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THEORETICAL NOTES ON THE STRUCTURE AND DYNAMICS OF EMPIRES

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Abstract. The march of events which have been unfolding in the last three decades in Northern Eurasia requires clarification and extension of the terminology used in the empire studies, and first of all, the supplement of the wide-spread "centerperiphery" model with a third, intermediate element – the notion of "core". The "core", in contrast to the "center", points to the territorial aspect of the imperial structure. The "core" is primarily formed by those loci which are predominantly occupied by institutions and actors of the imperial center, as well as those with which central values are strongly associated. However, the "core" is also formed by the "first order"-peripheries, linked with the center and its loci by particularly strong, qualitatively closer ties than those that connect the center with the ordinary, "second order" – peripheries. Through the course of the systemic crisis of an empire, the most dramatic processes take place in the core – the movement of its constituent political units turns out to be multidirectional, there are numerous internal divisions and schisms. As a result, the process that on the "far" periphery of the empire can really be taken for its unidirectional "collapse", in the core is rather an arrhythmic pulsation, during which the composition and boundaries of the core are redefined and revised, including forcibly. It is impossible to predict a priori, how long this pulsation will take, and whether it will end with the real collapse of the empire.

Keywords: empire, collapse of empire, center, periphery, core, political form, nation-state.

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ТЕОРЕТИЧЕСКИЕ ЗАМЕТКИ О СТРУКТУРЕ И ДИНАМИКЕ ИМПЕРИЙ

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Аннотация. Ход событий, разворачивающихся в последние три десятилетия в Северной Евразии, требует уточнения и расширения терминологического аппарата, используемого в изучении империй, и прежде всего дополнения распространенной аналитической модели "центр–периферия" третьим, промежуточным элементом – понятием "ядра". "Ядро", в отличие от "центра", указывает на территориальный аспект имперской структуры. Это прежде всего те локусы, в которых преимущественно размещены институты и акторы имперского центра, а также те, с которыми прочно ассоциированы центральные ценности. Но "ядро" – это еще и периферии "первого порядка", связанные с центром качественно более плотными узлами по сравнению с перифериями обычными, "второго порядка". В ходе системного кризиса империи самые драматические процессы происходят именно в ядре – движение составляющих его политических единиц оказывается разнонаправленным, умножаются внутренние расколы. В результате то, что на "дальних" перифериях империи действительно можно принять за ее однонаправленный "распад", в ядре оказывается скорее аритмичной пульсацией, в ходе которой состав и границы ядра переопределяются и пересматриваются, в том числе насильственным образом.

Сколько времени эта пульсация займет и завершится ли она именно крахом империи, *a priori* предсказать невозможно.

Ключевые слова: империя, распад империи, центр, периферия, ядро, политическая форма, национальное государство.

— *One of two things... Either the patient is alive or he is dead. If he's alive, he stays alive or he doesn't stay alive. If he is dead, he can be revived or he cannot be revived.*

A. N. Tolstoy.

To begin with, it should be strongly emphasised that the following notes are indeed theoretical in nature. Their purpose is to clarify and extend the terminological apparatus used in the study of empires, not to apply it to contemporary processes. Some points will be accompanied by illustrative examples that are historically and/or geographically distant from contemporary North Eurasia. The Owl of Minerva does not fly in the daytime (only with the falling of dusk), nor does it fly over battlefields – when it can get shot.

The grave events of recent times have highlighted many things, including the unsatisfactory state of *empire studies*. This is because their common weakness has been represented in the verbal formula “collapse of empires” (crash, decay, fall, breakup), which implies and imposes the perception of what it signified as a unidirectional process. Reservations were made occasionally about its varying tempo and rhythms, about the different pace at which it fragments and falls away from the empire; yet the process is predominantly described as the movement of the empire from a certain point “A” to a certain point “B”, from a consolidated state to a disintegrated one – to the state *after empire, to the end* (see the titles of chapters written by Charles Tilly and Eric Hobsbawm for the excellent compilation of essays *After Empire: Multi-ethnic Societies and Nation-Building – How Empires End* and *After Empire* respectively [1]). So did the author of this paper, for which he bears his share of responsibility.

There are many reasons for this. This includes a widespread naïve belief that all historical processes have somehow accelerated and therefore must come to their end in the lifetime of the observers. This includes, as well, the projective hopes of the actual “observers of the empire” who for the most part passionately desired this very fate for the object of their observation. Any attempts to reverse the “disintegration of the empire” were viewed by this majority, as stemming only from bitter resentment, as futile and ultimately doomed. If “something goes wrong” on the ruins of the empire, it means that the empire has just “under-collapsed”; one should encourage and

welcome its further disintegration in every possible way, and things would automatically get better.

However, there is one more reason, now of heuristic nature – the insufficient power of the oversimplified set of categories, which the researchers used for the most part. This is primarily the “center-periphery” model used extensively in empire studies. “Most scholars would probably agree that every empire consists of something called a core and something called a periphery” [2, p. 20]. Numerous reservations were made as well in this respect – that any periphery is not like another one, that their relations with the imperial center are ambiguous, that their trajectories of entering the imperial space were different and their trajectories of leaving it are different as well... Still, everything ended in dichotomy – everything that was not the center was the periphery and vice versa. Accordingly, in the course of the “dissolution of the empire”, peripheries embark on a more or less successful independent voyage, while the center undergoes internal rebirth (or *does not*, therefore collapses), in any case irreversibly losing its imperial nature. This study hypothesises that this model, chronically, misses one element that is structurally and analytically located *between* the center and the periphery. Its inclusion could substantially enrich the heuristic potential of the model.

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There have been a number of attempts to complicate the center-periphery model. Far back, it was Johan Galtung who talked in 1971 in his famous article [3] about “centers of the centers”, “peripheries of the centers”, “centers of the peripheries”, and (least of all) “peripheries of the peripheries”. However, the subject of his analysis was not empires but imperialism – in the actual Marxist and even Leninist meaning. The limitation of Galtung’s concept lies not only in its inevitable shifting of focus to economic factors and processes (ultimately, by any measure, it is a derivative of *faith* in the primacy of matter over spirit), but also in that his units of analysis are *nations*, and specifically nations. Although his definition of imperialism seems to allow for some other versions (“rela-

tion between collectivities, particularly between nations”) [3, p. 81], one can see “nations” further in the text, not “mainly”, but exclusively, as if in a ready-made, objectified and substantiated form, which is doubtful in itself and certainly not applicable to every empire.

One cannot fail to mention the appealing term “*semiperiphery*”, firmly associated with Immanuel Wallerstein and his school. However, here one faces the same limitations of the same (neo)Marxist origin. “Besides the upper stratum of core-states and the lower stratum of peripheral states, there is a middle stratum of semi-peripheral ones” [4, p. 43], i.e. Galtung’s well-recognised “nations”. “Some states have a near even mix of core-like and peripheral products” [5, pp. 94–95], and it is specifically clarified that these are “production” processes. “On a number of economic criteria (but not all), the semiperiphery represents a midway point on a continuum running from the core to the periphery. This is, in particular, true of the complexity of economic institutions, the degree of economic reward (both in terms of average level and range), and most of all in the form of labor control” [6, p. 122]. At the same time, according to Wallerstein, semiperipheries are found only in the “*world-economy*”, but suddenly, not in the historically preceding “*world-empires*” that abandoned the scene irreversibly long ago and are defined as “a structure that has a single overall political structure and a single overall division of labor” [7, p. XXII]. “Han China and the Roman Empire are two good examples of a world-empire” [7, p. XXII]. It is absolutely impossible to understand how this description correlates with what is known about the strict heterogeneity of the classical empire structure qualified by Tilly in general terms as *indirect* rule [8, p. 30] exercised by various intermediary instances, institutions, and individuals.

To be fair, there are some versions of the world-system analysis which offer the interpretation of the term “semiperiphery” that is much devoid of these limitations [9, pp. 78-98; 10]. At least, there is a temptation to designate the sought third element of the imperial structure with the term “semi-center” by analogy with the “semiperiphery”: if the mentioned neologism has proved to be acceptable, then a mirrored one has the right to existence. However, it is better to refrain from this temptation, in order not to evoke strong and quite unnecessary associations with the world-system analysis, especially in its most popular version by Wallerstein, since it is of little use for the needs of further reasoning. Instead, this study will attempt to do what, as far as known, has never been done in empire studies (and in general – in the

center-periphery model): to disconnect the categories of *center* and *core*.

Normally, they are used as synonyms depending on the preferences of a particular author. For instance, Susanna Birgerson notes en passant that Galtung “uses the term ‘center’ instead of ‘core’” [11, p. 21]. Thereby she gives preference to the latter and sees no problem with it. In the above quote from Alexander Motyl about the “center-periphery consensus” reached with regard to empires offers the wording “core”, not “center”; however, Motyl supports his quite accurate statement by a single reference to a valuable book edited by Jean Gottmann, called *Center and Periphery: Spatial Variation in Politics* [12], which does not contain the word “core” at all, neither in the title nor in the text.

It can be assumed that segregated and semantically different operationalisation of these categories can be useful. It makes sense to leave the category of “center” as a predominantly analytical and even metaphorical in the spirit of Edward Shils, i.e. having “nothing to do with geometry and little with geography” [13, p. 3]. “The term “center” refers to a sector of society in which certain activities which have special significance or functions are relatively more highly concentrated or more intensively practiced than they are in other parts of that society and which are to a greater extent than are other parts of society the focus of attention, preoccupation, obedience, deference, or emulation” [14, pp. 251-252]. “Centers exist in societies in consequence of inequalities or concentrations in the distribution of authority, power, wealth, knowledge, creative achievement, religious qualification, moral distinction, etc., and because human beings are preoccupied with those things and their concentration” [14, p. 260]. The center exists as “a group or circle of individuals” [14, p. 254] – actors, functionaries of the center, constituting its human substratum. Further, the center exists as a “set of institutions” [14, p. 254] – these represent agreements between the center’s functionaries and the practices of their interaction, formal and informal. However, above all, the center exists as a “phenomenon of the realm of values and beliefs. It is the center of the order of symbols, of values and beliefs, which govern the society” [13, p. 3]. (Shils-based extended interpretation versions of the category of center, including those applied to empires – see [15, 16, 17, 18]). Both the institutions of the center and their human substratum are secondary to central values. They express, embody, and transfer these values, and translate them into the domain of action; meanwhile, they are functional and efficient as such only to the extent they are legiti-

mised by values. As long as values retain their guiding and motivating force, institutions can be renewed and their human substratum can rotate relatively safely. However, when the values lose their power, i.e. their status as “non-empirical... conceptions of the desirable, used in moral discourse, with a particular relevance for behaviour” [19, p. 22] and even more, to much significant extent – since traditionally “values are seen as fundamental, unchangeable, sacrosanct or holy” [20, p. 76] – then the human substratum of the center, left without the legitimising support (usually rotating at an increased rate in this situation), sets out to discover alternative values (or tries to restore the former ones). This way it seeks to strengthen the faltering old institutions and hastily constructed new ones (created on the basis of the old institutes’ wreckage, as a rule). Sometimes this undertaking succeeds, sometimes it does not.

This is what a systemic crisis of any political order looks like, not only of an imperial one but still of an imperial one too. Centers (as well as peripheries – “the elements that need to be integrated, the material on which the creative, the society-generative function of the center is performed” [21, p. IX]) are present in every politically organised society. In fact, their very presence makes societies politically organised, therefore Birgeron’s statement that unlike empires, “no center or periphery in a state” [11, p. 15] produces a truly stunning impression by its absurdity.

The imperial center, naturally, has its own specificity, and the political form of the empire differs from the political form of the state. If the central values are absolute and universal, i.e. they are conceived as *imperatively* destined for worldwide triumph for particular reasons (or at least in its part observable within the framework of event horizon relevant to a given center), then the most logically coherent conclusion is empire-building. Not all such ventures are successful – their origination requires a considerable critical mass of not only symbolic but also material, human, and organisational resources. For an imperial project to enter the phase of stable reproduction (dynamically stable, which implies more or less permanent expansion), a favourable combination of multiple external circumstances, including incidental ones, must take place as well. It also requires the ability of the center’s functionaries to build an institutional framework of the empire adequate to the mission, i.e. the interaction between the center and the periphery in a mode that is almost unlimitedly inclusive (primarily, peripheral sub-centers). This regime supposes granting the latter many differentiated statuses and maintaining their wide autonomy, subject to the latter’s show-

ing basic loyalty, and participation (asymmetrical, but usually mutually beneficial) in internal resource exchange missions of the empire and its external expansionist projects. Tilly defines such a framework as “indirect rule”, with two major elements: “(1) retention or establishment of particular, distinct compacts for the government of each segment; (2) exercise of power through intermediaries who enjoy considerable autonomy within their own domains in return for the delivery of compliance, tribute, and military collaboration with the center” [8, p. 3]. Motyl, in his turn, specifies it as “an incomplete wheel, with a hub and spokes but no rim... or, to use less metaphorical language, of political and economic relations between and among the peripheral units or between and among them and nonimperial polities” [22, p. 16]. “First, that peripheral elites (ideally) interact via the core means that their capacity to communicate and thus to band together against the core elite is limited. In particular, no one peripheral elite can halt the flow of resources and information from the periphery to the core and back. Second, because all peripheries are simultaneously contributors and recipients of resources, peripheral elites are, structurally, competitors and not cooperators. Their dependence on the core, and their resulting independence of each other, aligns them with the core and against the rest of the periphery. Third, empires are extraordinarily good deals for peripheral elites” [22, pp. 23-24]. In human history, all the above factors – certain properties of central values, actors, and institutions, sufficient resource endowment, and fortune’s favour – are rarely combined, but sometimes they are combined. This is how empires emerge.

* * *

The incompleteness of such operationalisation of the center in general and the imperial center in particular lies in the fact that according to Shils as quoted above, it “has little to do with geography”. To a certain extent, however, it does, Shils does not deny the obvious: the central zone “almost always has a more or less definite location within the bounded territory in which the society lives” [13, p. 3]; “Obviously all actions have a spatial location; the institutions which are combined in the center and the persons who perform the diverse actions of the center... have spatial location” [14, p. 252]; “The relations between ‘centers’ and ‘peripheries’ may be defined as relationships of ‘proximity’ and ‘distance’. There is a spatial overtone in all these terms”; however, “the term ‘center’ is no more spatial than the term ‘centralization’” [14, pp. 258-259], that is, this connotation is weak.

Thus, the spatial, territorial aspect plays quite a secondary role in the center-periphery structuring of society. Notably, the same point of view was expressed, oddly enough, by some geographers: “‘Center’ is not a particular point on the earth’s surface; it is a concept in mythic thought rather than a deeply felt value”, although “associated with unique events and places” [23, p. 150].

However, territoriality does matter, and not only for theoretical research (see, above all, [24], and [25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30]). Due attention to this parameter allows a researcher to make a particularly clear analytical distinction between the imperial and state political forms: “The principle of state sovereignty first and foremost unified political rule within a specific territory. The stage was being set for the imagining of political space in a fundamentally novel way, as a unified, contiguous territory” [31, p. 57]. “The constitution of the modern Nation-State – through the ‘invention’ of borders which replaced the ancient forms of ‘marches’ or ‘limes’, combining on the same ‘line’ administrative, juridical, fiscal, military, even linguistic functions – was in particular a transformation of the (more or less indefinite, heterogeneous) *space* into *territories* controlled by a ‘monopolistic’ State-power, thus rendered ‘homogeneous’. This could be called generally a process of *the territorialization of space*, which forms a *pre-condition* for the emergence of ‘politics’ as such, in the modern sense” [32, p. 3]. Bertrand Badie’s description of the historical process of the state political form as emerging *from within the imperial one* is unsurpassed so far [33], given that it is *state-building* that has been deemed in the past one and a half – two centuries to be the natural outcome of “disintegration” of empires, and not without due reason. The most important thing, however, is that the factual fetishisation of territoriality *per se* of particular territories and borders delineating them resulted in innumerable human sacrifices offered to this fetish. The willingness to do so is determined not so much by the real economic or strategic importance of particular territories as by their symbolic significance, their size not being important. The land – sometimes a sliver or inch thereof – regarded as “native” has abundantly been awash in blood, especially if it used to house an empire, and it is not a fact that this empire ceased to be such or will cease to be such in the foreseeable future.

* * *

The proposed separation of the “center” and “core” concepts aims to consider the core precisely

as a territory. Of course, this primarily represents the loci predominantly hosting the institutions and actors of the imperial center, as well as those firmly associated with the central values. However, this scheme is not necessarily unambiguous. What was the center of the western Roman Empire in the last decades of its existence – Ravenna or still “Old Rome”? What was the center of the Holy Roman Empire in the Middle Ages – Aachen or, again, Rome which remained for centuries the only place where a true imperial coronation could take place? What was the center of the Russian Empire from the 18th to the early 20th century – St. Petersburg or Moscow, the “ancient capital” where – and only where – chrismation and coronation took place? The functions, institutions, and symbols of the center can be spatially distributed, while its actors can move across the territory, staying at ease for a long time in a variety of places: in a sense, the center of the empire is located where the emperor and his court are currently located.

Furthermore, the core includes the “first-order” peripheries that are connected with the center and its loci by particularly strong, qualitatively tighter ties than those connecting the center with ordinary, “second-order” peripheries. The nature of such ties can be different almost any way – geographic proximity and spatial contiguity; longevity of staying within the empire; the intensity of economic interaction and exchange relations; ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious affinity at the level of both elites and population at large, the multiplicity of kinship or just friendly interpersonal relations; special symbolic significance, *etc.* None of these factors alone is either necessary or sufficient; all of them can be combined in a variety of combinations and proportions. Ultimately, the composition and outline of the core are determined by its perception as such, whatever it may be conditioned by – in accordance with the Thomas theorem, fundamental for social sciences: “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences”. In this aspect, the core of the empire perceived as reality is also real. “What you count as periphery depends on what you count as center” [34, p. 29]. This also applies to the core.

The core resembles partly Galtung’s “periphery of the center”. However, firstly, it is composite, with its own sub-divisions and their sub-centers; secondly, in no way it is made up of “nations”. Nor should it be confused with “semiperiphery” treated in Wallerstein’s or even more refined versions of world-system analysis. For instance, Christopher Chase-Dunn and Thomas Hall, trying to operate with as many as five fundamentally different interpretative versions of the

concept (and deriving them all from Wallerstein's writings), find one thing in common in them: "For all of these, we expect that semiperipheral regions will be dominated by the core but will at the same time dominate peripheral areas" [9, p. 78]. The first statement may concern any periphery in any hierarchically organised structure. As to the second one, the imperial core quite seldom realises its own programmes of domination over second-order peripheries and does not even necessarily enjoy any privileged position in relation to them. It is pertinent to recall a well-known late-Soviet discourse about the degraded, discriminatory position of Russian regions and the RSFSR in general within the Soviet Union. To support this, not only was the evidence, of significantly lower living standards in the imperial core as compared to the Soviet republics, provided (this was a subject of numerous manipulations; exactly the same manipulations, though with the opposite sign, were practised by the second-order peripheries), but also an undeniable fact that the RSFSR did not even have its own Communist Party (and in addition, its own KGB [Committee for State Security] from 1965 to 1991, which is also important).

The status of the imperial core may not serve to be the subject of political reflection for quite a long time. However, it can acquire this status for a variety of reasons: for instance, it was inspired by the Roman plebs' desire in the late Republic to switch to a completely parasitic existence at the expense of the peripheries (which included a demand not only for distribution of bread but also for regular spectacles accompanied by all kinds of gifts – *panem et circenses*). Indulging in these endeavours in a masterly manner resulted in Caesar's, then Octavian's coming to power and eventually became a solid pillar of the principate regime (it is notable that later the same practice was replicated by Constantine in the Second Rome, in Constantinople – he was well aware of the imperial center's *noblesse oblige* and preventively strengthened it). The problematisation of the core became systematic in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when national and nationalist ideas and projects began to sprout through the former imperial order. It was demonstrated many times over that "nation" in the context of this process represented in a general way another name of the state *et vice versa* (or, rather, one of the hypostases of the state as a political form which developed in the Early modern period and gradually advanced to the foreground), and this does not need any separate explication (see [35, 36, 37]). One should mention that it is acceptable, at this level of generalisation, to disregard the distinction between

"nation-states" and "states-nations" which is important in other contexts [38].

Things got mixed up at that time. Nations emancipated themselves from empires [39, pp. 403-418]; some of them tried to set up their own empires that belong already to the modern epoch (see [15, pp. 203-218] about the differences between "modern" and classical empires); but empires used to construct nations as well [40]. No single or even predominant scenario existed for that. The emerging Second Reich was choosing between two options for the formation of its own core (and even its center) – the Greater vs. the Smaller Germanic Reich [41]. The Habsburg Empire, having become Austria-Hungary, formed a coupled or, rather, bifurcated core in an entirely non-trivial way [42]. The Young Turks in the Ottoman Empire tried to extend, and stretch the core as far as possible, spreading it to the second-order periphery [43]. In the Romanov Empire, a project of the "great Russian nation" was debated and even promoted to a certain extent, as a specific way of consolidating the imperial core [44, pp. 13-61, 285-308], which was much later reproduced by Alexander Solzhenitsyn [45], with a minor alteration of details, but most importantly, with a totally opposite intention – to radically dismantle the empire for the sake of the salvation of at least its core. In both versions, this project continues to resurface from time to time in contemporary political discourse. The USSR was actively experimenting, creating an "affirmative action empire" (which could be translated without excessive shyness in a more accurate way as "positive discrimination empire"), alternatively changing it for the "friendship of peoples" model with the highlighted role of the Russian nation [46], and somewhat later adding the ideologue of the "new historical community" to it. At the same time, the core of the communist empire was invariably maintained in a politically demobilised and poorly conceptualised condition. On the one hand, an appropriate symbolic and institutional design was indeed provided for all "Soviet nationalities" other than Russian, not only in the Union republics but also in political units within the core (different-rank autonomies within the RSFSR where the latter was positioned as a special federation within the federation). On the other hand, a continuous struggle (of variable intensity) existed with "bourgeois nationalism" – both with its "vestiges" and with new opposition movements encompassing some groups of the dissident and human rights movement in the least and ending with dissenting "national intelligentsia". Actually, some reflection regarding the status of the core was smouldering "under the rubble" of the re-

gime, as illustrated by the “Russian party” case [47]. Based on a fundamentally different ideological foundation, the Third Reich originated, on the contrary, by consolidating and mobilising the core conceived as a nation (occupation of Rhineland, the annexation of Sudetenland, Anschluss of Austria, direct incorporation of Danzig, Alsace-Lorraine), with the plans to begird this core with sufficient “living space”, that is, with imperial peripheries of the second level.

* * *

When an empire, for one reason or another, is hit by a systemic crisis (which may or may not trigger the “disintegration of the empire” – this is revealed only *a posteriori* after a lapse of some indefinite period of time), much-differing processes are unfolding in its center, its core, and in second-order peripheries (or the crisis itself is represented by these processes, or starts with them, overgrown with time by other epiphenomena). The processes taking place in the core are the most variable and least predictable.

The center, in all of its dimensions, degrades – in particular, its values (the tautology “gets devalued” would be more appropriate), institutions, and actors. This degradation usually becomes truly rapid and irreversible when an empire perishes as a result of the irresistible influence of some external force, usually a military defeat, and not just a defeat, but annihilation that precludes any possibility of revenge or restoration – as was the case of the Second Rome (Byzantium), Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, the Third Reich, *mutatis mutandis* the “Great East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere” (if the European-origin conceptual framework is applicable in this case at all). The former values are rejected or even tabooed, the institutions are completely or almost completely eliminated, and the human substratum of the center is radically renewed (however, as a rule, its total substitution does not take place since it is almost impossible to replace all central positions simultaneously, therefore many grassroots functionaries remain in their places). In the Modern age, such a collapse or, rather, the crush of the empire usually results in the emergence of a nation-state in the place of its former core. This state faces similar problems, sometimes dealt with on a smaller scale; for instance, the Republic of Turkey long insisted that Kurds were “mountain Turks”, nothing more. The Second Greek-Turkish War (1919–1922) is also illustrative: its core, which decayed after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, was able during the war, after rejecting the Treaty of Sevres and attaining the conclusion of the Treaty of Lausanne, to recover Eastern Thrace

and Western Anatolia which had been regarded as irretrievably lost – and this was the actual reason of the realised urge to incidentally replace the sultanic rule with the republic. However, this did not result in the restoration of the empire – because it was prudently not included in the Kemalist agenda and programme. In less rigid scenarios, degradation of the center lasts for a longer period; quite natural attempts to reverse it – again, in all three dimensions – are not excluded and are even probable. Their success is disputable (because it depends on what happens not only in the center, but also on the periphery, depending as well on the actions of external centers competing with the empire, those unlikely to watch the course of events with indifference), but is not excluded.

Second-order peripheries break away (or they are split off by the empire’s external rivals), constructing their own centers with more or less success or by reorienting themselves toward external centers of imperial or some other nature (often, this strategy proves to be easier for implementation and more advantageous for peripheral elites). “It is no denial of the existence of the center to wish to escape from its dominion; indeed, the desire to escape from the center confirms preoccupation with it. The desire to escape from one center may be a product of the desire to be attached to another center” [14, p. 261]. One way or another, they are not left without a center at all. However, if a systemic crisis is successfully overcome and the potential of the imperial center is restored, then at least some of the peripheries may be compelled to return to the imperial perimeter.

The position of the core is the most contradictory. Some political units of the core (it should be remembered that the core represents peripheries as well, it is not monolithic) try to emulate second-order peripheries and impersonate them, which is difficult because they usually do not have a full-fledged, convincing experience of independent political existence, or this existence is buried somewhere in the distant past (which does not preclude attempts to exhume it and present it *urbi et orbi*, or which even suggests them). However, an unambiguous answer in trying to see the difference between the periphery of the second order and that of the first order is indeed not always possible. Other political units remain in association with the center either in virtue of some objective impossibility of withdrawal from it or due to a subjective motive – willingness to remain loyal, even to a decrepit suzerain, or both. After all, they are bound with the center particularly tightly; their interdependence is strong and powerful in a multitude of aspects;

unlike second-order peripheries, they have literally become one with the center. Naturally, the behaviour of each of these political units is determined primarily by local elites; but the opinion of the wider community cannot be ignored either, especially after the transformation of a “nation” and “democracy” into a political standard that is almost universally accepted. As a result, many first-order peripheries are tested for stretching and rupture. Intra-elite splits occur: some elite groups encourage centrifugal motion and incite towards it; some groups trigger centripetal motion, being satisfied with limited expansion of their autonomy and privileges, which usually takes place in the core during a systemic crisis of the empire. The choice depends on the path which, in their opinion, provides more benefits and fewer costs, both ideal and tangible. If neither of these groups manages to achieve enduring and long-term dominance, then centrifugal and centripetal vectors alternate, sometimes repeatedly, moreover that both appeal to the masses and seek their support, while the masses, in turn, exert pressure on the elites’ course to the best of their ability, not always being constrained by legalistic boundaries. Elites’ splits are thus projected into the masses and masses’ splits – into the elites. The delimitation lines between the elites and the masses are drawn based on a variety of grounds (as above mentioned – historical, economic, ethical, linguistic, cultural, religious, *etc.*) and, quite possible, on territorial grounds, both between the political units of the core and within them, which is especially sensitive. Finally, the center is involved in all this as far as possible, being able to accept the disintegration of the core as *a fait accompli* far less painfully than the fact of the withdrawal of the second-order peripheries which had always remained alien to it. Naturally, the center maintains centripetally oriented groups and territories with its remaining resources, depleted, but not yet fully exhausted. Naturally, the center, frustrated by the events it is involved in and affected by resentment, perceives the external rivals’ genuine or imaginary claims to the establishment of independent relations with the core rather than with second-order peripheries much more nervously.

As a result, what can be taken for a unidirectional “collapse” relative to “distant” (not necessarily in the geographical sense) peripheries of the empire appears to be a convulsive, spasmodic, arrhythmic pulsation of the core in the course of which the composition and borders thereof are redefined and revised, including in a violent way. The duration, intensity, and amplitude of such pulsation, as well as its ability to resonate in second-order peripheries as well,

depend on so many factors that neither it’s intermediate nor, all the more, distant consequences are predictable. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that one of such factors is taken into account less frequently than it deserves. It is the ratio of the territory of the empire as a whole at the time it entered into a systemic crisis vs. the territory of the core (albeit estimated approximately, with deviations in one direction or another) at the moment of true completion of the “imperial collapse” or seeming finalisation followed by an attempt to reverse it. Most often, the former figure exceeds the latter by several times or even orders of magnitude. Suffice it to compare the territories of the Ottoman Empire and Turkey, Austro-Hungary and Austria, and the British, French, Spanish, Portuguese and Japanese empires – with the territories of Britain, France, Spain, Portugal, and Japan, respectively. Apropos, the ratio was much lower in the Interbellum-period Germany which suffered almost no territorial losses during the First World War. For reference: The Soviet empire in 1991 was not so much split up as “crumbled around the edges”, as Emil Pain formulated aptly: the territory of the Russian Federation makes up 76.3% of the area of the former USSR (with the Crimea – 76.4%). The losses are significant, but not so much as to fundamentally change the political meaning generated by the very size of this space, given that this meaning in turn modifies all other contiguous/conjugated implications. However, the dimension of space is not neutral; it considerably influences the character of political interaction taking place in it, serving as its semantic “background and horizon”. The realisation of this influence in the imperial space (that is, in an extraordinarily large space according to any of the definitions of political form) is superbly demonstrated in Alexander F. Filippov’s refined works [48, 49].

A good example of such pulsation is the nearly 40-year period of Justinian’s reign (the emperor not of the mythical “Eastern” empire contrived by later historians, but of the Roman Empire itself, without any predicates), marked by enormous efforts to restore the value-based and institutional potential of the center (religious, legal, administrative, tax reforms) and known for grandiose military campaigns that returned North Africa under the rule of the center, along with southern Spain, Illyria, and Italy (from Sicily to the Alps), together with Ravenna and, most importantly, Rome. Notably, the empire by the time of Justinian’s transformation actions had retained control over the vast, resource-rich territories, and the described proportion was not too dramatic. It is no less remarkable that direct reintegration of far-off,

out-of-the-Mediterranean peripheries like Gallia, Germany and, more so, Britain was out of the question – the whole thing was limited to isolated drive-back victories over Alemanni, Visigoths, Franks, and Slavs. It is even more noteworthy that all that feverish activity, in Justinian's lifetime already, resulted in numerous mass protests and conspiracies of the elite, including those in the heart of the imperial center; in repeated exhaustion of resources of the seemingly risen empire, in its increased vulnerability to new external threats (from the north and particularly from the east); the same under his successors led to the loss of most of the conquered lands as well as some other much valuable areas (Syria, Egypt) [50, pp. 259-404]. Not every shudder of the (political) body is a sure sign

of its full-fledged, irreversible reanimation. There is something to think about.

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Actually, there is a lot to think about in this subject area – in particular, about the harm of hurried, unfounded hope: for the “end of history” at most to the “end of empires” at least. One should realise that the fate of empires is in fact determined not so much outside them, on their peripheries and not even in the center, but in their torn-apart core, not at all reducible to the center. Someday, the above reasoning will make one think about what these theoretical notes have to do with Northern Eurasia of the last three decades. The Owl of Minerva will fly over it as well in due course.

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