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**FROM FULL TO LIMITED: UNDERSTANDING SOVEREIGNTY IN
THE CONTEXT OF RUSSIAN IMPERIALISM IN EASTERN EUROPE**

**DE LA COMPLET LA LIMITAT: ÎNȚELEGEREA SUVERANITĂȚII
ÎN CONTEXTUL IMPERIALISMULUI RUS ÎN EUROPA DE EST**

**ОТ ПОЛНОГО К ОГРАНИЧЕННОМУ: ПОНИМАНИЕ
СУВЕРЕНИТЕТА В КОНТЕКСТЕ РОССИЙСКОГО ИМПЕРИАЛИЗМА
В ВОСТОЧНОЙ ЕВРОПЕ**

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ABSTRACT:

**FROM FULL TO LIMITED: UNDERSTANDING SOVEREIGNTY IN THE CONTEXT
OF RUSSIAN IMPERIALISM IN EASTERN EUROPE**

The essay explores the evolution of the concept of sovereignty in the context of Russian imperialism in Eastern Europe, particularly its impact on Ukraine. It engages with a theoretical framework rooted in international relations and post-imperial studies, contrasting interpretations of sovereignty between IR scholars and international lawyers. The study identifies a shift in how sovereignty is perceived, moving from a monolithic understanding to a constructivist view where sovereignty is fragmented into a variety of types, most prominently, "full" and "limited".

This author argues that Russian policies towards Eastern European states reflect this division, with Russia treating its smaller neighbours as states possessing only limited sovereignty, a status that can be revoked by force, should the stronger neighbour so decide. Through an analysis of Russian rhetoric and actions, this author highlights how Moscow's foreign policy aims to restore its "full" or "imperial" sovereignty over its neighbours, while simultaneously challenging the sovereignty of Western powers. Conceptually, this study provides a nuanced understanding of sovereignty as a key concept in analysing Russian expansionist ambitions in the region.

Keywords: *sovereignty, Russian imperialism, Eastern Europe, constructivism, Russian foreign policy.*

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РЕЗУМАТ:

DE LA COMPLET LA LIMITAT: ÎNȚELEGEREA SUVERANITĂȚII ÎN CONTEXTUL IMPERIALISMULUI RUS ÎN EUROPA DE EST

Eseul dat examinează evoluția conceptului de suveranitate în contextul imperialismului rus în Europa de Est, în special impactul acestuia asupra Ucrainei. Argumentarea sa se angajează într-un cadru teoretic bazat pe relații internaționale și studii post-imperiale, contrastând interpretările suveranității între publiciștii din domeniul relațiilor internaționale și juriștii internaționali. Studiul identifică o schimbare în modul de percepție a suveranității, care trece de la o înțelegere monolitică la o viziune constructivistă în care suveranitatea este fragmentată în diverse tipuri, cel mai prominent fiind „plină” și „limitată”.

Autorul susține că politicile rusești față de statele est-europene reflectă această diviziune, Rusia tratând vecinii săi mai mici ca state care posedă suveranitate doar într-o măsură limitată, un statut internațional care poate fi revocat prin forță, dacă vecinul mai puternic decide astfel. Printr-o analiză a retoricii și acțiunilor rusești, autorul subliniază cum prin politica sa externă Moscova urmărește să-și restabilească suveranitatea „plină” („imperială”) asupra vecinilor săi, în timp ce contestă simultan suveranitatea puterilor occidentale. La un nivel conceptual, acest eseu oferă o înțelegere nuanțată a suveranității ca un concept cheie în analiza ambițiilor expansioniste rusești în regiune.

Cuvinte cheie: suveranitate, imperialismul rusesc, Europa de Est, constructivism, politică externă rusă.

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РЕЗЮМЕ:

ОТ ПОЛНОГО К ОГРАНИЧЕННОМУ: ПОНИМАНИЕ СУВЕРЕНИТЕТА В КОНТЕКСТЕ РОССИЙСКОГО ИМПЕРИАЛИЗМА В ВОСТОЧНОЙ ЕВРОПЕ

Данное исследование анализирует развитие понятия суверенитета в контексте российского империализма в Восточной Европе. Основываясь на теориях международных отношениях и исследованиях в области пост-империализма, автор выявляет различные интерпретации этого понятия, данные ему исследователями в области международных отношений и международного права. Данное исследование отмечает изменение в восприятии суверенитета, который, благодаря влиянию теории конструктивизма, всё реже используется как монолитный концепт. Более того, можно выявить его различные виды, наиболее примечательными из которых являются “полный” и “ограниченный”.

Автор утверждает, что российская политика в отношении государств Восточной Европы отражает это разделение, поскольку Россия рассматривает своих более слабых соседей как государства, обладающие только ограниченным суверенитетом. Данный статус может быть изменён или отозван в любой момент, если более сильный сосед решит применять силу. Анализируя российскую риторику и действия, автор подчеркивает, что внешняя политика Москвы направлена на восстановление своего “полного” или “имперского” суверенитета над соседями, одновременно бросая вызов суверенитету сильнейших западных держав. Это исследование предоставляет нюансированное понимание суверенитета как ключевого концепта в анализе экспансионистских амбиций России в Восточной Европе.

Ключевые слова: суверенитет, российский империализм, Восточная Европа, конструктивизм, внешняя политика России.

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Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine became the apogee of the former's decades-long expansionist foreign policies and the most striking example of the modern anti-imperial struggle in Eastern Europe. Additionally, it brought two considerations to scholars' attention. First concerns oft-omitted arguments about how fundamentally different Eastern Europe is from its Western sister coming to the forefront of academic discussions. Authors began to revisit earlier works examining how the historical routes of these two regions resulted in their incomparably different levels of development and (factual) independence (Mälksoo, 2023). Secondly, Russian attempts to expand its territory by annexing more of Ukrainian territory, this time manifestly and with justifications anchored in principles of international law, led several academics to argue that Russian foreign policy entered an openly imperialist stage (Kuzio, 2023).

This second line of argumentation is conceptually sound, as the main defining feature of an empire is its creation through conquest (Howe, 2002). Additionally, scholars raised concerns that the invocation of the legal language to justify expansionist foreign policies can indicate Russia's (neo-)imperial ambitions (Oksamytna, 2023). Logically, most of this literature comes from the field of international relations (IR). However, reflecting the interdependence of international law and politics, international legalese has often been used to discuss this topic, and foreign affairs scholars might have a different understanding of inherently legal concepts. As the legal implications of imperialism, (de-)colonisation, and foreign policy cannot be underestimated (Chimni, 2022), this essay aims to trace the implications of, arguably, the most important concept of international law—*sovereignty*—in this academic discussion. As such, it will be guided by the following question:

In which form does the international legal concept of sovereignty find reflection in the academic literature of post-imperial studies in Eastern Europe, especially in the context of Russian expansionist policies?

Sovereignty in Post-Imperial Studies on Eastern Europe: Looking Behind the Façade

Why is postcolonial language not applicable to Eastern Europe?

Nowadays covered with a veil of romanticism (Forgacs, 2014), Eastern European states share a long history of subjugation by foreign powers. The difficulty in defining Eastern Europe further complicates studying its past—although it might be delineated geographically, defining this region is a much more challenging exercise for sociologists and lawyers (Okey, 1992). After centuries of passing these territories over from one dominant power to another, cultural and ethnic borders have been practically erased in many areas. In this light, drawing an analogy with Africa's colonial past, Patryk Labuda (2023) points out that the *post-colonial* language should equally apply to Eastern European nation-states that have suffered from the conquests of non-Western empires. As other countries' imperial ambitions do not affect Eastern Europe anymore, the focus of this essay lies on Russian expansionist ambitions.

However, inspired by Barbara Arneil's (2023) arguments in favour of clearly distinguishing between the concepts of 'imperialism' and 'colonialism', this author contends that Labuda and other publicists who refer to Eastern Europe's *post-colonialism*, instead of *post-imperialism*, fail to grasp the essence of Russian aggressive foreign policies against Eastern European countries. Instead, this conceptual distinction is crucial to consider from the beginning of this essay, because omitting it might cause a misleading perception of the current events in Ukraine and other Eastern European states that fight back against the Russian intervention, either militarily or politically.¹

¹ On the latter type, think of the recent arguments made by the Speaker of the Moldovan Parliament, Igor Grosu, that Russian political technologists' attempts to sponsor pro-Russian political campaigns in Moldova amount to an interference in the latter's internal affairs (PAS, 'Președintele Parlamentului, Igor Grosu, despre Blocul "Podeba", creat la Moscova' [2 May 2024], available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tssfc8WeaTg&ab_channel=PAS-PartidulAc%C8%9Biune%C8%99iSolidaritate> accessed 04 May 2024). Another example concerns massive

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According to Arneil (2023), in addition to the etymological and historical differences between colonialism and imperialism, they should be distinguished primarily because each of them bears a different connotation of *power*. As such, using hard power against ‘inferior’ populations of other territories is inherent to *imperialism* because an empire can only be built through conquest. Given that conquerors see these populations as inherently inferior, the use of force against the latter is justified. On the contrary, in the *colonial* narrative, the main objective is not to forcibly subjugate the population of overseas territories but rather to help them improve their lives in the course of economically abusing them, as they are simply ‘backward’, not ‘inferior’.

Based on this distinction, this author argues that the term ‘imperialist’ is more accurate than ‘colonialist’ to describe Russian expansionist policies in Eastern Europe. This contention is embedded in the official Russian rhetoric about Ukrainians being neo-Nazis (Rossolinski-Liebe and Willems, 2022). It implies that Ukrainians are (at least morally) inferior to Russians because their aspirations to join the ‘collective West’ made them forget that their common ancestors decades ago managed to fight back against the biggest evil in Russia and Ukraine’s common history (Siddi, 2017). According to this logic, as Ukrainians are inferior, they may be subjugated—when necessary, by conquest.

Recently, Marta Grzechnik (2019) has identified a gap in this field, whereby authors failed to pay attention to the anti-imperial struggle of Eastern European nations because of being predominantly concerned with the implications of Western colonialism in other regions of the world. Following this, the field has witnessed a blossom of contributions. Although most studies focused on specific Eastern European countries,¹ what is important for the context of this essay is that many authors used legal language to advance their arguments. After conducting preliminary library research, the concept of ‘sovereignty’ has been identified among the most often used legalese by IR scholars to discuss contemporary Russian imperialism in Eastern Europe. Broadening the scope of this discussion to take into account the broader situation in the region, the following passages will address the implications of its use in the recently boomed field of Eastern European post-imperial studies.

Do we speak the same language?

The notion of ‘state sovereignty’ is public international law’s Kuhnian scientific paradigm (Kiladze, 2022). A group of international legal scholars may disagree on virtually all concepts of the discipline, but none of them would doubt the fundamental character of the principle of sovereign equality of states. It is understood as signifying independence in interstate relations.² Put rather simply, international lawyers treat sovereignty as an element of binary code: based on the customary criteria laid down in the Montevideo Convention (Dugard, 2021), a country either possesses it (and, therefore, is a formally independent state) or lacks it.

Nevertheless, in ‘Understanding the Ukrainian Conflict from the Perspective of Post-Soviet Decolonization’, Bong-koo Kang (2020), an IR scholar, seems to follow a different approach to sovereignty. When analysing the war in Ukraine as an instance of anti-imperial

protests in Georgia initiated against the Parliament’s decision to pass a controversial law ‘on foreign agents’, modelled almost precisely on a similar piece of legislation from Russia (R Forestier-Walker, ‘No to the Russian Law! Georgia Protesters Demand a European Future’ *Al-Jazeera* [4 May 2024], available at: <<https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2024/5/4/no-to-the-russian-law-georgia-protesters-demand-a-european>> accessed 04 May 2024).

¹ On Moldova and Ukraine, see, e.g., I Matveev, ‘Between Political and Economic Imperialism: Russia’s Shifting Global Strategy’ (2021) 25(2) *Journal of Labour and Society* 198; on Ukraine, see, e.g., E Drażkiewicz et al., ‘Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine’ (2023) 31(2) *Social Anthropology* 119; on Moldova, see, e.g., A Miller, ‘Starinnaya Khronika Tekushchikh Sobytii’ (2023) 21(1) *Rossiya v Global’noy Politike* 172; R Shevchenko, ‘Osnovnyye Formy i Messedzhy Rossiyskogo Natzionalizma v Moldove’ (2020) 9(2) *Society, Document, Communication* 214. Also, more generally, see M Szczygielska, ‘Elephant Empire: Zoos and Colonial Encounters in Eastern Europe’ (2020) 34(5) *Cultural Studies* 789.

² *Island of Palmas case*, in *Reports of International Arbitral Awards*, Vol. 2 (United Nations 2006), 829, 838.

struggle in Eastern Europe,¹ he stated the following: ‘Ukraine has achieved legal and political independence and wanted to pursue full-fledged sovereignty [...] vis-à-vis Russia’. Furthermore, Kang (2020) went on to argue that such a ‘full-fledged’ sovereignty, understood as encompassing economic, technological, and cultural elements of independence besides political and legal ones, was unattainable for Ukraine without ‘enhancing self-reliance and independence from Russia’.

Based on this, this author deduces that for Kang, unlike for international lawyers, sovereignty is not equal to independence. Instead of understanding it in all-or-nothing terms, he (2020) approached sovereignty from a constructivist perspective, implying that a state’s sovereignty is not static and cannot be assumed—rather, its enjoyment is dependent on multiple factors. In this light, the following questions arise: what does it elucidate about the IR field’s perception of sovereignty? If sovereignty is not monolithic but consists of different aspects, can we speak of ‘piecemeal’ or ‘incomplete’ sovereignty? Or, to develop this question, under which conditions can a state achieve ‘full’, ‘complete’ sovereignty, as understood in international law, and is it at all possible? And, more specifically in the context of this essay, how do Russian imperialistic policies affect the sovereignty of Russia and its victims?

We do speak different languages, but can we still understand each other?

Writing in the immediate aftermath of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Monica Eppinger (2022) suggested distinguishing between ‘full’ and ‘limited’ sovereignty in the Eastern European post-imperial context. Anchoring this distinction in her colleagues’ comments, she analysed the implications of these types of sovereignty for Ukraine’s anti-imperial struggle against Russia. As such, according to Eppinger (2022), the concept of ‘limited’ sovereignty is derived from the Soviet approach to relations with constituent republics, whereby the only actual, ‘full’ sovereign was the Union itself, and the republics and satellites enjoyed sovereignty only to a limited extent and only because the USSR granted it to them. On the other hand, ‘full’ sovereignty is an attribute of a limited number of states ‘which ha[ve] an ability to project [their] interests beyond [their] territory, thereby forming [a] special sphere of responsibility with an exclusive right to intervene in the domestic affairs of ‘supervised’ countries’.

The latter logic finds reflections in contemporary statements and actions of Russian state officials. Their rhetoric and decisions, with invasions of Georgia and Ukraine being the most extreme examples, demonstrate that Putin’s geopolitical doctrine builds on the idea that Russia is the ‘full’ sovereign, the hegemon that is entitled by its status of the USSR’s successor to assert dominance over neighbours with ‘limited’ sovereignty, at any moment. In this light, it becomes challenging to find aspects in which this approach would be different from that of empires vis-à-vis their dominions.

Assuming that reports about Putin’s initial idea of a *blitzkrieg* followed by establishing a puppet government in Kyiv were accurate (Pearson and McFaul, 2022), this author argues that Putin views Ukraine as a country with a limited degree of sovereignty which is, on top of that, owed to Russia. His essay published in 2021 further evidences the reasonableness of this approach, as there Putin attempted to undermine Ukrainian sovereignty by arguing that it was Lenin who invented Ukrainian statehood by taking a part of the Soviet state’s sovereignty and transferring it to Ukraine. Against this background, Eppinger’s (2022) conclusion that Ukrainian battlefields ‘are testing the limits of the “limited sovereignty” paradigm’ becomes even more relevant, because the longer Ukraine resists, the more policy objectives Russian officials will put forward to justify the invasion.

Arguing along similar lines, Ruslan Zaporozhchenko (2023) noted that the decision to invade Ukraine in 2022 indicated a new development in the Russian doctrine of sovereignty. As his argument goes, by attempting to demonstrate how powerful Russia and its leader are,

¹ While Kang refers to those events as an anti-colonial struggle, in the context of this essay, it should be understood as an example of fighting back against Russia’s (neo-)imperial ambitions.

Putin aimed at completing the transition towards ‘absolute’ sovereignty. In light of Putin’s expansionist policies, Zaporozhchenko (2023) dubbed this type of sovereignty as ‘imperial’, which means nothing else than an exclusive right of a sovereign to assert his political power by using force. While acknowledging that this approach shares several points with the above-explained logic of Eppinger, this author sustains that Zaporozhchenko (2023) tends to oversimplify Russian expansionist policies of recent years by focusing exclusively on events that started in late February 2022. Although the full-scale invasion represents the most striking example of Russian aggressive foreign policy, one cannot overlook decades of Russia’s cultural, political, and economic expansion in the states that used to be part of the USSR—a bird-eye’s view is thus essential to understanding the logic behind Putin’s modern imperialism.

It is undeniably true that Putin’s masculine image could not be upheld without launching a war of aggression, where his military would demonstrate its Supreme Commander’s might. However, the Russian foreign policy of recent decades has produced ample examples of expanding its influence over the ‘Near Abroad’¹ without resorting to armed force. For instance, Romanian scholar Lică (2023) opined that, in an attempt to restore his state’s ‘lost’ sovereignty, Putin often used non-military imperialist strategies against smaller Eastern neighbours. Those usually revolved around disseminating pro-Russian narratives in the latter’s public space.

Even though these strategies took different forms, for instance, funding political campaigns of Russian-affiliated candidates (such as in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) (D’Anieri, 2022), manipulating language issues in plurilingual states (in Moldova and Ukraine) (Coșeriu, 2017), or even employing elements of hybrid warfare (against Ukraine) (Clark, 2020), the rationale behind these policies aligns with the baseline of Eppinger and Zaporozhchenko’s theses—Putin’s ambitions for the ‘Near Abroad’ are imperial.

What Lică (2023) alludes to with her notion of ‘lost’ sovereignty is that since the dissolution of the USSR Russia has lost its ‘full’ sovereignty in Eppinger’s terms. Thus, Putin’s expansionist external strategy should be seen in opposition to other states that are often deemed to be fully sovereign, such as the US. His attempts to juxtapose Russian actions to those of the US and other Western states indicate this (Kursani, 2023): think of, for instance, when Putin mirrored Western rhetoric concerning Kosovo to justify his Russian intervention in Crimea. Another interesting conclusion that logically flows from Russian officials’ continuous vain attempts to justify aggression against Ukraine is that nowadays Russia cannot (although wants to) claim to be a ‘fully-fledged’ sovereign in Kang’s terms, or an actual ‘imperial sovereign’ in Zaporozhchenko’s terms, either. Should it be otherwise (meaning that Russia was independent from the international community politically, technologically, and financially), it would stop trying to whitewash its atrocities in international fora (United Nations, 2024a, 2024b).

Thus, we can speak of a gradation of ‘limited’ sovereignty (within a larger framework of gradations of sovereignty in general), given that neither Russia nor Ukraine could be said to enjoy ‘full’ sovereignty, but the former attempts to deprive the latter even of the not-complete degree of sovereignty that it possesses. In this light, from this bacchanalia of terms that IR scholars use to refer to sovereignty, two preliminary conclusions are drawn about how they discussed this concept in the context of Russian imperialist policies against Eastern European states.

The new approach in practice

¹ ‘Near Abroad’ is a translation of the Russian term ‘ближнее зарубежье’ which encompasses former USSR republics that, unlike the Baltic States, did not radically cut relations with Russia off. On its policy implications, see, e.g., D R Cameron and M A Orenstein, ‘Post-Soviet Authoritarianism: The Influence of Russia in Its “Near Abroad”’ (2012) 28(1) *Post-Soviet Affairs* 1.

Firstly, given that IR scholars should, by virtue of their field's peculiarities, pay much more attention to political considerations than their colleagues studying international law,¹ they cannot take sovereignty's monolithic nature for granted anymore. As the scientific paradigm of the field of foreign affairs gradually but inevitably shifts towards constructivism (Peez, 2022), more publicists have attempted to break through the previously impenetrable veil of sovereignty to understand what it consists of. Thus, the field's approach to sovereignty changed (De Carvalho, 2021), and it is not seen as a state's inherent attribute, which, in realist terms, equalled independence (Feinstein and Pirro, 2021), but rather as a complex phenomenon whose degree depends on a variety of real-world circumstances. As such, IR scholars nowadays take political, technological, cultural, and even natural factors into account when discussing sovereignty, and depending on these input elements, the output extent of sovereignty changes within one state and from one state to another. This is where the different categories of piecemeal-like sovereignty, discussed above, stem from.

Secondly, in practical terms, this disintegration of the concept of sovereignty provides an interesting framework to make better sense of Russian aggressive foreign policies. Analysed against many approaches to sovereignty, these policies can be said to operate at two overlapping, but not equal levels. On the one hand, it is beyond doubt that, by intervening in its Western neighbours' domestic affairs, Russia attempts to assert geopolitical dominance over them. In line with the Brezhnev doctrine, which is quite similar to what Eppinger called 'full' sovereignty, it is a manifestation of Russia's imperial ambitions for Eastern Europe. Put rather simply, when Putin understands that his 'softer' policies no longer achieve desirable results and Russian neighbours start claiming their sovereignty back, he will resort to hard military force to prevent these nations, which only possess 'limited' sovereignty, from achieving more of it.

In this regard, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine provides an obvious example. When Ukraine decided to cut ties with Russia and diminish the latter's societal and political influence (O'Loughlin *et al.*, 2020), Putin first resorted to different proxies in Eastern Ukraine to demonstrate that he did not like that course of action. However, when it did not yield the desired results and Ukraine continued to claim more sovereignty, this time by openly and democratically following a pro-Western course, Putin decided to intervene using the full panoply of his military power. Even the very narrative of a 'special military operation', used in Russian propaganda to refer to the war in Ukraine, demonstrates that he does not treat Ukraine as an equal to Russia because a 'full' sovereign (which Russia is, according to Putin's logic) would only wage an official war against another 'full' sovereign (Gorobets, 2022).

On the other hand, however, Lică's (2023) consideration of 'lost' sovereignty (or, rather, lost full sovereignty) indicates that, by asserting dominance over its sphere of influence in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, Putin sends a clear message to other 'fully' sovereign states—Russia is ready to regain this status which it owns by virtue of being the USSR's successor. Putin and his officials' numerous attempts to challenge the 'collective West', at times in a confrontational manner, evidence that Russian foreign policy is conducted in such an aggressive way because hard power is, in Russian traditions of international politics (Shin, 2009), the only language that opposing 'full' sovereigns understand. And here is where Zaporozhchenko's thesis of 'absolute' (or 'imperial') sovereignty comes into play again, given that Putin, his inner circle, and Russian propagandists have been straightforward in their threats of using force against the West and its allies (Horovitz and

¹ It is certainly true that international legal scholars, especially those conducting empirical research, cannot avoid considering political and other not-necessarily-legal concepts when drawing their conclusions. However, their importance is more limited for those lawyers who approach their questions from purely doctrinal or normative perspectives, because it is much easier to theoretically limit the impact of political considerations. On the contrary, IR scholars should not (and cannot) avoid dealing with politics *a priori* given that it is an inherent element of their field. On this matter, see, e.g., M Koskenniemi, 'The Politics of International Law' (1990) 4(1) *European Journal of International Law* 4.

Wachs, 2022). In other words, the rationale behind Putin's recent geopolitical decisions can be seen as a much more radical adaptation of Donald Trump's 'Make America Great Again', with Russia substituting for America in this populist equation.

Concluding Remarks: What Can International Jurists Take Home from This Discussion?

As the world community is concerned that Ukraine's potential loss of sovereignty due to Russian aggression may signify a transformation of the international legal order (Kordan, 2022), this essay attempted to understand how IR academics employ the concept of 'sovereignty' to study Eastern European post-imperialism. Having encountered a plethora of different approaches to sovereignty, this author identified that, unlike international lawyers, modern IR scholars, who are inspired by constructivist approaches, have recently attempted to look behind this concept's façade.

In other words, instead of studying *the* sovereignty, they are examining its different gradations—'full', 'limited', 'imperial', 'absolute', 'full-fledged', and 'lost' *sovereignties* denote different degrees of power, independence, and even the existence of states. In this light, international jurists, who are obsessed with interpretation (Tzanakopoulos, 2020), can make use of these different interpretations of the idea of sovereignty to better understand Russian imperialist policies against Eastern European states. Several illustrative examples will follow.

In this context, think of the Russian approach to the principle of extraterritoriality. Article 61(2) of the Russian Constitution prescribes 'protection and patronage' to Russian citizens *abroad*.¹ Putin and his officials have used this provision to threaten Eastern European states with potential intervention in their affairs (Calugareanu and Pozdnyakova, 2022), and even to justify actions in Donetsk and Luhansk regions (Stebelsky, 2018). At the same time, Russian foreign policy distinguishes between different types of 'abroad' – in addition to a 'regular' abroad, there is the 'Near Abroad', where states, according to Putin, enjoy only a 'limited' degree of sovereignty.

Thus, if Putin denies those states' 'full' sovereignty, this constitutional provision can be read as referring exclusively to the 'far' abroad, namely, to exceptional situations when Russian nationals in countries not comprising Russia's sphere of influence might require diplomatic protection. An extraterritorial intervention in a 'fully' sovereign state's affairs would require a justification grounded in Article 61(2), as it would grant such actions some legitimacy, at least domestically. For the 'Near Abroad', however, since the Russian foreign policy's logic tells us to treat those states as possessing only 'limited' sovereignty, there is no need to resort to such strong constitutional arguments. At the end of the day, a 'full' sovereign should not look for excuses for its actions against 'limited' sovereigns, especially when it considers that this 'limited' sovereignty is owed to it historically.

Another controversial Russian decision that such a non-monolithic approach to sovereignty may help explain is placing Ukrainian President Zelenskyy on wanted list. Incriminating him with an undisclosed offence under the Russian Criminal Code (Sulima, 2024), Russian authorities that issued this order disregarded the fundamental logic of immunities enjoyed by heads of state, which stems from a universally accepted principle of international law.² However, when analysed through the lens of Russian foreign policy whereby Ukraine lacks 'full' sovereignty, it seems logical that the latter head of state's immunity (which stems from the necessity to discharge his official functions effectively) can be legitimately neglected, as a president of a 'limitedly' sovereign state cannot enjoy a 'full' degree of immunity. Moreover, given that Russia treats Ukrainian sovereignty as owed to

¹ The Constitution of the Russian Federation, Article 61(2), available at: <<http://archive.government.ru/eng/gov/base/54.html>> accessed 09 May 2024.

² *Arrest Warrant of 1 April 2000 (Democratic Republic of the Congo v. Belgium)*, Judgment, ICJ Reports 2002, p. 3, [51].

and granted by it, it reserves the right to claim it back at any moment—together with all privileges and immunities stemming from it.

Even though these examples do not represent an exhaustive list, this author does not doubt that Russian officials will come up with other ‘creative’ justifications for their imperialist actions against Eastern European states. Against this background, as restoring and preserving Russian sovereignty remains a crucial objective for Putin and his coterie because their image rests on a strong (read: sovereign) Russian state, it is also beyond doubt that the above-identified approach of gradations of sovereignty, proposed by constructivist IR scholars, will provide a useful starting point to explain these actions.

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