

Russian Federalism and the Rehabilitation of the Empire

Alexei I. Miller

Alexei I. Miller, PhD in History

European University at St. Petersburg, Russia

Department of History

Professor;

Center for the Study of Cultural Memory and Symbolic Politics Director;

Institute of Scientific Information for Social Sciences of the Russian Academy of Sciences

Leading Research Fellow

ORCID: 0000-0001-8139-0976

ResearcherID: Z-1451-2019

Scopus AuthorID: 56321369000

E-mail: amiller@eu.spb.ru

Tel.: +7 (812) 386-7634

Address: 6/1A Gagarinskaya Str., St. Petersburg 191187, Russia

The article is part of the research project “Values of Sovereignty, Great Power, and Empire as Components of Russian Identity and as a Resource for Socio-Political Development,” implemented at the Institute of Scientific Information for Social Sciences of the Russian Academy of Sciences with support from the Russian Ministry of Science and Higher Education and from the Expert Institute of Social Research.

DOI: 10.31278/1810-6374-2025-23-1-31-42

Abstract

The model of state-nation, proposed by Alfred Stepan and Juan Linz, has expanded conceptions of the modern state’s possible forms beyond the nation-state alone. Yet Stepan has also argued that the nation-state and state-nation models are both unsuitable for Russia, while a democratic federation is almost impossible due to a lack of democracy. This article rejects attempts to describe Russia within the framework of a democracy deficit, instead considering the practices of regulating ethnic, cultural, and

confessional diversity by which Russia ensures its resilience to consistent external and internal threats to stability. To understand Russian practices, the author proposes rehabilitating the concept of empire as an analytical category void of negative or positive connotations.

Keywords: Russia, federalism, state-nation, nation-state, empire, ethnic diversity.

In 2011, Alfred Stepan and Juan Linz, in the book *Crafting State-Nations: India and Other Multinational Democracies*, introduced the notion of ‘state-nation’ as compared to ‘nation-state,’ which was then (and still is) considered by many the only possible form of a modern democratic state (Stepan et al., 2011).¹ The authors principally argued that the range of possible models of democratic polity is broader and more complex than is generally believed. The book was a logical continuation of their long-term comparative study of federalism, which also includes Stepan’s (2000) article on Russian federalism, of especial significance here.

Stepan et al.’s nation-state vs. state-nation dichotomy became popular among Russian political analysts quite a while ago, partially because of my critique of Stepan’s study of state-building in Ukraine (Miller, 2008). Indeed, the dichotomy proved quite useful for overcoming the futile or outright harmful attempts of various Russian intellectual circles to find a path to the coveted norm of ethnic or civic Russian nation-state.

As defined in the dichotomy, the nation-state model is feasible when only a single community in a given territory is mobilized through a territorially-rooted national identity, and any others agree to consider themselves minorities within this state. But if multiple groups in a state are thus mobilized, attempts to implement the nation-state model will be fraught with major and likely violent conflict. In the Russian Federation, with its more than 20 autonomous ethno-territorial entities

¹ Yogendra Yadav, an Indian sociologist, helped Linz and Stepan in their study of the Indian case that is central to the book.

(republics and *okrugs*) based on decades of Soviet practice, the nation-state model is unrealizable.

In such situations, Stepan and Linz suggest the state-nation as a possible solution. It attracts loyalty not through establishing a single cultural norm and identity, as in a nation-state, but through recognizing and institutionally patronizing the plurality of national identities, including through the establishment of multiple official languages and the admission of autonomist parties into central and regional governments through asymmetric federations and consociational democracy (see Lijphart, 2002; 2004). The purpose is to foster institutional and political loyalty to the state among its different nations, despite the *polis*'s non-correspondence with the various cultural *demoi*.

The state-nation might be considered an alternative option, but that does not make it the only possible one or guarantee its success in Russia. Stepan and Linz do not consider Russia to be a state-nation and thus mention it only once *en passant*. Therefore, it is worth considering more thoroughly Stepan's article, specifically addressing Russian federalism.

BUILDING FEDERALISM

Stepan begins with the claim that Russia is not strictly a federal system. He refers to Robert Dahl's definition of federation as a system in which certain issues are constitutionally assigned exclusively to the sub-federal entities, and others to the federal government. According to Dahl's definition, only a democracy can be a federation (see Dahl, 1986; Stepan, 2000). The nation-state and state-nation models interest their authors mainly as models that create conditions for democracy. In 2000, Stepan assessed that Russia met democratic criteria only partly at best.

When comparing Russia with established democratic federations, Stepan noted a number of features that make federalism in Russia more difficult than anywhere else (Ibid, p. 136). Spain, India, and Belgium were unitary states before they became democratic federations, but Russia is heavily burdened by the Soviet legacy of undemocratic ethno-

territorial federalism (that was ensured by highly centralized party control), which complicates the creation of either a nation-state or a democratic federation (Ibid, p. 137). Moreover, at the end, the USSR was the only two-tier federation in the world (Yugoslavia had ceased to be one after Kosovo's change of status).

Of all democratic federations, only Germany has experienced a period of totalitarianism, albeit much shorter than that in the USSR. However, Germany had no period of state collapse, as Russia did in the 1990s, and the German totalitarian regime was replaced by foreign occupation, which redrew federal borders, erasing Prussia completely. In addition, postwar Germany had relatively recent experience of representative institutions, elections, and the rule of law, while Russian democratic tradition is either invented (the Novgorod *veche*) or significantly removed both temporally and institutionally (Russia's current State Duma has little in common with that of 1906-1917, and its municipal self-government today looks even less democratic than it was 25 years ago, when Stepan wrote his article, and is a far cry from the traditions of municipal government in pre-revolutionary Russia).

Following William Riker, Stepan describes three scenarios for a federation's formation: 'coming together,' 'holding together,' and 'gathering.' In the first, previously independent polities voluntarily unite; in the second, an internally-troubled polity transforms into a federation, like Spain after Franco. The third scenario is exemplified by the Bolsheviks' formation of the USSR. This was largely forcible, which, intertwined with the memory of the imperial conquest of Kazan or the Caucasus (Ibid, p. 139), additionally complicated the construction of a federation.²

Analyzing the Russian federal institutions in 2000, Stepan demonstrated that the dysfunction and imitative nature of Soviet federal institutions were aggravated by the struggle between the central government and the RSFSR during *perestroika*, by the USSR's collapse, and in the 1990s by central government weakness and the "parade of sovereignties" in the autonomous republics.

² Stepan describes this as unique, but actually the unifications of Germany and Italy also fit the 'gathering' model.

Multinational federative systems are usually built in such a way that minorities on the national scale are majorities on the regional one. This, of course, immediately raises the question of protecting the rights of those residents who do not belong to the regional majority. In Russia, the issue of civil equality is complicated by the fact that the system of “violence mixed with autonomy,” inherited from the Soviet period, was further encumbered by the 1993 Constitution and the unconstitutional agreements that Boris Yeltsin signed with some constituent republics. According to Stepan, the 1990s saw the signature of 46 such unconstitutional agreements, which were not endorsed or even debated by the Russian parliament.

Stepan notes (*Ibid.*, p. 150) that asymmetric federations based on the ethno-territorial principle usually generate great internal tension. This tension is exacerbated by the fact that titular nations are minorities in most of Russia’s ethno-territorial autonomies. In the December 1993 referendum, the people of nine national autonomies voted against the Russian Constitution, and turnout was below 50 percent in another six. Since many federal subjects adopted their own constitutions, often at odds with the federal one, Russia’s legal space in the 1990s was fragmented. The substantial unification of the legal space in the 21st century has been enabled by the central authorities’ pressure (to the extent that they could afford it at any given place and time).

Stepan pays special attention to the institutions created in post-Soviet Russia, particularly the Federation Council. He notes the extremely uneven representation (comparable only to the situation in the U.S.), in which regions with hundreds of thousands of residents have just as many senators in the Federation Council as regions with several million people. Most of these sparsely populated regions are ethno-territorial autonomies. Stepan insists that a genuine federation would require a different constitution that would significantly reduce the nominal prerogatives of ethno-territorial autonomies. This was very difficult to do democratically, since the 1993 Constitution required such changes to be approved by three-quarters of the Federation Council members. Since then, the Council’s formal powers have remained the same, but the process of its formation has changed dramatically, with members

nominated by the President and the heads of regions. Thus, quasi-federative institutions are often not “dormant” hotbeds of democracy, but obstacles to the development of democratic institutions and practices.

Noting that democratic federations are more *path-dependent* than unitary states, Stepan again asserts that a democratic federation would be more difficult to achieve in Russia than in any place where one already exists. Cautiously remarking on possible scenarios for Russia, Stepan deploys the term ‘federacy’ to mean “a unitary state that incorporates one or more self-governing autonomous areas. It is distinguished from a federation in that the constitutional structure of the state is still unitary but incorporates federalist principles” (Stepan, 1999; Elazar, 1991).

This argument has significant merit in its recognition that Russia’s historical development makes the unitary state the model most suitable for it. But this argument also has its weaknesses. *Firstly*, all of Stepan’s examples of federacy feature just a few exceptions to a general unitary principle, bearing little overall resemblance to a system of real ethno-territorial autonomies. *Secondly*, Stepan does not clearly describe how exactly Russia could have become a unitary state with elements of federalism (if one can describe ‘federacy’ thusly) during the last years of Boris Yeltsin’s rule.

Over time, it has become clear that the concept of federacy as a third model has not won over researchers and would clearly be difficult to implement in Russia. We must agree with Stepan’s conclusion that neither nation-state nor state-nation can be realized in Russia in the foreseeable future. Over the quarter-century since Stepan’s article, we have not come any closer to either model. Stepan is right that, before World War I, Russia lagged behind neighboring empires—Germany and Austria-Hungary—in rule of law and representative institutions. He is also right that Soviet federative institutions were imitative and dysfunctional, and that the constitutional decisions taken during the state’s weakness in the 1990s exacerbated quasi-federative institutions’ dysfunction, complicating any transition to genuine democratic federalism.

However, if we limit ourselves to Stepan’s conception of the past, we will be unable to find within Russia’s history any useful tradition

of managing ethnic diversity. I propose using the approach taken by Stepan and Linz themselves when they decided on the nation-state model's inadequacy for describing their subject of study. In other words, we need an additional model (or models) to describe state-building in diverse societies.

RETURN TO EMPIRE?

By the 2020s, it has become obsolete to measure state structures by the extent to which they contribute to liberal democracy. Stepan and Linz might have considered things through the prism of Francis Fukuyama's end of history when the 'transition' (a concept from the 1990s) seemed to have no alternative. But now, liberal democracy itself is in serious crisis, and the 'unipolar moment' is decidedly over. This does not mean that the pursuit of a democratic system is illegitimate. But assessing political processes solely through the lens of evolution towards democracy (especially liberal democracy), as the only possible path of development, amounts to sacrificing objective analysis for the sake of ideological tenets (Tilly, 2007).³

Indeed, over the past quarter-century, the Russian system of interethnic relations has demonstrated surprising resilience in the face of state weakness, strong centrifugal tendencies, deep crises (primarily in the North Caucasus), and unprecedented external pressure. So how can Russia's experience of managing ethnic diversity be described, other than listing things that Russia lacks?

The concept of civilization-state, which has recently become so popular, will not help here, as it actually describes how a country perceives the liberal version of globalization. The concept of authoritarianism (with epithets like "electoral" and so on) reflects some aspects of the Russian political structure but does not explain how exactly ethnic diversity is managed. And here I move on to the main point—the need to rehabilitate the concept of *empire*, which can serve as an analytical tool for modern political science to study governance and state-building in diverse societies.

³ Possible illiberal forms and principles of democracy deserve a separate discussion. I will only note here that Charles Tilly's (2007) book would be a good starting point for it.

This category is often used to describe current international relations—mostly referring to the U.S., either in the spirit of Niall Ferguson’s “optimistic imperialism,” or with an emphasis on U.S. imperial decline (Go, 2011). This concept is also useful for examining Russia’s foreign policy in terms of horizons (but not borders) (Münkler, 2005), spheres of influence, and force-projection. Russia has already seen the concept of empire used in sociology and political science to analyze current issues (see Filippov, 1992; 1993; 1995; 1999).

But there are significantly fewer works that analyze the internal politics of empires when they had to (and still have to) deal with nationalism. Those that do are mainly the works of historians (Lieven, 2002; 2016; Berger and Miller, 2015; Kumar, 2017; Antoshin, 2024). Standing out among them is Chapter 8 of Jürgen Osterhammel’s monumental work, which demonstrates that the long 19th century was a time of empires and nationalism, but not of nation-states (Osterhammel, 2015).

Modern Russian discourses either ignore the concept of empire with embarrassment, or aggressively delegitimize it. The Russian opposition in exile, including those claiming to be academic, view the continuing empire as the cause of all of Russia’s most difficult problems, explaining the behavior that they condemn through the legacy of the imperial myth. As a panacea, they propose decolonization in all respects—from rewriting history and other ways of scrubbing out the imperial mentality, to actually splitting up the country. In short, everything imperial in practice or consciousness must be identified and eradicated as a source of evil.

But the concept of empire, without aggressively negative or nostalgically positive emotional connotations, can be useful for analyzing Russia’s national and regional policies in the 21st century. During the initial stages of the Russian Empire’s democratization in the early 20th century, ethnicity was not institutionally formalized, there was only a limited mobilization of nationalism both in the center and at the periphery, and many politically-organized elites on the fringes of the empire deliberately rejected nationalist separatism (see Miller, 2010; 2019; Cusco, 2019; Brüggemann and Wezel, 2019). The Great War,

and ensuing crises of revolution and civil war, transformed the system into what Terry Martin described as an “affirmative action empire.” It pursued indigenization (*korenizatsiya*), the institutional and territorial consolidation of ethnicity, and ethno-territorial pseudo-federalism (see Martin, 2001; 2002; Kaiser, 1994; Hirsch, 2005). In Russia during *perestroika* and in the 1990s, this institutional Soviet heritage was joined by central government weakness and the “parade of sovereignties.”

In the 21st century, the management of ethnic and confessional diversity has sought to strengthen the central authorities’ power in a unitary system. The powers of the regions were slashed as part of the alignment of regional with federal law. The center took control over the appointment and funding of senior regional officials, and strengthened its economic and budgetary mechanisms of influence over them. Relations between the center and ethnic autonomies are very diverse, less due to official decisions, and more due to elites’ bargaining and agreements, an informal system of patron-client relations that is typical of empires, and the mobility of elites between regions and the center.

All these processes are accompanied by pressure of varying intensity from the central government. The problems of the Federation Council’s representativeness and broad prerogatives were solved not by changing seats’ allocation to regions or by reducing the Council’s powers, but by making Senators appointed rather than elected. In other words, the flawed design of a representative institution was neutralized by undemocratic means.

The authorities saw (and to some extent still see) Russian nationalism not only as a source of support, but also as a potential challenge and a serious threat. This was typical, in the era of nationalism, of all empires, which sought an elusive balance between reliance on the nationalism of the imperial nation (the ‘state-forming people’) and the restriction of it to avoid pushing peripheral nationalisms towards separatism.

In Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s 1990 *Rebuilding Russia*, declared rejection of the Soviet empire turns out to be an appeal to a (seemingly vanished) imperial heritage. “We don’t have the strength for the peripheries, either economically or morally. We don’t have the strength

for sustaining an empire—and it is just as well. Let this burden fall from our shoulders: it is crushing us, draining us, and hastening our demise.” And “after subtracting these twelve [republics], there will remain nothing but what might be called *Rus* as it was known in olden times (for centuries, *Russian* embraced Little Russians, Great Russians, and Belorussians), or *Russia* (used since the eighteenth century), or the *Russian Union*, now in the proper sense.”

This essentially meant a return to the project (adjusted per the experience of the 20th century) of building an *imperial* or *greater Russian nation* in the approximate core of a multi-ethnic and poly-confessional empire. As soon became clear, the USSR’s dissolution did not mean the rejection of imperial elements such as indivisible sovereignty, great-power status, and a “zone of privileged interests and influence.” The dissolution was seen by part of the elite, and the majority of the people, as a search for a new form of imperial existence, less burdensome and more adapted to modern conditions (Miller, 2024).

Solzhenitsyn accurately saw this trend in 1990. By the beginning of the 2000s, faced with the impossibility (or extreme difficulty) of building a nation-state or state-nation, the authorities turned to imperial methods of managing diverse societies. They are effective, partly due to acceptance by broad sections of society and an enduring cultural tradition.

Today, there is no ready-made imperial model for managing ethnic and confessional diversity in a territorially large country with imperial traditions. Such a policy might even be considered unsuccessful, as it does not support democracy or the rule of law. However, amid the ruins of various undemocratic systems that weakened the state’s capacity and spurred ethnonationalism, the imperial policy has revived state power and enhanced the system’s resilience. Its objective assessment is extremely difficult today because of the issue’s almost hysterical ideologization. The verdict of history will depend on how the country develops in the coming decades. At present, the holistic and systematic description of current practices is more important than their evaluation. Such description demands the rehabilitation of the concept of *empire* as a tool of political-science analysis.

References

- Antoshin, A., 2024. Empires and Ethnic Communities in Russian History. *Quaestio Rossica*, 12(1), pp. 7-16.
- Berger, S. and Miller, A. (eds.), 2015. *Nationalizing Empires*. Budapest: CEU Press.
- Brüggemann, K. and Wezel, K., 2019. Nationally Indifferent or Ardent Nationalists? On the Options for Being German in Russia's Baltic Provinces, 1905–17. *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History. Forum: "National Indifference" in the Russian Empire*, 20(1), pp. 39-62.
- Cusco, A., 2019. Russians, Romanians, or Neither? Mobilization of Ethnicity and "National Indifference" in Early 20th-Century Bessarabia. *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History. Forum: "National Indifference" in the Russian Empire*, 20(1), pp. 7-38.
- Dahl, R.A., 1986. Federalism and the Democratic Process. In: *Democracy, Liberty and Equality*. Oslo: Norwegian University Press.
- Elazar, D.J., 1991. *Federal Systems of the World: A Handbook of Federal, Confederal and Autonomy Arrangements*. London: Longman.
- Filippov, A.F., 1992. Наблюдатель империи (империя как социологическая категория и социальная проблема) [Empire Observer (Empire as a Sociological Concept and a Social Problem)]. *Voprosy sotsiologii*, 1, pp. 89-120.
- Filippov, A.F., 1993. A Final Look Back at Soviet Sociology. *International Sociology*, 8(3), pp. 355-373.
- Filippov, A.F., 1995. Смысл империи: к социологии политического пространства [The Meaning of Empire: Towards the Sociology of Political Space]. In: S.B. Chernyshev (ed.) *Иное. Хрестоматия нового российского самосознания*. Т. 3 [Different. A Textbook of the New Russian Identity. Vol. 3]. Moscow: Argus, pp. 421-476.
- Filippov, A.F., 1999. Der Raum der Systeme und die großen Reiche. Über die Vieldeutigkeit des Raumes in der Soziologie [The Space of Systems and the Great Empires. About the Ambiguity of Space in Sociology]. In: S. Hradil and F. Traxler (eds.) *Grenzenlose Gesellschaft [A Boundless Society]*. Opladen: Leske und Budrich, pp. 344-358.
- Go, J., 2011. *Patterns of Empire: The British and American Empires, 1688 to the Present*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hirsch, F., 2005. *Empire of Nations. Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Kaiser, R., 1994. *The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kumar, K., 2017. *Visions of Empire: How Five Imperial Regimes Shaped the World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Lieven, D., 2002. *Empire: The Russian Empire and Its Rivals*. Yale University Press.

Lieven, D., 2016. *Towards the Flame. Empire, War and the End of Tsarist Russia*. London: Penguin.

Lijphart, A., 2002. The Wave of Power-Sharing Democracy. In: A. Reynolds (ed.) *The Architecture of Democracy: Constitutional Design, Conflict Management, and Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 40-47.

Lijphart, A., 2004. Constitutional Design for Divided Societies. *Journal of Democracy*, 15(2), pp. 96-109.

Martin, T., 2001. *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Martin, T., 2002. The Soviet Union as Empire: Salvaging a Dubious Analytical Category. *Ab Imperio*, 2, pp. 91-105.

Miller, A.I., 2008. Государство и нация в Украине после 2004 г.: анализ и попытка прогноза [State and Nation in Ukraine after 2004: Analysis and Attempt to Predict]. *Politicheskaya nauka*, 4, pp. 109-124.

Miller, A.I., 2010. *Империя Романовых и национализм. Эссе по методологии исторического исследования* [Romanov Empire and Nationalism: Essays in the Methodology of Historical Research]. Moscow: NLO.

Miller, A.I., 2019. “National Indifference” as a Political Strategy? *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History. Forum: “National Indifference” in the Russian Empire*, 20(1), pp. 63-72.

Miller, A.I., 2024. Российская империя и Советский Союз – диалектика разрыва и преемственности [The Russian Empire and the Soviet Union: The Dialectics of Rupture and Continuity]. *Quaestio Rossica*, 12(1), pp. 339-352.

Münkler, H., 2005. *Imperien. Die Logik der Weltherrschaft. Vom Älten Rom bis zu den Vereinigten Staaten* [Empires. The Logic of World Domination. From Ancient Rome to the United States]. Berlin: Verlag GmbH.

Osterhammel, J., 2015. *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century*. Translated from German by P. Camiller. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Stepan, A., 1999. Federalism and Democracy: Beyond the U.S. Model. *Journal of Democracy*, 10(4), pp. 19-34.

Stepan, A., 2000. Russian Federalism in Comparative Perspective. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 16(2), pp. 133-176.

Stepan, A., Linz, J.J., and Yadav, Y., 2011. *Crafting State-Nations. India and Other Multinational Democracies*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Tilly, Ch., 2007. *Democracy*. New York: Columbia University Press.