

KATALIN SCHREK

**THE BALKANS AS A SPHERE OF RUSSIA'S IMPERIAL POWER –  
THOUGHTS ON NEW PERSPECTIVES AND APPROACHES  
IN MODERN HISTORICAL RESEARCH<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** The relationship between Russia and the Balkans has traditionally been a well-researched area in the history of international relations. In recent decades, however, there has been a shift within the scholarly community towards rethinking the dynamics of great power action and its impact on particular geographical regions, moving beyond the political-historical approach and adopting new methodologies. The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of thought-provoking trends and tendencies in modern historiography that may open up new possibilities for a more complex understanding and reinterpretation of the relationship between Russia and the Balkans. Therefore, the paper is not always analytical, but rather reflective, and seeks to provide a basis and stimulus for formulating new research questions.

*Keywords: Russian Empire, influence, Balkan Peninsula, 19<sup>th</sup> century, new trends, methodology and historiography*

Katalin Schrek – PhD, Senior Lecturer, Institute of History, Department of World History, University of Debrecen. E-mail: schrek.katalin@arts.unideb.hu ORCID: 0000-0002-8601-6382

---

1 Citation: KATALIN SCHREK, „The Balkans as a Sphere of Russia's Imperial Power – Thoughts on New Perspectives and Approaches in Modern Historical Research”, *RussianStudiesHu* 7, no. 2 (2025): 73–88. DOI: 10.38210/RUSTUDH.2025.7.14

In the historiographical literature the Balkans are commonly presented as a geopolitical region bordered and ruled by empires.<sup>2</sup> This geographically and politically determined and to some extent constrained situation has fundamentally marked the direction of the region's development over the centuries. Undoubtedly, the Balkan peninsula was strongly influenced by the so-called "imperial space" in its immediate proximity, including the Ottoman Empire, as well as Austria-Hungary and the Russian Empire; it was also influenced by states which had no direct connection to the peninsula but which nevertheless impacted Balkan relations at various points (Great Britain, France, Italy, the German Empire). This vulnerability of the South-eastern European region and the dynamics of changing circumstances set it apart from other European (geo)political regions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – just as they still do today.

In this paper, I would like to explore how the Balkans as a geopolitical space appear in modern historiography in the context of Russia. What did the Balkans as a geopolitical region mean for the Russian Empire? And what are the modern historiographical tendencies that can provide a completely novel approach to understanding the relationship between Russia and the Balkans? In the meantime, however, the study will also reflect on the simultaneous presence and behaviour of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the Balkans, since a closer look at the Balkan policies of Austria-Hungary and the Russian Empire will reveal an overlapping and multi-layered cause-and-effect system, the components of which, in my opinion, cannot be separated. These interconnections have certainly been analysed in many different ways in modern historiography. However, in order to understand the correlations in their true depth, we need to understand the new perspectives and challenges emerging from the research on the regional powers in Southeastern Europe.<sup>3</sup>

---

2 The present study is a result of the project STARTING 150326 „*Geopolitical Tendencies and Balkan Strategy of the Austro-Hungarian Empire: Individual Sources and Foreign Policy Actors (1878–1918)*”. Project no. 150326 has been implemented with the support provided by the Ministry of Culture and Innovation of Hungary from the National Research, Development and Innovation Fund, financed under the STARTING\_24 funding scheme.

3 An interesting approach is offered by a collection of studies entitled *Empires and Peninsulas*, which largely examines how the surrounding powers influenced the region of South-eastern Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. PLAMEN MITEV, IVAN PARVEV, MARIA BARAMOVA, VANIA RACHEVA (eds.), *Empires and Peninsulas: Southeastern Europe between Karlowitz and the Peace of Adrianople, 1699–1829* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2010).

In recent decades, state-of-the-art trends have appeared in historiography, whose main task is to confront and eliminate the attitudes associated with diplomatic historiography in the traditional sense. These trends seek to establish a professional discourse on the multi-ethnic empires and their impact on specific regions. The starting point was the so-called 'imperial turn.' After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the study of the Russian Empire and its various interpretations gained momentum.<sup>4</sup> One of the groundbreaking currents of this trend is the 'New Imperial History,' which at several points raises new questions about how empires really work, attempting to reframe the traditional perception of great powers as multinational and expansive states. The Austro-Hungarian Empire has normally become the focus of research as a major factor in Central and Southeastern Europe, while most attention has been given to the Russian Empire as an entity with influence on Eastern and Southeastern Europe. Typically, what has been predominantly addressed are the problems that led to the collapse of these empires, that is, the narrative of failed or disintegrating empires (as in the case of the Ottoman Empire).<sup>5</sup> With regard to the Russian Empire, there has also been an emphasis on understanding reforms and their delay, through interpretations of the process of catching up with or separating from Europe, as well as examinations of features specific to the development of the Russian state.<sup>6</sup>

The New Imperial History approach differs in that, on the one hand, it studies the structural and operational features of the given state formations in a different way (by involving new sources, by exploring the significant actors, processes and mechanisms of influence that exceed the traditional, official/institutional framework). On the other hand, it emphasises the formal and informal ways in which the empires established relations with other peoples, going beyond the boundaries of political and diplomat-

---

4 This process of changing narratives and approaches is described in several studies. See: MARINA MOGILNER, "Post-Soviet Historiography in Search of a New Paradigm for the History of Empire and Nationalism," *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest* 45, no. 2 (2014): 25–67; MICHAEL DAVID-FOX, PETER HOLQUIST, ALEXANDER R. MARTIN, "The Imperial Turn," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 7, no. 4 (2006): 705–712. <https://doi.org/10.1353/kri.2006.0049>; ANTOINETTE BURTON (eds.), *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and through the Nation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003). <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822384397>

5 For example: MICHAEL A. REYNOLDS, *Shattering Empires: The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires 1908–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

6 ALEXEI MILLER, "The Value and the Limits of a Comparative Approach to the History of Contiguous Empires and European Periphery", in KIMITAKA MATSUZATO (ed.), *Imperiology: From Empirical Knowledge to Discussing the Russian Empire* (Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, 2007): 19–20.

ic history and focusing on alternative ways of gaining cultural and economic influence. The New Imperial History is also closely linked to studies on colonialism. This perspective, which emerged from the 1990s onwards, initially focused on Western-style empires – Britain and France – and created a new narrative, mainly by exploring processes of the colonial past that were previously less well known, or by studying the colonial mentality and identity. Later, the scope of research broadened to include states that had not previously been presented within the branch of New Imperial History which had primarily focused on colonial empires in the traditional sense of the term. At this point, it is important to note that I do not wish to go into detail about the historiographical debate on the conceptual determination of the aforementioned notion, a subject that has given rise to many conflicting positions. However, we should refer to it, since an important contribution of the New Imperial History is the suggestion that the term “colonial empire” can be applied to both the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Russia, not necessarily as states dominating overseas territories, but as multi-ethnic states bearing the marks of colonial behaviour and mentality in neighbouring continental areas.<sup>7</sup>

Whether we accept this approach or not, the study of the imperial actions and attitudes of Austria-Hungary and Russia in certain priority areas has become an important part of the field of the New Imperial History.<sup>8</sup> And the intersection of the two is clearly the Balkan Peninsula. This brings

---

7 The possible interpretations of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy's colonial past are explored in works by Walter Sauer, Simon Loidl, Krisztián Csaplár-Degovics, Evelyn Kolm and André Gringrich and so on, while a similar analysis of the Russian Empire has not yet been carried out. Among the few examples are the following works: WILLARD SUNDERLAND, *Taming the Wild Field: Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); ALEXANDER ETKIND, *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience* (New York: Polity, 2011); MICHAEL KHODARKOVSKY, “A Colonial Empire without Colonies: Russia's State Colonialism in Comparative Perspective”, *Comparativ: Zeitschrift für Globalgeschichte und Vergleichende Gesellschaftsforschung* 30, no. 3–4 (2020): 285–299. But it is important to highlight that the term “colonisation” has a multifaceted meaning in Russian history as it primarily covers population movements that can be interpreted in parallel with the expansion of Russia, as Vasilii Osipovich Kliuchevskii had already pointed out. ANDREW MYCOCK, MARINA LOSKOUTOVA, “Nation, State and Empire: The Historiography of ‘High Imperialism’ in the British and Russian Empires”, in *Nationalizing the Past: Historians as Nation Builders in Modern Europe*, ed. STEFAN BERGER, CHRIS LORENZ (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 240. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230292505\\_12](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230292505_12)

8 In the case of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the priority areas overlap with the region under study, the Balkan Peninsula. In the case of Russia, however, it is worth making a distinction, as it is a large empire with a multifocal geopolitical orientation due to its involvement in the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Central Asian and Far Eastern regions.

us to a more nuanced perception of the traditional view of the Balkan region as the “buffer zone of empires,” which will reveal hitherto unknown aspects of Russian, and simultaneously, Austro-Hungarian relations in the Balkans. Informal interactions, the interconnections between private and formal spheres, cultural links, the lobbying activities of economic actors – all these represent areas through which we can capture the imperial attitudes affecting the Balkans. The existence of these coherences was pointed out by Krisztián Csaplár-Degovics in his monograph published in 2022 through examples of cultural transfer, information acquisition and at the same time informal knowledge acquisition.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, the New Imperial History proves to be a good starting point for redefining the relationship between Russia and the Balkans. And the need for a new approach to the historical study of empires is not only a general demand, but also clearly evident among historians of Russian history. There have been a number of unanswered questions about the Russian Empire (and the Soviet Union), for which traditional means and methods of analysis were insufficient. Historians committed to rethinking the study of the Russian empire have played a decisive role in highlighting the so-called “uncharted territories,” providing overviews and discussion papers on the tasks faced by modern historiography.<sup>10</sup> The need for a new perspective on the study of continental empires has been expressed by Aleksei Miller in several of his publications.<sup>11</sup> In his opinion, it is necessary to move away from the view of “traditional empires” in the case of the Habsburg Empire, the Russian Empire and the Ottoman Empire,<sup>12</sup> while comparative analysis (previously very popular) of these eastern and southeastern European empires should also leave the old, traditional aspects behind. New methodological attempts have appeared which mainly focus on responses to modernity, mechanisms for conflict management, and patterns of governance

9 CSAPLÁR-DEGOVICS KRISZTIÁN, “Nekünk nincsenek gyarmataink és hódítási szándákaink”: Magyar részvétel a Monarchia gyarmatosítási törekéseiiben a Balkánon (1867–1914) (Budapest: BTK Történettudományi Intézet, 2022).

10 ILYA GERASIMOV, SERGEY GLEBOV, ALEXANDER KAPLUNOVSKI, MARINA MOGILNER, ALEXANDER SEMYONOV, “In Search of a New Imperial History”, *Ab Imperio*, no. 1 (2005): 33–56. <https://doi.org/10.1353/imp.2005.0007>; as well as the authors featured in the following: KIMITAKA MATSUZATO (ed.), *Imperiology: From Empirical Knowledge to Discussing the Russian Empire* (Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, 2007).

11 ALEXEI MILLER, “Between Local and Inter-Imperial: Russian Imperial History in Search of Scope and Paradigm,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 5, no. 1 (2004): 1–26, esp. 8–18.; ALEKSEI MILLER, “The Value and the Limits of a Comparative Approach”, 19–32.

12 MILLER, “The Value and the Limits of a Comparative Approach”, 20.

of the state and the diverse multinational populations within it, as well as the techniques used to exercise power.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to its thematic diversity, certain aspects of the New Imperial History can, because they involve the study of interactions with other nations, be associated with questions of international relations, foreign policy and geopolitics, as well as the understanding of inherent processes, internal structures and ethno-cultural phenomena.<sup>14</sup> It is precisely at this point that Russia's interconnection and regional influence with its neighbours and even with more distant regions can be grasped. As Krisztián Csaplár-Degovics puts it: "Political and cultural interpretations are excellent to explore when the subject of investigation is the various forms of imperial expansion. Those with an imperial perspective have a presupposed idea of the geographical areas that constitute the sphere of interest of the empire, beyond its territorial extent."<sup>15</sup> The key word in this context is therefore the imperial *sphere of interest*, and related to this, it is worth addressing and discussing another concept, that of "informal imperialism." One fundamental question is whether the Balkan Peninsula can be considered as an area where the nature and scope of the expansion of influence can be equated with the phenomenon of informal imperialism.<sup>16</sup> For while

---

13 Similarly to Alexei Miller, Jun Akiba, who reflects on the preliminaries to a comparative analysis of the Russian Empire and the Ottoman Empire, has highlighted new perspectives on imperial analysis in his paper: JUN AKIBA, "Preliminaries to a Comparative History of the Russian and Ottoman Empires: Perspectives from Ottoman Studies", in *Imperiology: From Empirical Knowledge to Discussing the Russian Empire*, ed. KIMITAKA MATSUZATO, (Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, 2007): 33–47. Furthermore, the following works refer (among others things) to social-cultural aspects: VAL KIVELSON, RONALD GRIGOR SUNY, *Russia's Empires* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).; ROBERT P. GERACI, *Window on the East: National and Imperial Identities in Late Tsarist Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).; JANE BURBANK, MARK VON HAGEN, ANATOLYI REMNEV (eds.), *Russian Empire: Space, People, Power, 1700-1930* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

14 GERASIMOV, GLEBOV, KAPLUNOVSKI, MOGILNER, SEMYONOV, "In Search of a New Imperial History", 49–50. While the essay's reflections in this regard are primarily presented in relation to a criticism of the national narrative, they can also refer to the manifestation of an imperial attitude towards other nations.

15 CSAPLÁR-DEGOVICS, "Nekünk nincsenek gyarmataink és hódítási szándákaink", 29.

16 The term has both old and new meanings. In this case, we are referring to the new type of approach, whereby not only colonial territories can be informal spheres of influence, but also those with some form of sovereignty. See: WOLFGANG J. MOMMSEN, *Theories of Imperialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 89–90.; Trotha's definition of the term: "Informal imperialism" is understood as a form of control of foreign policy and economy of a polity which does not affect the formal political autonomy of the political order. (...) The imperial goal is economic control and penetration of the region, the opening of its market for foreign investments and products of the imperial power, unhindered

the conditions associated with the concept (such as economic privileges, concessions, and other advantageous international treaties) are fundamentally specific to the region, the local conditions do not fully cover all the characteristics of an informal empire. This is to be compared with the presence of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in Southeastern Europe. Can the Russian Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Empire function as informal empires in the Balkan region, how responsive are the two sides to each other and to what extent can we perceive their interaction in shaping their policies on the Balkans?<sup>17</sup>

This question would be valid in general terms, but in terms of economic and political advocacy it is most intensely focused on the period after 1878, the period of actual competition, when the Balkan space – due to the active involvement Austria-Hungary in the peninsula – was, for Russia, significantly transformed. There had been previous attempts to counter-balance the influence of the St. Petersburg government in the Balkans. One of these was the economic and diplomatic presence of Great Britain (for instance in Serbia, the Danubian Principalities, Greece and Constantinople). But this was no longer just the ambition of a distant Western European great power seeking a regional balance of power, but rather a political action of a regional great power, Austria-Hungary, immediately neighbouring the Balkans. Due to its geographical proximity, and after the loss of power in Central Europe in 1866, the Monarchy sought to compensate these losses in Southeastern Europe.<sup>18</sup> Its economic orientation and its moves towards the Balkan national states and the Ottoman Empire manifested in a new form of market acquisition and involvement in infrastructure development, in support for trans-Balkan railway projects. Of the major rail routes envis-

---

or privileged trade (...). Techniques for maintaining this informal imperialism are diplomatic pressure, military threats and occasional military interventions (...)." TRUTZ VON TROTHA, "Colonialism" in *A Companion to Nineteenth-Century Europe 1789-1914*, ed. STEFAN BERGER (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 435. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470996263.ch32>

17 Ivan Parvev has also written about informal power in the case of Bulgaria. See: IVAN PARVEV, "Russland und die Orientalische Frage, 1688-1878", *Bulgarian Historical Review* 48, no. 3-4 (2020): 18-19. He also describes the development of informal empires and economic-political dependency, but Parvev projects this back to earlier historical periods, not specifically to the period of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Russia's active involvement in the Eastern Question after 1878. PARVEV 2003, 27.

18 DEMETER GÁBOR, "Geopolitical Aspects of Alliance Politics in the Balkans 1878-1913", in *Diplomatic Struggle for Supremacy over the Balkan Peninsula, 1878-1914: Collected Studies*, ed. DEMETER GÁBOR (Sofia: Publications of the Bulgarian-Hungarian History Commission, 2017). 39-65.

aged for the Balkan Peninsula, the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy advocated two major alternatives. One was the Belgrade–Niš–Sofia–Adrianople–Constantinople route, which the government of Vienna prioritised, the other was the Belgrade–Niš–Skopje–Thessaloniki route. In parallel, the Russian Empire also tried to keep up with/compete with this process through the exercise of “soft power,” e.g., through formal and informal lobbying for the construction of the Lower Danube railway line.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, the design and construction of the Balkan routes is a typical sub-area through which the actor-centred methodological approach of the New Imperial History and the theory of informal influence can be applied.<sup>20</sup>

On a theoretical level, *Imperial Co-operation and Transfer, 1870-1930 – Empires and Encounters*, (edited by Volker Barth and Roland Cvetkovski and published in 2015) also established a new perspective. Breaking with the practice of adopting and maintaining the pattern of great power rivalry, it presented the international aspirations of leading European and non-European states from a hitherto entirely marginalised perspective, through the practice of global interpretation and analytical approaches. The behaviour of the great powers is not (or not entirely) determined by conflicts and rivalries along the vectors of their own interests, but rather by multilateral cooperation and interactions that take the form of conflicting attitudes around specific issues. Therefore, investigations must also address the areas which, in addition to competition, have led to cooperation between the great powers.<sup>21</sup> This reverse approach can also bring new results in the research of Balkan history, as we have seen in examples of similar interaction during the regional confrontation between Austria-Hungary and the Russian Empire (for example, the St. Petersburg Agreement of 1897 and the cooperation of 1903 and 1908). Furthermore, at certain times, Austro-Hungarian–Russian conflicts of interest also inspired cooperation

---

19 CHARLES JELAVICH, *Tsarist Russia and Balkan Nationalism: Russian Influence in the Internal Affairs of Bulgaria and Serbia, 1879-1886* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1958). 69–70.

20 At this point, two other trends should also be addressed: the New Diplomatic History (NDH) and Entangled History. Both have complex methodologies that have been integrated into British, American and Western European historiography, as well as Central European historiography, and which allow for an in-depth analysis of the observed historical processes by studying the cultural context, the social-historical aspect and the functioning of state and non-state actors.

21 VOLKER BARTH, ROLAND CVETKOVSKI, “Methodological Approaches”, in *Imperial Co-operation and Transfer, 1870-1930: Empires and Encounters*, ed. VOLKER BARTH, ROLAND CVETKOVSKI (London: Bloomsbury Academic, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015). 3.

between the great powers, such as the Monarchy's cooperation with Great Britain or the German Empire.

This renewed approach is also reflected in the use of terms such as "inter-imperial co-operations" and "contact zones". With regard to the term "contact zone," this conceptual formulation is more capable of covering overlapping areas, which are mostly inseparable from each other, areas where the partnership/collaboration based on shared interests is really tangible. All the more so, since contact zones do not necessarily cover geographic or geopolitical regions, but are associated with economic/political/cultural sectors etc. extending across them. In addition, imperial power and influence is not uniform across territories, for example in some Balkan states. For this reason, the interests of more than one state are often represented in the same place at the same time (see, for example, Serbia and Bulgaria in relation to Russia).<sup>22</sup> In this respect, we can refer back to the aforementioned trends, since the phenomenon of the informal empire combined with the New Imperial History approaches can pave the way for the study of the operation of inter-imperial encounters as a cross-state political, economic and cultural practice.<sup>23</sup> Cross-empire actors, such as international corporations were involved in the development of infrastructure<sup>24</sup>; there were also so-called "epistemic communities," which played a key role in international relations, having members with recognised expertise in a particular field who could use their knowledge to lobby their governments and make demands on certain issues.<sup>25</sup> They are thus able to influence certain processes and have an impact on the way the state deals with situations and the extent to which it builds up influence in a given area. In short, they shape the imperial attitude.

From the perspective of research on the Russian Empire, a regional approach, specifying the nature and territorial scope of the exertion of influence by great powers, can also be of key importance. From the historiographical point of view, there are different interpretations of this attitude with respect to Russia. The application of a regional approach in studies of the history of the Russian Empire has different characteristics, depending

22 BARTH, CVETKOVSKI, "Methodological Approaches", 15.

23 BARTH, CVETKOVSKI, "Methodological Approaches" 6.

24 BARTH, CVETKOVSKI, "Methodological Approaches" 6.

25 BARTH, CVETKOVSKI, "Methodological Approaches" 6.; ANNE L. CLUNAN, "Epistemic communities", in *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/epistemic-community> (Accessed 26 October 2024).; PETER M. HAAS, "Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination", *International Organization* 46, no. 1 (1992): 1–35. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300001442>

on the focus of the research.<sup>26</sup> The concepts of “region” and “regional approach” imply one thing when the aim is to study the internal structure of a particular state, its peoples and its traditional historical regions, as has been reflected by many excellent works of historians; the concepts suggest an entirely different thing, however, when the investigation goes beyond the limits of a state (or even an empire). In the first case, the issue of nationality will be at the forefront of attention, and even if regional research beyond the borders is addressed, it will mostly be built around this topic as well. Thus, an important element of the regional perspective, as Aleksei Miller points out, is on the one hand that in this interpretation it is not possible to ignore the national perspective, and on the other hand that “(...) the dense, multilayered interaction over nationality issues between neighboring continental empires was qualitatively different from the geopolitical competition between empires that were not contiguous with their rivals.”<sup>27</sup> Basically, regional studies are still at the stage of analysing internal processes and do not reflect geopolitical studies in the contemporary sense. Another kind of regional approach is when we look globally at the role of the state in the international arena, considering its active political-economic-cultural presence in remote areas far beyond its borders. The local conditions and potentials of a region strongly determine, and sometimes even clearly shape the relationship of a given great power with the states of the region and the extent of its involvement and/or intervention in local processes. Unfortunately, very little attention is currently being paid to this kind of research, although there is a great need for complex studies on the Balkans.

Another theoretical-methodological approach is analysis from a geopolitical point of view, for which we have had numerous examples in recent decades. Among the pioneers of the historically focused geopolitical approach we can mention Dominik Lieven, Alfred J. Rieber, John P. LeDonne or Ivan Parvev.<sup>28</sup> However, Parvev’s work studies Russia’s geopolitical per-

---

26 A detailed analysis of this problem is provided in a study by A. I. Miller and Gust Olson. See: ALEXEI MILLER, GUST OLSON, “Between Local and Inter-Imperial: Russian Imperial History in Search of Scope and Paradigm”, *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 5, no. 1 (2004): 7–26. <https://doi.org/10.1353/kri.2004.0016>. For a modern example for this approach: DARIUS STALIŪNAS, YOKO AOSHIMA, *The Tsar, the Empire, and the Nation: Dilemmas of Nationalization in Russia’s Western Borderlands, 1905–1915* (Budapest–New York: CEU Press, 2021). <https://doi.org/10.1515/9789633863640>

27 ALEXEI MILLER, “Between Local and Inter-Imperial”, 18.

28 DOMINIC LIEVEN, *Empire: The Russian Empire and its Rivals* (London: Murray, 2000).; DOMINIC LIEVEN, “Empire on Europe’s Periphery: Russian and Western Comparisons,” in *Imperial Rule*, ed. ALEXEI MILLER, ALFRED J. RIEBER (Budapest–New York: CEU Press, 2004), 133–150.

spective entirely in the context of the Balkans, and not as a peripheral part of the great European and Asian expansionist trends. In Parvev's conception, the Balkans have been defined by four political vectors over the centuries. Each of these vectors has a different significance in different eras.<sup>29</sup> From our point of view, however, the most important vectors to point out are the third and the fourth factors affecting the geopolitical perspectives of Central Europe, namely that shaped by the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the geopolitical perspectives of Eurasia as represented by Russia. Moving away from Parvev's concept, we will discuss these two alternatives in more detail below. First, we will focus on the Eurasian geopolitical space. This geographical entity of particular importance for the Russian Empire essentially incorporates three major regions: the Balkans, the Black Sea and the Caucasus (together with some Central Asian territories).

The traditional historical literature examines Russia's relations with these areas separately (be it from a diplomatic, political or economic point of view), and typically not in their context. In contrast, the view has increasingly been adopted that the Balkan Peninsula, the Black Sea region and the Caucasus (together with parts of Central Asia) constitute the so-called Eurasian frontier, and that as such, for Russia, it has existed as a single geopolitical space throughout different historical periods. It is important to emphasise that each of these areas was in itself an active part of Russian foreign policy in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, each of these areas was treated according to an individually customized methodology of Russia's foreign policy, and yet they are unique in the sense that they nonetheless formed a kind of unity. And the Russian Empire, which maintained particularly close political and economic ties with the Balkan Peninsula,

---

<https://doi.org/10.1515/9786155211140-008>; Rieber, "The Comparative Ecology of Complex Frontiers," in *Imperial Rule*, ed. MILLER AND RIEBER, 179–210.; JOHN P. LEDONNE, *The Russian Empire and the World, 1700–1917: The Geopolitics of Expansion and Containment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); JOHN P. LEDONNE, *The Grand Strategy of the Russian Empire 1650–1831* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195161007.001.0001>

29 The Southeastern (or Anatolian), the Southwestern (or Aegean-Adrian), the Northwestern (or Central European, where the Habsburg Empire/and then the Austro-Hungarian Empire were the dominant factors), the Northeastern (or Central Eurasian, where the dominant power was the Russian Empire). The third and fourth vectors were important because they mostly affected the Balkan Peninsula by pushing the Ottoman Empire out of the Balkans and the Black Sea. IVAN PARVEV, "Geopolitics of the Eastern Question (1688–1918)", in *Re-imagining the Balkans: How to Think and Teach a Region. Festschrift in Honor of Maria N. Todorova*, ed. AUGUSTA DIMOU, THEODORA DRAGOSTINOVA, VENETA IVANOVA (Oldenbourg: De Gruyter, 2023), 30.

perceived the Balkans not simply as part of the Ottoman Empire's European territories, but as a western sphere of influence in the Eurasian geopolitical space. This has been reflected by academics such as Michael Khodarkovsky, Andreas Kapeller and Nancy Shields Kollmann.<sup>30</sup> So, in my opinion, one of the main characteristics of the Russian approach is that it never looks at its own relations with European states, which in this case includes the Balkan states, from a purely European perspective, but instead applies a much broader cross-continental perspective. In this context, the Balkan Peninsula is interpreted as a geopolitically significant frontier region, which is particularly true for the Eastern Balkans.

Nevertheless, Parvev believes that there is still a need for basic gap-filling studies that, for instance, could define the "scope of geopolitical realias" in close connection with geopolitical analysis by defining the role of the region as a buffer zone and by influencing the regional interventions of the surrounding powers.<sup>31</sup> Parvev bases his analysis on what he considers to be a general assumption that the Balkan Peninsula is part of the Mediterranean space, a larger geopolitical region where empires have typically been born in different historical periods. Parvev also raises another interesting aspect worthy of further investigation, which may be of interest in the future study of the ways in which the surrounding empires influenced the Balkans. Namely, he points out that the Balkan region has never developed an independent, complex state or empire based on the resources of the region. It has instead functioned more as a region affected and wedged between empires, and in this sense it can be seen as a geo-strategically limited territory or one with limited possibilities.<sup>32</sup> I believe that it is only a matter of historical perspective, and even a reflection of the difference in perception between the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Russia, whether the Balkan Peninsula is considered to be the eastern part of the Mediterranean region or the western part of the Eurasian region, and that it should be examined accordingly. Perhaps both approaches would yield their own results.

And last but not least, we should mention a trend in historiography which, though based on the aforementioned foreign policy/geopolitical/

---

30 MICHAEL KHODARKOVSKY, *Russia's Steppe Frontier: The Making of a Colonial Empire, 1500-1800* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); NANCY SHIELDS KOLLMANN, *The Russian Empire, 1450-1801* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199280513.001.0001>; ANDREAS KAPPELLER, *The Russian Empire: A Multiethnic History* (Harlow: Longman, 2001).

31 PARVEV, "Geopolitics of the Eastern Question (1688-1918)", 26.

32 PARVEV, "Geopolitics of the Eastern Question (1688-1918)", 26.

diplomatic analyses, takes a completely different route. This trend attempts to make sense of Russia's building of influence in Southeastern Europe (and, to some extent, in Anatolia) by means of supporting cultural and religious communities, reviving old-new ideologies, but in a completely different way, be they pan-Slavism or neo-Byzantine ideas.<sup>33</sup> Taking this further, it is worth exploring a new trend that has emerged in recent years characterised by the work of Laura Gerd and Denis Vovchenko in particular. In her work on the religio-cultural background of Russia's orientation in the Balkans, Laura Gerd has studied neo-Byzantine ideology as a defining aspect of the Russian Empire's geopolitical thinking. The measures taken by the Russian Empire in the period after 1856 were, however, different from those in the preceding period, which was characterised by the protectorate policy employed after the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca. Neo-Byzantine theorists in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century claimed that Russia was the only great power with an Orthodox monarch, and that, therefore, it should rule over the whole Orthodox world, including Eastern Europe, the Balkans and the Middle East. This notion was often coupled with the aforementioned imperial (and even colonial) ambitions. The historiography of the Balkan question so far tends to ignore this religious perspective, which is why Laura Gerd's book on the relationship between foreign policy and religious means and the intertwining of the two<sup>34</sup> is an important contribution to the development of neo-Byzantine ideology in the Russian political consciousness after 1878 and its impact on Russian policy in the Balkans. Denis Vovchenko's book, which focuses on the Bulgarian national movement in the context of Ottoman modernisation (Tanzimat) and European imperialism, is an equally groundbreaking work. It also reflects on the context of the establishment of the Bulgarian Exarchate and the aspirations of the Russian diplomacy in this direction.<sup>35</sup>

In my opinion, study of the relationship between Russia and the Balkan region – regardless of the seemingly trivial nature of the topic – still has a lot of new research potential, for which the historical perspectives mentioned above will provide an excellent basis. Horizons can be further

---

33 MILLER, "The Value and the Limits of a Comparative Approach", 26–27.

34 Its manifestations can primarily be observed in the cultural and religious spheres, such as the continuous efforts of Russian institutions like the Russian monasteries on Mount Athos and elsewhere, and the functioning of the Russian Archaeological Institute based in Constantinople. LORA GERD, *Russian Policy in the Orthodox East: The Patriarchate of Constantinople (1878–1914)* (Warsaw-Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014). <https://doi.org/10.2478/9788376560328>

35 DENIS VOVCHENKO, *Containing Balkan Nationalism: Imperial Russia and Ottoman Christians, 1856–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190276676.001.0001>

broadened by the fact that similar research in the case of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy has been carried out in greater depth. This can serve as a reference point for future analyses and also provide an opportunity for a modern comparative study of the presence and sphere of influence of the two states in the Balkans, based on new findings. Such analyses will also contribute to understanding of the significance of the Balkans for the two empires and how the different – but in many ways intersecting – perception of the Balkans has shaped the two states' relations, experience and stereotypes of each other.

## References

- JUN AKIBA, "Preliminaries to a Comparative History of the Russian and Ottoman Empires: Perspectives from Ottoman Studies", in *Imperiology: From Empirical Knowledge to Discussing the Russian Empire*, ed. KIMITAKA MATSUZATO (Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, 2007), 33–47.
- VOLKER BARTH, ROLAND CVETKOVSKI, "Methodological Approaches", in *Imperial Co-operation and Transfer, 1870–1930: Encounters of Empires*, ed. VOLKER BARTH, ROLAND CVETKOVSKI (London: Bloomsbury Academic, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 3–34.
- JANE BURBANK, MARK VON HAGEN, ANATOLYI REMNEV (eds.), *Russian Empire: Space, People, Power, 1700–1930* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).
- ANTOINETTE BURTON (ed.), *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and through the Nation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003). <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822384397>
- ANNE L. CLUNAN, "Epistemic Communities", in *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/epistemic-community>
- MICHAEL DAVID-FOX, PETER HOLQUIST, ALEXANDER R. MARTIN, "The Imperial Turn", *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 7, no. 4 (2006): 705–712. <https://doi.org/10.1353/kri.2006.0049>
- CSAPLÁR-DEGOVICS KRISZTIÁN, "Nekünk nincsenek gyarmataink és hódítási szándékaink": Magyar részvétel a Monarchia gyarmatosítási törekéseiében a Balkánon (1867–1914) ["We have no Colonies and no Intentions of Conquest": Hungarian Participation in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy's Colonial Efforts in the Balkans (1867–1914)] (Budapest: BTK Történettudományi Intézet, 2022).
- DEMETER GÁBOR, "Geopolitical Aspects of Alliance Politics in the Balkans 1878–1913", in *Diplomatic Struggle for Supremacy over the Balkan Peninsula, 1878–1914: Collected Studies*, ed. DEMETER GÁBOR (Sofia: Publications of the Bulgarian–Hungarian History Commission, 2017). 39–65.
- ALEXANDER ETKIND, *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience* (New York: Polity, 2011).
- ROBERT P. GERACI, *Window on the East: National and Imperial Identities in Late Tsarist Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001)
- ILYA V. GERASIMOV, SERGEY GLEBOV, ALEXANDER KAPLUNOVSKI, MARINA B. MOGILNER, ALEXANDER SEMYONOV, "In Search of a New Imperial History", *Ab Imperio*, no. 1 (2005): 33–56. <https://doi.org/10.1353/imp.2005.0007>
- LORA GERD, *Russian Policy in the Orthodox East: The Patriarchate of Constantinople (1878–1914)* (Warsaw–Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014). <https://doi.org/10.2478/9788376560328>

- PETER M. HAAS, "Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination", *International Organization* 46, no. 1 (1992): 1–35. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300001442>
- CHARLES JELAVICH, *Tsarist Russia and Balkan Nationalism: Russian Influence in the Internal Affairs of Bulgaria and Serbia, 1879–1886* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1958).
- ANDREAS KAPPELER, *The Russian Empire: A Multiethnic History* (Harlow: Longman, 2001).
- VAL KIVELSON, RONALD GRIGOR SUNY, *Russia's Empires* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
- MICHAEL KHODARKOVSKY, "A Colonial Empire without Colonies: Russia's State Colonialism in Comparative Perspective", *Comparativ. Zeitschrift für Globalgeschichte und Vergleichende Gesellschaftsforschung* 30, no. 3–4 (2020): 285–299.
- MICHAEL KHODARKOVSKY, *Russia's Steppe Frontier: The Making of a Colonial Empire, 1500–1800* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).
- NANCY SHIELDS KOLLMANN, *The Russian Empire, 1450–1801* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199280513.001.0001>
- JOHN P. LEDONNE, *The Grand Strategy of the Russian Empire 1650–1831* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195161007.001.0001>
- JOHN LEDONNE, *The Russian Empire and the World, 1700–1917: The Geopolitics of Expansion and Containment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- DOMINIC LIEVEN, *Empire: The Russian Empire and its Rivals* (London: Murray, 2000).
- DOMINIC LIEVEN, "Empire on Europe's Periphery: Russian and Western Comparisons," in *Imperial Rule*, ed. ALEXEI MILLER, ALFRED J. RIEBER (Budapest–New York: CEU Press, 2004), 133–150. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9786155211140-008>
- ANDREW MYCOCK, MARINA LOSKOUTOVA, "Nation, State and Empire: The Historiography of 'High Imperialism' in the British and Russian Empires", in *Nationalizing the Past: Historians as Nation Builders in Modern Europe*, ed. STEFAN BERGER, CHRIS LORENZ (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010). [https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230292505\\_12](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230292505_12)
- ALEXEI MILLER, "The Value and the Limits of a Comparative Approach to the History of Contiguous Empires and European Periphery", in *Imperiology: From Empirical Knowledge to Discussing the Russian Empire* ed. KIMITAKA MATSUZATO (Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, 2007): 19–32.
- ALEXEI MILLER, GUST OLSON, "Between Local and Inter-Imperial: Russian Imperial History in Search of Scope and Paradigm", *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 5, no. 1 (2004): 7–26. <https://doi.org/10.1353/kri.2004.0016>
- PLAMEN MITEV, IVAN PARVEV, MARIA BARAMOVA, VANIA RACHEVA (eds.), *Empires and Peninsulas: Southeastern Europe between Karlowitz and the Peace of Adrianople, 1699–1829* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2010).
- MARINA MOGILNER, "Post-Soviet Historiography in Search of a New Paradigm for the History of Empire and Nationalism", *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest* 45, no. 2 (2014): 25–67.
- WOLFGANG J. MOMMSEN, *Theories of Imperialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).
- IVAN PARVEV, "Geopolitics of the Eastern Question (1688–1918)", in *Re-imagining the Balkan: How to Think and Teach a Region. Festschrift in Honor of Maria N. Todorova*, ed. AUGUSTA DIMOU, THEODORA DRAGOSTINOVA, VENETA IVANOVA (Oldenbourg: De Gruyter, 2023), 25–33.
- IVAN PARVEV, "Russland und die Orientalische Frage, 1688–1878", *Bulgarian Historical Review* 48, no. 3–4 (2020): 3–21.
- MICHAEL A. REYNOLDS, *Shattering Empires: The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires 1908–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
- ALFRED J. RIEBER, "The Comparative Ecology of Complex Frontiers," in *Imperial Rule*, ed. ALEXEI MILLER, ALFRED J. RIEBER (Budapest–New York: CEU Press, 2004), 179–210.

DARIUS STALIŪNAS, YOKO AOSHIMA, *The Tsar, the Empire, and the Nation: Dilemmas of Nationalization In Russia's Western Borderlands, 1905–1915* (Budapest–New York: CEU Press, 2021) <https://doi.org/10.1515/9789633863640>

WILLARD SUNDERLAND, *Taming the Wild Field: Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

TRUTZ VON TROTHA, "Colonialism," in *A Companion to Nineteenth-Century Europe 1789–1914*, ed. STEFAN BERGER (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 432–447. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470996263.ch32>

DENIS VOVCENKO, *Containing Balkan Nationalism: Imperial Russia and Ottoman Christians, 1856–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190276676.001.0001>