiv, and even less of Lviv. I was 30 years old and hardly knew my own country at all. The traditional isolation of Crimea showed. Our island mentality. Crimean identity.

After February 2014, that mentality began to lose its luster. The annexation forced each one of us to commit. We had to choose: which flag was ours? Which anthem?

Conversations with other Crimeans felt more and more like a minefield. One careless move could cause an explosion. More and more topics divided us. Fewer and fewer united us. And the minefield gradually developed into actual battle lines.

I had to leave.

I had no idea what awaited me. It wasn't a year for making plans. One thing was clear—my generation were now living inside history. The history that had been lacking in all those preceding years. There was no settling for cheap imitations.

I've been home to Crimea only twice since that day. Once at the end of 2014. Again in the summer of 2015. And then the FSB arrested my colleague who had stayed on and had written that the peninsula belonged to Ukraine. He was convicted on charges of calling for the violation of Russia's territorial integrity. Since then, I've only seen Crimea looking across the lagoon from the Arabat Spit.

I don't brag about my birthplace. I certainly don't want to become a "professional Crimean." I don't dream of the peninsula at night and I can't stand sympathy. I prefer to regard everything that has happened to me as experience rather than trauma.

And this experience showed me what I wanted. In October 2014, I hit the road with a clear view of the future I did not want. And I have no intention of packing up again.

Once was enough for me.

The Nutjobs Were Right

I remember flying to Crimea two days before the referendum.

The jetliner that had been reassigned to the Crimean route was packed to capacity. The cabin was full of Russian bureaucrats and journalists. There were French journalists in the rows ahead of me, Italians behind me, a Serb to my left and on my right a sailor from Sevastopol who'd heard about the invasion while at sea. He'd gone ashore in Curaçao and was making his way home in stages.

I spent the entire flight talking with the Serb. He was trying to work out some logical consistency and talked a while about the fact that he and his colleagues were in a no-win situation: "We support a strong Russia since Moscow is our ally, but how can we support the secession of Crimea from Ukraine? That would mean we also support the secession of Kosovo."

As our landing time in Simferopol approached, the Serb started talking about the centenary of World War I. He told me that it bothers Serbians that many Europeans blame them for the start of the First World War. He described conferences and symposiums in Serbia arguing that the war was caused by the accumulation of irreconcilable contradictions—not just because of Young Bosnia and Gavrilo Princip.

As I listened, I felt as though Crimeans would be making the same arguments in a hundred years.

In the movie *The Day After Tomorrow,* climate change results in a sudden environmental catastrophe all over the planet. In one scene, as the Vice President is being evacuated from the White House, his motorcade passes a local crank warning them to Repent, because Armageddon is nigh. The Vice President looks at him and sighs, forced to acknowledge that the nutjobs were right all along.

That's exactly how I felt in 2014. We used to dismiss the people warning us about "Russian tanks." We thought they were paranoid cranks. We were sure that they were stuck in the past: Russian tanks were impossible in the modern world. It turned out that they were the ones living in reality, while the rest of us soothed ourselves with comforting illusions.

After Crimea, the world woke to the era of conspiracy brought to life. Nothing was over the top.

Strangely enough, when the Soviet army entered Prague in 1968, the Czech army did not open fire. Not only because they didn't receive orders. Memories were still fresh of the Soviet liberation of Czechoslovakia. World War II had ended just 23 years earlier and many Czechs still viewed Soviet soldiers as part of a "brotherly nation," as "liberators." The events of the Prague Spring led to a dramatic change in national consciousness.

The same happened with Ukraine.

23 years also passed between the declaration of Ukrainian independence and Moscow's decision to annex the peninsula. And when the Russians invaded Crimea, the Ukrainian army did not open fire. Yes, there were no orders and the military doesn't act without receiving the go-ahead, but another key reason is that back then, in February 2014, many people did not see Russian soldiers as the enemy. That all changed after the occupation began. Any remaining reserves of "brotherly feeling" or sense of "one people" were used up that spring.

Pandora's Box

I couldn't quite believe that the events were irreversible. Everything that was happening violated my understanding of the post-war reality.

We were taught that World War II had settled everything. While new borders and new states might occasionally appear on the political map of the world, no one would ever again erase the existing borders by annexing foreign territories.

Moscow likes to draw parallels between Crimea and Kosovo. But Kosovo wasn't annexed to Albania. Kosovo was granted in-

dependence in 2008, whether you choose to recognize it or not. No one erased a pre-existing border from the political map of the world: they just added a new one. In terms of international law, this is a much smaller problem than what happened with Crimea.

The Kremlin didn't choose to declare Crimea an "independent state" in March 2014. They took us back to 1938 instead.

In October 1938, Germany annexed the Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia, where the population was 90% ethnic Germans. Konrad Henlein promoted their interests as head of the Sudeten German party.

The Sudeten German party pushed the idea that the German population of the region was suffering under the heavy hand of Czechoslovakia's Slavic majority. This rhetoric was used despite the fact that the Sudeten Germans had direct representation in the Czech National Assembly and attended German-speaking schools at state expense.

England and France acceded to Germany's demands in order to avoid war. When Chamberlain returned from signing the Munich Agreement which ratified the partition of Czechoslovakia, he declared that he had "brought peace for our time." Winston Churchill was said to have responded, "You were given the choice between war and dishonour. You chose dishonour, and you will have war." World War II began less than a year later.

The global slaughterhouse of the Second World War demanded new rules. Annexation was recognized as one of the most serious violations of international law. There have been very few violations in the last 60 years.

Some were related to the collapse of the colonial system. In December 1961, the Indian army took control of the Portuguese colony of Goa, declaring it a "union territory." The Portuguese government didn't recognize India's sovereignty over Goa until 1974. A year later, in 1975, the Indian army invaded the former British colony of Sikkim.

The next instance took place in the Portuguese colony of East Timor, following the collapse of the Caetano government in Portugal. East Timor declared independence on November 28, 1975. Nine days later, Indonesia invaded and then officially annexed

East Timor, declaring it an Indonesian province. Hundreds of thousands of Timorese died in the 27-year occupation. East Timor didn't gain its independence until 2002.

There have also been annexations that took place following wars. For example, Israel established control over the Golan Heights and East Jerusalem following the Six-Day War. The Knesset officially declared both regions Israeli territory fourteen years later.

In contrast, some wars were started as attempts at annexation. In 1982, Argentina attempted to regain the Falkland Islands by force. The British Navy was dispatched to recapture them.

Sometimes other countries come to the victim's assistance, as was the case following Iraq's occupation of Kuwait. Iraq invaded and occupied the emirate on August 2nd, 1990. On August 7th, the puppet government declared the independent "Republic of Kuwait" and requested annexation to Iraq. On August 28th, Iraq formally annexed the entire country of Kuwait. This story ended with the anti-Iraq coalition, "Desert Storm" and the liberation of the country.

But all of that felt very distant to us. We believed that Europe was immune to such things. We believed in treaties, common sense, and our own peace-loving nature. Then the spring of 2014 destroyed our preconceptions regarding what was "acceptable" and what was "forbidden."

And now just one simple question remains. Where does Russia end and where does Ukraine begin now?

The "Russian World" Has No Borders

In 2016, Vladimir Putin asked a nine-year-old boy where Russia ends. The boy said "the Bering Straight." And Putin responded, "nowhere."

You can't call that a joke. It's a core belief. An empire will continue trying to expand until it reaches the borders of another empire.

This is the Russian worldview. In 2014, most Russians didn't view the seizure of Crimea as the appropriation of someone else's

space, but rather as taking back what's "ours." Like the division of property in a divorce. Within that framework, Ukraine isn't recognized as a separate sovereign state: it's more like a suitcase with various items. Some of those items are considered "ours," and some are "yours." As long the suitcase has any of "our" things, then we have rights to its contents.

The problem is that imperialists have trouble accepting any boundaries that limit what can be considered theirs. And it's impossible to guess when they will or won't respect the border lines.

Suppose Moscow does succeed in turning Ukraine into a buffer zone. Do you suppose they will then look at everything west of Uzhhorod as "not-ours." As territory where people hae the right to do as they please without asking for Russia's opinion? How much territory are we willing to give the Kremlin, in the hopes of soothing Russia's wounded imperialist vanity?

Some claim that for the imperialist, the category of what is considered "ours" only end where he meets armed resistance. They believe that a territory's ability and willingness to defend itself is what moves it to the category of "not-ours." But it is entirely possible that for the adherents of the empire, the Ukrainian soldiers defending their country are no more than a physical barrier to the return of "ours,"—not a psychological one.

What about Poland, is it "not-ours"? Romania? How about the Baltic States? Finland—are the Finns just a bunch of reindeer herders or are they citizens of a sovereign state who have the right to live as they see fit?

"Not-ours." Does it begin where Russian isn't spoken? Or maybe it's where they don't pray to the Orthodox God? Perhaps it has to be land that the empire's soldiers have never trod. Does it end at the borders of the USSR? The Eastern Bloc? The Russian Empire? Europe? Or perhaps all the homelands of *Homo erectus*?

Revanche was probably inevitable for Russian society. After all, the empire appeared in Russia before they ever developed a national consciousness. The authoritarian vertical hierarchy of power always dominated. In the Soviet system, the state first eliminated anyone who asserted a right to their own opinion, then assimilated their children. Unlike their neighbors, Russians didn't

gain independence from a foreign empire in 1991. Instead, they lost their own empire.

How could this not inspire demand for greatness? The collective "we" won out over any individual sense of "I." The Russian opposition assures us that Vladimir Putin has imposed his agenda on the country, that ordinary Russians just want prosperity and peace. At this point, that just sounds like self-deception.

Vladimir Putin didn't create the Russian demand for greatness. He simply satisfied it. Of course, high oil prices and the political zeitgeist also worked in his favor. "When the sun of culture is low, even dwarves will cast long shadows…" Indeed, Europe has shown itself to be a continent of political Lilliputians over the last decade—what else can you say when Gerhard Schröder goes from being German Chancellor to Rosneft bureaucrat and enjoys the seat of honor at Vladimir Putin's inauguration?

The trouble with imperial appetites is that they only grow. It's like a drug addiction—the dosage has to be constantly increased. The Munich Speech, the war against Georgia, the crackdown against the 2011 protests, the invasion of Ukraine, the war in Syria, election interference around the world—Moscow is constantly submitting the world order to a stress test. When they don't encounter resistance, the boundaries of the permissible and possible are expanded.

There's only one "but." Their efforts to restore the Soviet Union are threatened by unlearned lessons. The leaders in Moscow may discover that they've miscalculated their destination. They wanted to emerge in the '70s during détente and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. Instead, they've popped into the '80s: Afghanistan, a growing economic crisis, a renewed arms race and sanctions.

The Russian public keeps forgetting the words of philosopher Merab Mamardashvili. Mamardashvili wrote that Russia doesn't exist to serve Russians—Russians exist to serve the state. It feels good to view yourself as the foundation of an empire. But then it's even worse when you discover that you're just the raw materials.

Russians sometimes describe reality as a battle between the TV and the fridge. The TV proclaims your "greatness" by association, simply as a Russian, a citizen of a "great" nation. The refrigerator represents personal well-being—which may not be aligned with the greatness of the state. There is no end in sight for this battle between the television and the fridge in Russia. The greatness of the state is based on "we." But it's all the individual "I"s who will have to foot the bill.

It has fallen to Ukraine to test the ambitions of the imperial ego. But the Kremlin's appetite is not limited to the Crimean peninsula, or even to Ukraine itself. In 2014, the "Russian World" went to war. And, as we know, the "Russian World" has no borders. Only limitless horizons.

The Evolution of Lancelot

During the Second World War, Soviet author Evgeny Schwartz wrote a play titled *The Dragon*. In the play, a wandering knight named Lancelot arrives in a town controlled by a cruel Dragon. However, the townspeople urge him not to kill the Dragon. They assure him that they need the Dragon, who gives meaning to their lives and protects them from any other dragons. The play makes it clear that whoever defeats the Dragon runs the risk of becoming a dragon himself. Although the play is ostensibly about the Weimar Republic and Third Reich, it reads now as an allegory for the Soviet Union and modern Russia.

Yes, it's easy to say that all empires experience phantom pains. That a relapse in the hearts of its citizens was inevitable. That the jump in oil prices in the early 2000s funded the revival of the old system. That the Russian elite is motivated only by superprofits and super privileges. All this is completely true—and completely false.

Any historical pattern can be described as a collection of random circumstances. Dissect, distill, think of it as the sum of coincidences. In reality, the very existence of Russia is subject to a very simple law.

The Russian Federation, even after all the shrinkage and waste of the twentieth century, remains a country destined to live according to supranational laws. It has not become a nation-state, nor can it become one in its present form. The differences between its regions, the differences between the residents of Buryatia and Dagestan, between the Nenets and the Chechens, are simply too vast. It is inclusive by necessity, trying to convince the inhabitants of previously conquered territories that it is in their best interests to remain a part of a shared state.

That's why any elites who find themselves at the helm are forced to continually return to those "spiritual bonds" whose task is to bind the country together in its imperial armature. Hence all the talk about the multiethnic nature of the country and the appeals to World War Two as the chief signifier of brotherhood and unity.

Anyone who defeats the Dragon in Russia will find themselves face-to-face with an unresolved problem: the country is like a patchwork quilt. It is hostage to its own contradictions between "ethnic" regions and Russian ones, between regions that are givers vs those which are takers, between those who feed Moscow vs those on whom Moscow feeds. The situation if further complicated by the fact that, unlike in 1991, potential delineations of smaller states no longer exist on administrative maps. If the centrifugal forces gain strength, the outcome could be even more chaotic in terms of geography and consequences.

This is the reality facing any Russian politician who finds himself at the top of the food chain by dint of luck and government coup. His liberal past will be useless as he faces the fork in the road: either become a second Gorbachev, or a second Putin.

Reforms inevitably result in the appearance of new players who aren't embedded in the old systems. Any economic thaw leads to new political demands from business. Decentralization lays the groundwork for centrifugal dynamics. Neutralization of the security apparatus reduces its loyalty. Turning off the stream of propaganda opens the door to uncomfortable questions. Reduced opportunities for corruption destroys the elite consensus on which the country runs.