How post-imperial democracies die: A comparison of Weimar Germany and post-Soviet Russia

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

Article history:
Available online 3 June 2019

Keywords:
Authoritarianism
Weimar Germany
Electoral authoritarianism
Putin
Democratic breakdown

A B S T R A C T

While socioeconomic crisis — like in Germany after World War I and in Russia after the Cold War — is a necessary precondition for democratic erosion resulting in a breakdown of democracy, it is not a sufficient condition. We identify, in the cases of Weimar Germany and post-Soviet Russia, a post-imperial syndrome that includes nationalist irredentism and an ambition to return to the status quo ante of a “great power” as a main reason why democratization faces specific and enormous challenges for former “great powers.” A slide back to authoritarianism in post-imperial democracies takes a high toll. It is facilitated by international political conflicts, including annexation and wars, with new neighbouring states that harbor territories perceived as external national homelands like the Sudetenland or Crimea.

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1. Introduction

What are the specific conditions endangering the process of democratization in former “great powers”? 2 (Gat, 2007; Janos, 1996)? In this article, we try to answer this question with reference to the two most important cases, Weimar Germany and post-Soviet Russia. The emergence of the Weimar Republic was the most important instance in the “second wave” of democratization while post-Soviet Russia constituted the most important country that democratized within the post-communist “fourth wave” (McFaul, 2002: 49). Respectively, Weimar’s breakdown was the most fateful collapse of democracy in the first half of the 20th century, during the interwar period. Russia is — in view of its continuing importance in world politics — the most important country within which an authoritarian regression happened in the late 20th and early 21st centuries so far (Gat, 2007).

Both countries where, at least during certain periods in the 20th century, and, perhaps, still are today — what one might call — “great powers.” Weimar Germany and post-communist Russia can be both seen as “crucial cases” within the cross-cultural study of democratic transition and collapse (Berg-Schlosser, 1995: 207–219; Gerring, 2001: 219–221; Hanson, 2007: 801; Kailitz, 2017) and especially in the study of democratic transition and collapse in (post)–“Great Power” countries (Fink, 1997; Janos, 1996). Since the early 1990s, a growing scholarly literature has in one way or another juxtaposed

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1 We are grateful to the reviewers of this manuscript for many useful suggestions to improve the article.

2 As “great powers” we hereby define countries with a large amount of military and economic strength that causes middle or small powers to follow the lead of these powers before acting on their own.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2019.05.003
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Weimar Germany’s interwar politics and society with those of post-Soviet Russia (Kenez, 1996; Luks, 1990; Misukhin, 1998; Ryavec, 1998; Starovoitova, 1992; Umland, 1994; Yanov, 1995).

Hanson and Kopstein (1997) were the first who developed a systematic and comprehensive framework for the comparison of Weimar Germany and post-Soviet Russia. There is still room though for improvement of their theory and of the entire body of literature that followed their seminal article (Ferguson and Granville, 2000; Martin, 2009; Hanson, 2006, 2010; Kailitz and Umland, 2010, 2016, 2018; Krawatzeck, 2014; Luks, 2008, 2013, 2018; Motyl, 2016; Russell, 1999; Shenfield, 1998; Van Herpen, 2013). We try to make here not only a contribution to post-Soviet studies, but venture to provide some additional deliberations on the Weimar/Russia juxtaposition and its wider relevance for a historically minded approach to the comparative study of democratization and de-democratization. Much of the scholarly Weimar/Russia juxtaposition has not yet been explicitly framed as contributing to the advancement of theories of democratization and de-democratization. In our view it is up to now insufficiently discussed in the growing literature on de-democratization (Kapstein and Converse, 2008; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Mounk, 2018; Svolik, 2008; Tomini and Wagemann, 2018) why and how exactly liberalizing “great powers,” especially when experiencing a post-imperial trauma, are prone to democratic decline as they face specific and enormous challenges. Presumably, these challenges may be similar, at different times and places. To highlight such similarities, we compare here two cases of a de-democratization of “great powers” in two distinct historical periods — the post-World War I and the post-Cold war years.

Such a paired, cross-cultural and diachronic comparison between early post-communist Russia and Weimar Germany is relevant for researchers of democratization as it illustrates that political transitions of “great powers” to democracy follow certain peculiar trajectories. To fully understand them, the foreign affairs of “defeated” empires — as we will briefly illustrate below — need to be considered in more length than in other subtypes of political transition. As Edward Mansfield and John Snyder (2005: 15) noted: “The period of democratization by great powers has always been a moment of particular danger, in part because when states are militarily strong they may seek to use their force in pursuit of nationalist goals.”

We argue in this article that, in interwar Germany and in today’s Russia, a post-imperial syndrome — all other necessary conditions for democratic breakdown also being fulfilled — was a crucial factor leading to the failure of democracy in these cases. Socioeconomic challenges fostered, to be sure, the decline of both democracies. Yet, they were not sufficient conditions for these two de-democratizations. We try to demonstrate below how the post-imperial situations in interwar Germany and post-Soviet Russia contained some fatal defects that were functionally equivalent — even if, sometimes, only on a high level of abstraction. The combination of these problems turned out to be sufficiently grave to eventually lead to roughly comparable results for both regime transitions, that is, subversions of the immediate post-imperial political orders, and breakdowns of these two nascent democracies.

2. Research design

When juxtaposing the dissolution of Germany’s and Russia’s democracies, we use “a distinct strategy of comparative analysis that both single cases and multicase comparisons lack” (Tarrow, 2010: 230). Paired comparison is a strategy that many scholars, from Alexis de Tocqueville to researchers today, have used to tackle fundamental problems of modern politics (Gisselquist, 2014). The two crucial cases of post-imperial democracies we are analyzing below are interesting because they are fundamentally different from each other, yet took partly similar routes, and passed somewhat analogous stages of authoritarian regression before arriving at eventually contrasting results, that is, full-blown fascism in Germany’s case and consolidated authoritarianism in Russia’s. Why exactly the final outcomes, after the break-downs of Germany’s first democracy in 1933 and Russia’s second democracy (after its first of February—October 1917) around 2000, were — in spite of some similar initial conditions — still remarkably different, we have in detail discussed within a different paper recently published in English and Ukrainian (Kailitz and Umland, 2016, 2018). The below outline complements our earlier deliberations on the Weimar/Russia comparison, and should ideally be read in combination with them.

Our juxtaposition has the usual advantages and disadvantages of any analysis of only two cases. It allows us to engage in closer process tracing (Bennett and Elman, 2006; Brady and Collier, 2004; George, 1979) which is impossible within large-N analyses. By doing so, we are trying to identify causal mechanisms that connect structural factors seemingly remote from the outcome via peculiar interventions of actor-specific factors. Naturally, our multivariate comparison manifestly lacks the degrees of freedom necessary to arrive at inferences of a high confidence typical of large-N regressions. Hence, our conclusions are tentative, and merely constitute systematically developed, informed guesses.

3. Why democracy fell in Weimar Germany and post-Soviet Russia

3.1. The socioeconomic prerequisites for democratic breakdown

A standard explanation for the breakdown of young democracies is that the respective regressing societies were not yet sufficiently developed and that their economy was not strong enough to sustain democracy. Lipset’s famous argument is that

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3 On the necessity-sufficiency approach in social-scientific analyses, see: Braumoeller and Goertz (2000); Goertz (2006); Goertz and Starr (2003); Seawright (2002).
“the more well-to-do a nation, the greater the chances that it will sustain democracy.” And indeed, modernization theory helps to explain regime trajectories in the majority of the cases of democratic breakdown and survival.

Yet, there is a certain corridor between, on the one side, relatively underdeveloped countries with scant chances to generate and sustain democracy, as well as, on the other side, highly developed democracies above a certain level of GDP per capita which “are impregnable and can be expected to live forever” (Przeworski et al., 1996: 41). This corridor contains a number of countries that do not fall in either of these categories. Their level of economic development can thus not fully determine or satisfactorily indicate the advancement of democracy in those countries.

The fates of most of the interwar democracies seem to support modernization theory’s claim. Democracy survived in Australia, Canada, Denmark, Great Britain, New Zealand, Netherlands and the USA, all with a GDP per capita above US$4,000, while democracy broke down in Greece, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, and Spain, which had a GDP per capita below US$2,500 (Kailitz, 2014). The socioeconomic corridor comprising countries not fitting this hypothesis and for which we therefore need additional explanation was still relatively small in the interwar years. Austria and Germany were the only two democracies that broke down although they had not a low, but medium GDP per capita, during the interwar years. The corridor of such “in between-cases” is filled with many more countries, in the contemporary world.

Both, the Weimar Republic and early post-communist Russia belonged to a group of regimes with a medium GDP per capita. Democracy in countries with a medium GDP per capita is neither impregnable, nor doomed to fail. Whether democracy in these countries survives or fails depends thus on additional factors. Germany started sliding towards authoritarianism in the late 1920s, in spite of its GDP per capita being at a medium level and its literacy rate ranging very high, at that time.

In terms of Lipset’s criteria — that is, wealth, urbanization, education and industrialization — early post-communist Russia has been even more modern than Weimar Germany and, surely, further developed than, for example, India or Botswana when they transited towards democracy. As the late Soviet-Russian transition towards democracy was gaining speed in 1990, the USSR’s GDP per capita was, according to official statistics, higher than, at that point in time, in Poland. In other words, Weimar Germany and post-communist Russia experienced authoritarian regression despite having been relatively advanced countries.

A closely related, yet somewhat different approach to explaining democratic breakdowns and especially the failure of democracy in general, and in Weimar Germany and post-Soviet Russia, in particular, would be to focus on the political repercussions of socioeconomic problems. Milan Svolik for instance has argued that

[The rise of the Nazi Party in the Weimar Republic amidst the hardship of the Great Depression and Russia’s return to authoritarianism under Vladimir Putin following the chaos of its transition to democracy under Boris Yeltsin are merely two prominent examples of the existential danger that economic downturns present for young democracies.] (Svolik, 2013: 685)

Indeed, both Weimar Germany and post-Soviet Russia experienced several grave economic crises. And these economic downturns constituted necessary prerequisites for the democratic erosions in Weimar Germany and post-Soviet Russia (Ferguson and Granville, 2000; Van Herpen, 2013: 26–29). Yet, grave economic problems — for instance, hyperinflation — were not peculiar to Weimar Germany and early post-Soviet Russia.

In almost all such cases, democratic erosion went hand in glove with an economic downturn. Several empirical large N-studies have demonstrated that, in young democracies, there is a correlation between economic recession and the breakdown of democracy (Haggard and Kaufman, 1995; Bernhard et al., 2001; Kapstein and Converse, 2008; Svolik, 2008, 2013; Boix, 2003). Thus, in the least, a reverse interdependence between the nonappearance of economic stress — that is, presence of economic growth, absence of recessions, a low rate of inflation etc. — and the stability of democracy is now well established, within comparative democratization studies (Przeworski et al., 1996, 2000).

Easton’s (1965b, 1965a) system theory provides the obvious connecting argument for why economic downturns endanger young democracies. According to his theory, a political system unable to deal with situations of social stress will lack support by the people. Therefore, democratic regimes under extraordinary stress will usually experience authoritarian regression because the people are not willing to sustain a regime not satisfying their demands.

However, while economic downturns seem to be thus a necessary condition of democratic breakdowns, they are not a sufficient prerequisite for break-down. There have been numerous new democracies that faced extraordinary economic stress, yet they still prevailed. All democracies of the interwar period were, to one degree or another, affected by the common external shock of the World Economic Crisis during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Economic conditions by themselves do not tell us why democracy broke down in Austria and Germany, whereas in Czechoslovakia and Finland it survived (Saalfeld, 2002; Zimmermann and Saalfeld, 1988).

Further delving into the exact connection between economic stress and democratic decline, it has been argued that there was a relationship between unemployment and the rise of antidemocratic forces in the Weimar Republic (Lepsius, 1978: 51, 61). Detlev Peukert (1992: 254) has, for example, argued that certain psychological consequences of unemployment

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4 Lipset (1959: 75) and others have shown that there is a significant statistical relationship between socioeconomic conditions and the survival of democracies. See: Bollen (1979); Boix and Stokes (2003); Diamond (1992); Lipset (1994); Müller et al. (1995); Przeworski et al. (2000).
contributed heavily to the Nazis’ rise. The parallelism of the rise of unemployment in the late Weimar Republic, and of the National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP) — see Table 1 — seems to support such an argument.

However, double-checking this co-variation suggests that, for a democratic breakdown to happen, a high unemployment rate in the interwar period was an obviously conducive, yet by no means a sufficient condition. Germany and Austria were the only democracies that collapsed against the background of the World Economic Crisis while other democracies — like, for instance, Belgium — survived in spite of facing social problems roughly comparable to those of Germany and Austria. Falter (1986, 1991) has demonstrated, moreover, that on the individual level, there was no positive correlation between unemployment and radically right-wing voting preferences including those for the NSDAP. Radicalized unemployed workers usually preferred the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) to the NSDAP.

Post-Soviet Russia’s various economic and social dislocations too were not that peculiar when compared to other post-communist countries in geographic proximity. The transformations of all the former Soviet bloc countries were, to one degree or another, characterized by the simultaneity of economic and property reforms with other dramatic changes including new state formation, territorial re-division, nation building, liberalization and democratization, that is, by situations prone to trigger especially high stress within both the elite and broad population (Elster, 1990; Offe, 1991). Some observers concluded that it would, therefore, be difficult, if not impossible, to quickly transit to and consolidate democracy, within the post-communist context.

Notwithstanding the intuitive plausibility of such propositions at their time, the post-communist countries of Central-Eastern Europe reinvented themselves rather quickly as — seemingly — more or less consolidated democracies (Merkel, 2007). In contrast, after more or less serious attempts to liberalize, most of the new states that had emerged out of the Soviet Union, with the notable exception of the Baltic countries, soon regressed to hybrid, authoritarian and even partly totalitarian regimes, like those in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan (Way and Levitsky, 2007). Against such an uneven background, it appears as insufficient to explain authoritarian regression in late Weimar Germany and early post-Soviet Russia solely in terms of socioeconomic stress. We do not argue here that socioeconomic stress is not a necessary condition for the breakdown of democracy. On the contrary, we below proceed from the fact that a post-imperialist syndrome will only lead to democratic breakdown during a period of more or less painful economic decline.

3.2. The post-imperial trap

Unlike most other new democracies of the interwar and post-communist periods, the Weimar Republic and Russian Federation were novel polycharchies that had come into being through radical shrinking of two once powerful empires, the German Kaiserreich and Soviet Union. The Weimar Republic and Russian Federation emerged as a result of these empires’ defeat in two of human history’s most dramatic international confrontations: World War I and the Cold War (Hanson, 2006; Hanson and Kopstein, 1997). Both nations felt, in different ways, humiliated by their former adversaries’ conduct after their defeats. The impact of the Versailles Treaty on the process of democratization in Weimar Germany was stronger than the impact of the USSR’s “defeat” in the Cold War on the process of democratization in post-Soviet Russia. But in Weimar Germany as well as in post-Soviet Russia a “culture of defeat” overshadowed the entire democratization process (Schivelbusch, 2003). The Germans felt particularly disgraced by the conditions and accusations in the Versailles Peace Accord laid down by the victorious Entente powers (Marks, 2013; Matthias, 1971). They did not realize that the Armistice of November 1918 was in fact a surrender and did not accept that Germany had lost the war (Mommsen 1996: 75–76). Until the very last day of the war, propaganda had told them that they were on the brink of victory. The terms of the Versailles Treaty were severe but not unfair in the light of the fact that Germany lost the war and it was almost entirely fought on foreign ground causing enormous damage and that, hence, war reparations from the German side could be expected. It was also completely understandable that the victors did not allow Germany to include Austria and to become a winner of war by “turning Little Germany into Greater Germany” (Heiber, 1995: 38).

The situation for post-Soviet Russia after the Cold War was less severe. Russia inherited the seat of the USSR in the UN Security Council and became a respected member of originally “Western” social and economic institutions. For instance, the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Unemployment rate</th>
<th>Votes for the NSDAP in parliamentary elections</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>37.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Source: Lepsius (1978: 51).

5 For our argument here it is not important that, in recent years, some of these post-communist democracies regressed, namely in Hungary and Poland.
G7-nations invited Russia in 1997 to join them in, what thus became, the G8. An important difference beteen the German and Russian empires was that their distance from “Western” democracy was different. The Kaiserreich already had established competitive parliamentary elections and a vibrant political sphere before Germany’s first transition to democracy (Anderson, 2000). The Soviet Union as a communist ideocracy (Backes and Kailitz, 2016; Kailitz, 2013; Kailitz and Stockeme, 2017), on the other hand, was an ideological counterpart of the “West” which had featured neither competitive elections nor a vibrant political sphere.

While there were thus already democratic elements in the German Kaiserreich, a destructive effect was exerted by another heritage from the empire, the popular Sonderweg (special path) ideology that claimed that Germany did neither belong to the — at the time — despotic East nor to the democratic West. Democratic governments in Western countries like Britain and France were regarded as ineffective and weak. The Sonderweg idea implied that the German imperial state should have the power to lead the nation without making compromises between conflicting party interests in society. This ideology was by itself not fascist and not even necessarily ultra-nationalist. Yet, once economic crises shattered, during the 1920s, the German population’s trust in the new republic, it helped paving the way to the erosion of democracy by the far right (Kailitz and Umland, 2016, 2018; Luks, 2008, 2013).

German nationalists like Moeller van den Bruck in his influential Germany’s Third Empire (Krebs, 1941) of 1923 argued that the men of 1918 did not accomplish a German revolution but committed an “immortal stupidity” (Moeller-Bruck, 1934: 24) when they swallowed the enemy’s bait and started imitating the West’s outworn ideas of liberalism. A major argument against the liberal West was that it had betrayed Germany by promising a “peace without victory,” but then allegedly destroyed it. The liberalism of the West was, from the perspective of Weimar Germany’s anti-democrats, only self-interest “protectively colored” and “the death of nations” (Moeller-Bruck, 1934: 77–78, 110).

For certain German imperialists, moreover, communism was an enemy within Germany while Soviet Russia and later the USSR were promising potential allies against the West. General Johannes Friedrich von Seeckt, the Reichsheer’s chief of staff in 1919–1920 and commander in chief in 1920–1926, declared in his memorandum “Germany’s Next Political Tasks” of June 1920 that Germany should ally with Russia. In return, Russia should promise to accept Germany’s borders of 1914. In another memo of 1922, he outlined one common interest of the two countries:

The existence of Poland is intolerable and incompatible with Germany’s vital interests. She must disappear and will do so through her own inner weakness and through Russia — with our help. Poland is more intolerable for Russia than for ourselves; Russia can never tolerate Poland. With Poland collapses one of the strongest pillars of the Peace of Versailles” (as quoted in: Wheeler-Bennett, 1964).

In Seeckt’s view, a Russian-German alliance would have been a decisive step towards restoring the Great Power status of Germany. In a memo of 1925, Seeckt stated the revanchist motives behind the policy: “We must become powerful, and as soon as we have power, we will naturally take back everything we have lost” (as quoted in: Wette, 2006).

The effect of the Sonderweg ideology in the Weimar Republic was augmented by the infamous legend of the Dolchstoßlegende (myth of a stab in the back) (Barth, 2003; Sammet, 2003). In 1918, the late Second German Empire’s two foremost military leaders Erich Ludendorff and Paul von Hindenburg acknowledged that Germany would, sooner or later, be beaten and conquered by the Entente. To prevent the embarrassment of a defeat on the battlefield and occupation of Germany, the Emperor’s army leadership agreed to end the war in spite of the fact that no foreign troops had yet entered German territory. In formulating and popularizing the Dolchstoßlegende, Hindenburg, Ludendorff and other representatives of the Second Reich eagerly sought and largely succeeded to shift the public’s perception of the responsibility for the beginning, conduct and results of the peace negotiations to politicians and diplomats of, or near to, the Weimar Republic’s camp of democratic parties.

Imperialist ambitions were a major mobilizing factor of right-wing extremists in Weimar Germany and have been so, in post-Soviet Russia since 1991, too. Vladimir Zhirinovskii’s ultra-nationalist Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), founded in the USSR in late 1989, is merely one example (Umland, 1994, 1997). Although Zhirinovskii is often seen as being merely a political clown, his plan of a “last dash to the South” constitutes a specifically post-Soviet permutation of palingenetic ultra-nationalism (Griffin, 1993, 1995; Griffin et al., 2009; Umland, 2008, 2010). It is thus a variety of Russian fascism (Ingram, 2001; Kailitz and Umland, 2010, 2016, 2018; Shenfield, 2001).

While Hitler defined “the Jews” as the main enemies of the German nation, Zhirinovskii (1993, 1998) is obsessed with the role of so-called “Southerners” (iuzhane) in Russia’s past and present. Hitler wanted to create a “new Germany” within new borders. Zhirinovskii similarly wants to bring about a “new Russia” of hitherto unknown territorial dimensions. His new Russian empire would include not only the former Soviet republics, but also Iran, Turkey and Afghanistan (as well as by, implication, Pakistan). For Zhirinovskii, it is Russia’s historic duty to take control of large parts of Asia’s Muslim world. The ultra-nationalist wants to trigger Russia’s resurrection and palingenesis less by internal cleansing than by outside expansion beyond the former borders of both, the Tsarist and Soviet empires. Zhirinovskii’s doctrine is thus neither restorationist nor nostalgic, but a form of revolutionary imperialism (Umland, 2009b, 2010). By “soothing” the unstable “South,” that is, Central Asia, the Caucasus, Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan through occupation, Russia will save both herself and the entire world. Russia, according to Zhirinovskii (1993), would be born anew by the military operation to subjugate the “South” and by the final solution of her major problem of the last 800 years — “Southern” destructiveness. As a result of her “last dash to the South,” a “new,” “cleaner” and “happier Russia” would finally find its peace (Umland, 1997).

Moreover, Zhirinovskii’s fascism has, by far, not been the only the only variety of palingenetic ultra-nationalism in post-Soviet Russia (Arnold and Umland, 2017; Griffin et al., 2009; Laruelle, 2009; Umland, 2002a, 2015). During the 1990s,
Aleksandr Dugin has become the most important ideologue of — what became known as — “neo-Eurasianism” (Laruelle, 2012a, 2012b; Shekhovtsov, 2008, 2009; Shenfield, 2001; Umland, 2009b, 2017). Eurasianism argues that the Russian civilization does neither belong to “Europe” nor to “Asia” but constitutes a category on its own: Eurasia. Like the German ideology of a special path (Sonderweg), Eurasianism is essentially anti-Western and state-centric.

Going far beyond classical Eurasianism, Dugin’s influential “neo-Eurasian” textbook Osnovy geopolitiki (Foundations of Geopolitics, 1997) outlines why and how a confrontation between Russia and the USA is inevitable. Following this assumption, Dugin and others have proposed various international anti-American alliances with a number of European and Asian states. Such Eurasian or “neo-Eurasian” views gained, over the years, more and more influence in the post-imperial Russian democracy.

The continuing political prominence of Eurasianism in post-Soviet Russia can be interpreted as part and parcel of the wider public salience of a Russian version of the Sonderweg (special path) ideology (Luks, 2005; Luks and O’Sullivan, 2001; Umland, 2012). In Russia’s past and present, the belief in the country’s necessity to follow an osobyi put’ (distinct route) into the modern world, has been even stronger than in pre-war Germany. Russia’s entire recent intellectual and political history has been characterized by permanent conflict between those who believe that Russia is or should be an integral part of Europe, and those convinced that she is and always will be something separate (Luks, 2005). All non-democratic Russian governments — whether those during Tsarism, Communism or today — took an ambivalent stand on this issue. Under the Romanovs, CPSU Secretaries and current regime, Russia has been understood to be both, a part of the “civilized world” (the popular Russian term for the community of industrially and socially advanced countries), on the one side, and a separate country or even unique civilization, on the other (Kailitz and Umland, 2010, 2016, 2018).

A rough Russian equivalent of Germany’s post-World War I stab-in-the-back-myth began to be developed already before the fall of the Soviet Union by, among others, the infamous writer and ultra-nationalist Aleksandr Prokhanov. In March 1990, Prokhanov complained in the journal Nash sovremennik (Our Contemporary) that, “for the first time in the history not just of Russia but of the world, we see a state not destroyed by external blows […] but by the deliberate actions of its leaders” (Prokhanov, 1990). Prior to the coup attempt of August 1991, on 23 July 1991, a number of imperialist Russian politicians and cultural figures published a declaration called “A Word to the People.” It was principally drafted by Prokhanov and contained an open call to arms against Boris Yeltsin and Mikhail Gorbachev:

An enormous, unforeseen calamity has taken place. Motherland, our land, a great power, given to us to ward with the nature, glorious ancestors, it is perishing, breaking apart, falling into darkness and nonbeing. And this collapse takes place at our silence, toleration and accord. […] Let us unite, so as to stop the chain reaction of the disastrous collapse of the state, economy, human personality; in order to contribute to the strengthening of the Soviet power, to the transformation of it into a genuinely people’s power, and not some manger for the hungry nouveaux riches, who are ready to sell off everything for the sake of their insatiable appetite, […] Soviet Union, this is our home and stronghold, built with enormous efforts of all the peoples and nations that has saved us from disgrace and slavery at the times of hideous invasions! Russia - unique, beloved! - she is crying for help’ (Bondarev et al., 1991; transl. at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Word_to_the_People).

The declaration was signed by, among others, Yuri Bondarev, Valentin Varennikov, Gennadi Zyuganov, Aleksandr Prokhanov, Valentin Rasputin and Vasilii Starodubtsev most of whom supported or even took part in the 1991 putsch attempt. The mass protest against the coup plotters in August 1991 demonstrated that this position was not dominant in the Russian population, by that time. However, some crucial supporters of the August coup were not defeated for long. In the mass protest against the coup plotters in August 1991 demonstrated that this position was not dominant in the Russian people’s movement, but it was objected to by the deliberate actions of its leaders, who were ready to sell everything for the sake of their insatiable appetite. […] Soviet Union, this is our home and stronghold, built with enormous efforts of all the peoples and nations that has saved us from disgrace and slavery at the times of hideous invasions! Russia - unique, beloved! - she is crying for help’ (Bondarev et al., 1991; transl. at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Word_to_the_People).

As a result of an expanding imperialist-nationalist discourse in post-Soviet Russia, the primary causes for the cracks in the allegedly centuries-old “friendship between the people” of the former Russian empire became more and more interpreted as results of treachery by Russian democrats as instruments of covert Western interference into late and post-Soviet domestic affairs. To be sure, in distinction to Weimar Germany, the metaphor of a “stab in the back” had initially been limited to radically nationalist fringe discourses. Among many other such publicists, Aleksandr Dugin (1992) had, at the beginning of the 1990s, argued that Gorbachev was a “double agent” and that he had stabbed the Soviet Union in the back (though Dugin then oddly claimed that Gorbachev had done so with the help of an “Atlanticist” lobby within the KGB).

Democracy had already been dead when, in 2005, Putin started — in reaction to, above all, the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine — to introduce a number of measures designed to purposefully increase an anti-Western radicalization of Russian society (Umland, 2009a, 2012). This included the creation of various new state-sponsored youth organizations, media outlets and other front organizations that led to a significant overall modification of the functioning of his authoritarian rule. Russian anxiety with regard to imagined and real internal and external threats continued to further rise in connection with, among other factors, the various social repercussions of the world financial crisis of 2008.

In a famous speech in 2005, Vladimir Putin had already stated that the break-up of the Soviet Union was “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century.” This statement reflected less a growing direct influence of the geopolitical ideas of Dugin et al. than an increasingly widespread public opinion in Russia at that time. Whereas the anti-Western opposition had been radically opposed to Yeltsin, Putin coopted many anti-Western ideas. Since the rise of Vladimir Putin, “proclamations of...
Russia’s *derzhavnost’* (great power status) have become not just acceptable, but a genuine component of official discourse, and oppositionists [like Zhirinovskii and Dugin] have found much to praise in Putin’s programme.” (Ingram, 2001: 1032)

Russian politics after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine became increasingly influenced by Eurasianism, albeit not of the Duginite revolutionary type, but rather as an elusive justification for reassembling as many territories as possible from the Tsarist-Soviet empire. In 2011, Russian President Vladimir Putin proposed, in a newspaper article, a “Eurasian Union” consisting of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan. Shortly after, the presidents of these three countries signed a treaty to launch the Eurasian Economic Union. Putin’s plan was to also integrate Ukraine and other post-Soviet republics later.

Many Russians perceived the West’s behavior in Yugoslavia, post-communist Eastern Europe, the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia to be supercilious and disrespectful of post-Soviet Russia and her geopolitical interests. One of the key events in the emergence of this narrative was the bombing of Yugoslavia by NATO in 1999. The *Chicago Tribune* reported of the break between post-Soviet Russia and the West: “Judging from the comments of its political leadership, Russia feels betrayed over Yugoslavia. More than that, though, it feels humiliated. It has been ignored diplomatically and dismissed militarily, and its ties with the United States and European Union nations are deteriorating as a result.” (McMahon, 1999)

From the early 1990s, right-wing extremists and communists alike have spread increasingly harsh propaganda against the West. In 1995, Zhirinovskii published, for instance a book titled *Spitting on the West* (Zhirinovskii, 1995). Much of the Russian political and intellectual elite started feeling betrayed by the West because, as more and more saw it, Moscow had allegedly been promised that NATO would not be enlarged to the East. To Moscow, the West’s strategy seemed to be (and indeed was an argument that could be found in the discussions within NATO) that: “[i]f in the future Russia regained strength and returned to its traditional policy towards Central and Eastern Europe, an enlarged NATO would be able to deny Russia the restoration of the former Soviet hegemonic sphere” (Schimmelpfennig, 1999: 6). The problem with the ensuing enlargement strategy of NATO was that it contributed indirectly to democracy’s demise in Russia like the Versailles Treaty had contributed to the failure of democracy in Weimar Germany. It alienated large parts of the Russian elite from the West (Umland, 2002b) while leaving some particularly vulnerable neighbours of Russia, like Georgia and Ukraine, to the mercy of the Kremlin. In the wake of the enlargement of NATO many critics in the “West” pointed out that “such a step will inevitably fuel Russian suspicions and jeopardise relations between Moscow and the West” (Walt, 1997: 173). NATO’s concurrently bold and hesitant expansion to the East and its repercussions in Moscow were, at least partially, the cause of a disease that it had been pretending to cure.

### 3.3. National irredentism

Weimar Germany and post-Soviet Russia were also similar in that they had to deal with the problem of millions of ethnic Germans and Russians — usually part of the former populations of the Empire — living, under sometimes problematic circumstances, abroad. There were about 8.6 million so-called “ethnic Germans” (*Volksdeutsche*) in Eastern and South Eastern Europe after 1918, and about 25 million so-called ‘ethnic citizens of Russia’ (*etnicheskie rossiiane*), in the former Soviet republics after 1991. Many of these involuntary expats did or still do not speak the languages of the newly independent countries where German and Russian were and are no longer official languages. In early post-Soviet Kirgizstan and Kazakhstan, for example, only about one per cent of the ethnic Russians commanded the language of the titular nation (Jackson, 1994: 4).

Weimar Germany and post-Soviet Russia found themselves also in so far in strange positions as they were left with ex-claves separated from the great powers’ core territories. The cities and surrounding regions of Danzig/Gdansk and Kalinin-grad/Königsberg had once belonged to these nations’ empires. Yet, they became separated from their “homelands” by, moreover, territories of more or less hostile states, that is, of Poland and Lithuania, respectively (Brubaker, 1996: 107–147).

The nationalisms within both post-imperial democracies had an irredentist dimension (Horowitz, 1985; Chazan, 1991) explosively mixed with pan-German/-Slavic ideas. In Nazi Germany, this eventually expressed itself with, for instance, Germany’s *Anschluss* (annexation) of Austria. In today’s Russia, the idea of a “union” with Belarus and — at least, parts of — Ukraine has been and continues to be a major topic of political and intellectual discourse. Conflicts among national minorities inside and outside Russia have fostered Russian ethnic and imperial nationalism.

Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, the interplay between nationalist aspirations in Russia’s neighbouring countries and Russian national irredentism has posed an especially severe and ongoing danger to democracy in Russia and peace in the region. For instance, regarding the secessionist conflict in Moldova, William Jackson argued that the problems had been present since 1991: “That the secessionist conflict in Moldova has been under way for three years and has tacit support from Moscow illustrates the profound instability of the post-Soviet international system” (Jackson, 1994: 7).

Russia’s 2008 intervention in South Ossetia was justified by President Dmitri Medvedev with then already familiar sounding arguments: “For us to take this step was the only way we could […] prevent further escalation of the conflict, and to prevent the deaths of thousands of innocent civilians. The second reason is that every people has a right to self-determination. This is provided for in the provisions of the UN Charter, the relevant international conventions and the Helsinki Final Act.” (Interview President Dmitri Medvedev with CNN, August 26, 2008). This was an obvious attempt to copy the Western justification of the military intervention in the Kosovo.

The principal role of national irredentism in Russia’s foreign policy became especially prominent when Russia annexed the internationally and bilaterally recognized Ukrainian territory of Crimea on 18 March 2014 (Umland, 2018). This happened, moreover, against the background of earlier Russian military involvement in various post-Soviet republics, and many warnings that this will eventually also happen to Ukraine. For instance, William D. Jackson had already in 1994 warned: “In
the Crimea, a secessionist conflict that would pose an extremely serious crisis to the stability of the post-Soviet international system has been averted — at least for the time being — only as a result of deft and conciliatory political maneuvering by the Ukrainian government” (Jackson, 1994: 7). Twenty years later, Moscow outmaneuvered Kyiv, annexed Crimea in a swift three-week operation, and triggered a pseudo-civil war in the Donets Basin (Blank, 2015; Umland, 2017).

3.4. How the post-imperial syndrome damages the support for a democratic regime

According to both, systems theory (Easton, 1965a, 1965b) as well as the political culture approach (Almond and Verba, 1963), commitment to democratic values and systems among countries’ populations are a necessary precondition for the consolidation of a young democracy (Svolik, 2013). Plainly, a newly established democratic regime has a problem when there are not enough people who prefer democracy to autocracy and if there is no hegemony of a pluralist, restrained, civic and tolerant political culture, particularly, among those who are electorally and socially active (Dahl, 1989: 264). Interwar Germany and early post-Soviet Russia too are, among many other examples, good cases in point.

We specify this argument for a particular sub-type of attempted democratic transitions. Though they emerged in comparatively developed countries, the young democracies of Weimar Germany and early post-Soviet Russia found themselves in a post-imperial trap. Moreover, the newly established democratic regimes suffered from an escalating interplay with nationalisms in neighbouring countries. The nationalism of their “own” ethnic minorities abroad fostered irredentism in the “homeland” of those minorities.

The fates of other interwar polities indicate that young democracies cannot survive — or will, at least, have serious difficulties in surviving — without sufficient support from the post-revolutionary elite strata of the state (Burton and Higley, 1989; Burton et al., 1992).

On the elite level, both the Weimar Republic and Russian Federation started with considerable burdens stemming from their imperial pasts. The new democratic governments made or had to make compromises with sections of the old elites. Parts of the state apparatus as well as cultural life remained under the control of unreformed representatives of the ancien régime (Kailitz and Umland, 2010, 2016, 2018). Due to Germany’s and Russia’s imperial pasts, many public servants who were taken over from the German and Russian previous regimes were or, in Russia’s case, still are more critical towards democracy than their counterparts in other young democracies across the world.

That is because they associated their countries’ democratizations with national humiliation and regarded the democratic regimes as disgraceful copies of the political regimes of Western countries that were seen as claiming victory over them, in World War I and the Cold War, respectively. This resulted in partiality or ambivalence of large elite sections towards the newly established post-imperial regimes. In the case of Germany, large parts of the bureaucracy, many university chairs, and most of the army remained, among other sectors of society, in the hands of anti-democratic elites. In the Russian case, especially the military, security services, and various cultural organizations remained under the control of officers fundamentally disloyal or, at least, ambivalent towards Russia’s Second Republic (Luks, 2008, 2013, 2018). This led to a multitude of contradictions in the creation, consolidation and legitimization of the new political order that emerged in 1991 — whether in the spheres of party politics, mass media, public administration, higher education, or rule of law. Steven Fish noted, to name just one example, concerning the role of the unreformed post-Soviet security services in the subversion of the constitutionally mandated divisions of powers and it repercussions for the quality of election in Russia, that “judges in Russia live in fear of the FSB [Federal Security Service, the major successor-organization of the KGB] and it “is therefore unsurprising that the courts in Russia never reverse election results.” (Fish, 2005: 67).

Thus, on the elite level, neither in early post-Soviet Russia nor in the Weimar Republic, democracy became the “only game in town” (Linz and Stepan, 1996: 5). Arguably, this was principally due to the post-imperialist trauma that burdens the democratization process in post-imperial democracies. This is especially the case when territories and populations that had formerly belonged to these “great powers” have become parts of neighbouring countries.

The post-imperial trauma causes people to adopt a pessimistic outlook in a number of areas, including economic prospects, which, in turn, causes them to see any subsequent economic downturn as an (apparent) confirmation of their pessimism with respect to their nation’s overall strength and health. The seeming confirmation then prompts these citizens to attribute that downturn precisely to the loss of empire, thus fueling revisionist, irredentist, and imperialist demands. Once a people has entered this trap, extreme nationalist movements are likely to gain votes when socioeconomic crises occur. Hence, the second rise of the Nazis in 1930 did not come out of the blue (Fink, 1997: 264).

The effect of the August 1998 ruble collapse in Russia was less devastating and prolonged than the repercussions of the interwar Great Depression of 1928–1932 (James, 2009). Yet, the influence of this economic crisis on Russians’ relation to democracy was aggravated by concurrent other events which led many Russians to fear, as a great nation, disrespected, humiliated and/or attacked. These included NATO’s continuing enlargement to the East, the bombing of Serbia in spring 1999, the recognition of Kosovo as an independent state, as well as the rhetorical confrontations between Russia and the West following the start of the Second Chechen War in summer 1999. Later on, there followed another fall-out between Russia and the West, in connection with the Russian-Georgian War of August 2008, which helped to consolidate further the already taken authoritarian and neo-imperial orientation of the, by then, already non-democratic Russian regime.

6 We are grateful to a reviewer from CPCS for providing us with this lucid definition.
As a result of these and other developments, during Putin's first two presidencies, something equivalent to the German legend of a “stab in the back” started gaining popularity in Russia. Most Russians acknowledged and today acknowledge that the Soviet system needed to be changed and the planned economy to be reformed. Yet, many continued and continue to believe that the larger part of the Soviet Union and thus most of the Russian empire should and could have been preserved.

A fundamental difference between the German and Russian cases remained, however, the structure of the ideological spectrum, with regard to both party politics and public discourse (Kailitz and Umland, 2016, 2018). Although democratic forces became weaker by the year, Russia’s main line of polarization has remained constant as one between pro-Western liberal groups, on the one hand, and anti-Western nationalist forces, on the other. In spite of the salience of socioeconomic issues in post-Soviet Russian public and private life, the confrontation between parties representing either free-market or socialist principles has until today remained subordinate or secondary to the more basic civilizational question of whether Russia should follow the post-war European, or her own “special” path of political development (Luks, 2005; Luks and O'Sullivan, 2001).

As the economic and social crises of the 1990s continued, the Russian democrats’ agenda appeared, to the public, as less and less suitable for the country, and became increasingly seen as a destructive import from the West. This determined, among others, the democrats’ decreasing appeal among the emerging middle class. It limited their support to a small sector of society, namely to intellectuals, students and businesspeople — and even here only to parts of these milieus. Democracy’s declining allure opened up a discursive field for Vladimir Putin who presented himself not only as a more dynamic administrator than Yeltsin, but also as a less influenced by the West, and as more “Russian” (Sakwa, 2008).

4. Conclusion

We qualify in our article Seymour Martin Lipset’s argument that the wealthier a nation is the more likely it is to sustain democracy. The relative wealth of Weimar Germany and post-Soviet Russia did not protect these democracies from anti-democratic temptations. We argue that the specific problem of former “Great Powers” like Weimar Germany (1918–1933) and post-Soviet Russia (1991–2000) is a post-imperial syndrome. Weimar Germany as well as post-Soviet Russia faced the specific challenge that their imperial pasts combined with perceived humiliations by other “great powers” as well as resulting imperialist and irredentist aspirations among the elite and population. In the post-imperial trap, citizens are prone to mourn for the lost status of the country and mistrust other countries. Hence, it is, in a way, not particularly important for our argument whether Weimar Germany or post-Soviet Russia were really humiliated by the “West” or not. What is important for our argument is that growing parts of the electorate of both countries perceived their countries as being humiliated. While economic downturns prevent people from starting to “love democracy,” the post-imperial syndrome induces many to start hating democracy — and especially political liberalism — if democracy is successfully linked by nationalist agitators, to military defeat and an alleged betrayal of “brotherly” ethnic minorities. While our above deliberations are only relevant for a small group of countries, these states are rather important for world politics. If something goes fundamentally wrong in their democratization processes, this might not end only in a breakdown of their democracies, but it can also lead them to conduct war with neighbouring countries. There are bitter lessons to be learned from the catastrophic repercussions of the post-imperial syndrome on the democratization attempt in Weimar Germany. They may not only be useful to better understand current post-Soviet Russian domestic and foreign affairs, but may well one day also apply to developments in and around other “great powers” such as China, once their political regimes start to democratize.

References


