

The Virtualization of the Sociocultural Frontier “Tertius Romae.” Translation from Russian¹

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Abstract

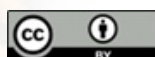
The article addresses the need to clarify the semantic core of the sociocultural frontier *Tertius Romae*. The theoretical construct of *Tertius Romae*, originating in the writings of Marcus Tullius Cicero, has undergone significant semantic transformations throughout history. It has acquired diverse meanings—from politico-geographic ambitions, such as the ideologies of “Moscow as the Third Rome” and the “Third Reich,” to connotations of Christian sacred-eschatological expectations, and further, to the ideological core of national sovereignty, world dominance, global economics, and, ultimately, the virtual global order.

The aim of this study is to identify the historical stages in the evolution of the sociocultural frontier *Tertius Romae*. In addition to the period of its initial appearance in Cicero’s legacy, we distinguish three global stages of its evolution: the sacred stage (5th–16th centuries), the secular stage (16th–20th centuries), and the virtual stage (from the 21st century onward).

While during the prolonged sacred phase, the semantic core of *Tertius Romae* was shaped by the centers of political and religious power, in later stages it was increasingly appropriated and instrumentalized by the same centers. In the new digital reality, the notion of the sociocultural frontier takes on the meaning of a shifting boundary between a technologically dependent periphery and a more advanced metropole that provides connectivity, regulates informational content, and ensures cybersecurity. What was once tied to territory and a specific form of governance has now come to signify virtual power, and sociocultural frontiers are increasingly determined by bandwidth and device capacity.

Keywords

Frontier; History of Ideas; Evolution of Ideas; Tertius Romae; Periodization; Digitalization; Virtualization; Sociocultural Frontier; Political Frontier; Virtual Frontier



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Виртуализация социокультурного фронта “Tertius Romae”. Перевод с русского языка¹

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Аннотация

Проблема состоит в необходимости уточнения семантического ядра социокультурного фронта “Tertius Romae”. Теоретический конструкт “Tertius Romae” Марка Цицерона на протяжении истории переживает смысловые трансформации. Он приобретает различные значения политико-географических амбиций, включая идеи «Москва – третий Рим» и «Третий Рейх», коннотации христианских сакрально-эсхатологических ожиданий, форму ядра идеи национального суверенитета, мирового господства, глобальной экономики и, наконец, глобального виртуального мира.

Цель исследования – определение исторических этапов эволюции социокультурного фронта “Tertius Romae”.

Мы выделяем, помимо времени появления конструкта “Tertius Romae” в наследии Цицерона, три глобальных этапа его эволюции: сакральный (V–XVI вв.), секулярный (XVI–XX вв.) и виртуальный (начиная с XXI в.).

Если на протяжении длительного сакрального этапа управляющие центры формируют семантическое ядро фронта “Tertius Romae”, то на последующих этапах активно его эксплуатируют. Понятие социокультурного фронта в новой цифровой реальности обретает значение подвижных границ технологически отсталой периферии, зависимой от более развитой метрополии, оказывающей услуги связи, регламентирующей информационный контент и обеспечивающей информационную безопасность. Некогда привязанный к территории и определенной форме правления, теоретический конструкт обретает сегодня значение виртуального могущества, а социокультурная фронтальность обусловлена качеством связи и мощностью конечного оборудования.

Ключевые слова

фронт; история идей; эволюция идей; *Tertius Romae*; периодизация; цифровизация; виртуализация; социокультурный фронт; политический фронт; виртуальный фронт



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About the subject of research

It's the retinue that makes the king

The Ciceronian construct “*Tertius Romae*”, applied to describe the *principate*—the third stage in the evolution of Roman statehood after monarchy and republic (Cicero, 1994, pp. 40–45)—has become entrenched in public discourse as a widely used metaphor for a center of power asserting, or capable of asserting, exceptional (imperial) geopolitical ambitions. It is important to underscore the origin of the metaphor, which serves as a characterization of the center: it emerges from the periphery, from the frontier zone that defines the center in a particular way. The widespread use of the metaphor today is related, on the one hand, to the diversity of theoretical approaches to understanding imperialism, and on the other, to the multiple cultural-historical meanings attached to *Tertius Romae*.

It is evident that each historical era interprets this construct in its own way. Therefore, it is of interest to identify its principal connotations in order to establish a common semantic core and to determine the cultural-historical factors behind its semantic variety. “The king is made by his court”—this aphorism, equally rooted in Confucian political thought that shaped the Qin Empire (since the 2nd century BCE) and in Machiavellian reflections at the height of the Holy Roman Empire—aptly captures the relation between *Tertius Romae* (as metropole) and its sociocultural frontier. The center cannot be conceived without its correlate: the provinces, the periphery, the boundaries or liminalities. What we encounter here is a political frontier of *Tertius Romae*, formed not between warring coalitions or ideological programs, but in the practice of governing peripheral zones from the center. This angle allows us to observe what characteristics a ruling center must possess for *Tertius Romae* to emerge as a sociocultural frontier that reflects the province’s aspiration toward the center.

“Virtualization”—a term borrowed from engineering vocabulary—broadly refers to the transfer of a process into an autonomous digital environment (a virtual reality) for automated execution without human intervention (Khrapov, 2020; Lee et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2016). The related concept of *augmented reality*, often used synonymously, involves human participation in simulated environments and processes (Denisov, 2019; Khabibullina, 2019; Hermida & Casas-Mas, 2020). In the latter case, virtual processes enhance reality to overcome spatial or temporal limitations. The integration of augmented reality technologies into social practices also represents a form of the virtualization of social life, in the sense of extending the technological influence over society.

In recent years, Russian scholars have increasingly employed the metaphor of the frontier to describe sociocultural phenomena conditioned by the digitalization of society: “network frontier” (Zayakina, 2017a; 2017b; Plotichkina & Dovbysh, 2017;

Sinelnikova, 2020; Fedorchenko, 2017; Chirun & Bobrova, 2018), more rarely “electronic frontier” (Dovbysh, 2016; Plotichkina, 2018), and even less frequently “virtual frontier” (Plotichkina, 2018; Smirnov & Yablokova, 2019).

In international literature, the concept of the “electronic frontier” became established at the turn of the 21st century in reference to the expanding and shifting boundary of digital ICTs shaping social space (Adams, 1997; Bowman, 1998; Ludlow, 1996; Postigo, 2008; Takacs & Freiden, 1998; Thomas, 1998). The term “virtual frontier” is also common, denoting a set of new phenomena and related problems emerging at the intersection of social and augmented virtual realities (Edwards, 1999; Li & Cui, 2017; Rheingold, 2000; Yang, Fang & Xue, 2021). The term “network frontier” is less frequent but it still appears in the studies of social networks as a marker of the shifting boundaries of networked communities (Alwin, Felmlee & Kreager, 2018; Brass & Borgatti, 2019), and also as a technical term in network analysis or interdisciplinary research, indicating threshold values or structural limits (Csermely, 2021; Kolaczyk, 2017; Vitevitc, 2019; D'Agostino & Scala, 2014).

Though not claiming to provide an exhaustive review of literature, it should be noted that the issue of supplementing social reality with virtual dimensions is only beginning to enter the Russian frontier discourse, whereas in international scholarship—despite legitimate resistance from certain theorists (Miller, 1995)—there has been a cumulative development not only of the terminological apparatus, but also of the understanding of a complex range of problems associated with the expanding influence of digital information and communication technologies.

Emphasizing the specifics of frontier discourse which lies, on the one hand, in scholars' attempts to use the metaphor to describe new or insufficiently explored phenomena, and on the other hand, in its projective capacity to generate new meanings within interdisciplinary contact zones, L. N. Sinelnikova notes that “diffusivity, openness, and permeability are properties of frontier discourse, against which the unsanctioned use of linguistic resources, violations of genre and stylistic norms under conditions of unstable meanings and values become manifest” (Sinelnikova, 2020, p. 471). She therefore argues for “a conceptual orientation toward the frontier in describing new communicative environments and the genre-stylistic transformations that arise amid the ‘frontier drift’ of digital activity” (p. 485).

In this context, the virtualization of the sociocultural frontier *Tertius Romae* is understood as the transfer of meanings historically embedded in public and political discourse—and constitutive of the ideologeme's semantic core—into an autonomous digital environment, enabling the automation of social governance processes without direct human participation.

The object of analysis is thus the public-political discourse as a component of broader socio-historical discourse that both extends and reinterprets the semantic construct of *Tertius Romae*. The semantic core of this historically dynamic concept—as a sociocultural frontier—becomes the subject of inquiry, allowing to trace the evolution of its functions in the interactions between the governing center and its peripheries.

Methodological Considerations

The methodological toolkit employed in this study is subordinated to the principles of typology and periodization—well-established methods in the field of intellectual history—which enable the synthesis and focalization of historical data around a conceptual object within the framework of the history of ideas. In our case, this object is the semantic construct *Tertius Romae* (“Third Rome”), which has undergone multiple semantic transformations in historical retrospect. These include various forms of geopolitical ambition such as the notions of “Moscow as the Third Rome” and the “Third Reich,” connotations of Christian sacred-eschatological expectation, the ideational core of national sovereignty and global dominance, the logic of the world economy, and, ultimately, the imaginary of a global virtual order.

Simultaneously, and in memory of our late colleague Oleg Vyacheslavovich Ustrizhitsky—PhD in Pedagogics and Associate Professor at the Department of Broadcasting of the Krasnodar State Institute of Culture, who passed away because of COVID-related complications—we underscore the significance of his pedagogically grounded idea: that the post-nonclassical paradigm of knowledge production makes it possible to overcome the static definition of dynamic phenomena by introducing the notion of *frontierness*—that is, the epistemic mobility of conceptual boundaries, rooted in the very dynamism of the phenomena themselves.

“In the context of the paradigmatic shift in pedagogy from subject-object to subject-subject relations between teacher and student, it has become both unprofessional and intellectually limiting to offer a single definitive explanation of any complex phenomenon. To elucidate the essence of an object today, one must provide multiple definitions, including those that are mutually contradictory. It is precisely between these static definitions that a theoretical understanding of the socio-cultural frontier of the phenomenon or object under discussion emerges. Even the natural sciences are increasingly forced to appeal to the historical-cultural dimensions of scientific worldviews. In humanities, the indication of *frontierness* (as boundary instability and perspectival dependency) has become virtually indispensable to the conceptualization of any object” (Bakumenko, Ustrizhitsky & Gritskevich, 2020, p. 129).

This position leads to two key implications for our research.

First, the idea (and *Tertius Romae* is indeed such an idea—an ideal construct) can appear static only in the written form. In social reality, it remains a dynamic phenomenon—what Ustrizhitsky conceptualized as a socio-cultural frontier.

Secondly, such dynamism can be traced through the juxtaposition of divergent positions. In this regard, one may invoke Robert Craig’s (1999) dialogical model for establishing a common field of communication theories. While Hegelian dialectical synthesis remains a possible route, it is by no means necessary. From a neoclassical standpoint, such a paradox might be viewed as a breach of analytical rigour, leading to eclecticism. Yet, within the post-nonclassical paradigm, it signals a productive expansion of the foundational category—towards *frontierness* as an epistemological condition. In pedagogical practice, the frontier method of

presenting knowledge through opposing interpretations of a single object has already become a recognized element of the problem-based approach. In theoretical contexts, however, debates regarding the legitimacy of such frontier-based definitions of historical reality are still forthcoming.

The outcome of describing reality through the lens of the epistemological frontier, as in pedagogical practice, is not a unified and monolithic model of reality, but rather a condition of choice, deconstruction, and the actualization of alternative contexts. Accordingly, the objective of analysis is not to produce a definitive forecast, an evaluation, or a singular interpretation of reality, but to determine limit-values, to provoke ambiguous assessments of the multiplicity of what is happening and what has already happened. In this mode, the object of study appears as a constellation of cultural constructs of reality, allowing the historical process to be read as a cultural text (Gorlova, Bakumenko, & Kovalenko, 2017). Following V. I. Shakhovskiy, the boundary between social and virtual reality can be defined by the principle possibility of communicative ascent—from personal autocommunication to interpersonal communication and ultimately to social autocommunication (i.e., the interaction between center and periphery)—achieved through the emotivity of text (Luginina, 2020). Beyond this communicative trajectory there lies the cybernetic monologue of virtual reality.

Let us now consider the virtualization of the sociocultural frontier through the lens of O. V. Ustrizhitsky's approach.

Drawing on his perspective, which has been associated since 2016 with the *Journal of Frontier Studies*, the body of relevant scholarship may be divided into two broad clusters. The first group concentrates on the historical portraits of province as a sociocultural frontier (Aliev, 2016b; Kryukov, 2019; Kudryashova, 2016; Kulakov, 2016; Skiba, 2016); the second is concerned with the reflexive fluidity of contemporary sociocultural frontiers (Aliev, 2016a; Dovbysh, 2016; Khlyshcheva, 2018; Heim, 2021; Jänchen, 2021; Šilhavá, 2021). Between these poles there lies a conceptual domain in which the very category of the frontier emerges as a mobile object of theoretical reflection—an epistemological frontier. From a neoclassical perspective, such mobility may be interpreted as a sign of terminological vagueness incompatible with the classical category. From a post-nonclassical standpoint, however, this fluidity is understood as the approximation of theory to the dynamism of lived reality via the internal mobility of the concept itself.

This leads us to ask: perhaps the very specificity of the foundational notion in frontier studies resides precisely in its mobility—in its continuous search for emergent configurations of reality among fixed limit-values, and in the possibility of systemic generalisations at a new post-nonclassical, post-structuralist, or post-postmodernist level?

The research programme is thus structured as a movement from the identification of stable connotations of the semantic construct *Tertius Romae* (“the Third Rome”) toward a reconstruction of its functional evolution in the historical interaction between governing centers and peripheral domains.

Sacralisation and Secularisation of *Tertius Romae*

Cicero employs *Tertius Romae* as part of a formal typology. His theoretical construct refers to the liminal condition of Roman statehood—namely, the transitional phase from republic to empire, commonly known as the Principate. In this respect, Cicero's *Tertius Romae* functions as a sociocultural frontier of political transformation in the development of ancient Roman governance. However, the New Rome (the *tertium status*, to which both Cicero and Emperor Augustus belonged) could not generate a new political system under conditions of dominant and sacralized kinship structures that defined the political stability of the ancient world. It lacked the capacity for mediating between tradition and innovation (Akhiezer, 1997, 1998). Only under Tiberius did such a synthesis begin to materialise. Accordingly, the socio-historical phenomenon of the Roman *tertium status* remains a sociocultural frontier—an interstitial zone of political elites within Roman society.

The emergence of Christianity and Islam in the peripheral zones of the civilizational oecumene is, as Akhiezer (1997, 1998) argues, rooted in the civilizational center's inability to produce unifying values for the conglomerate of conquered peoples. The dominance of extractive value practices in imperial governance (Mazzucato, 2020), as demonstrated by Roman history, leads to a cybernetic dead-end, where mass consumerism becomes a symptom of the center's inability to transmit value, signaling the devaluation of cultural production in favour of consumption.

J. Colomer (2007) highlights the significance of security for the periphery as a condition for its loyalty to the governing metropolis. When the center ensures the safety and continuity of political, economic, and cultural life in peripheral regions, these regions are disincentivised from seeking change. Conversely, when such conditions collapse, the center is redefined as a threat, prompting the periphery to seek new forms of allegiance and security. These dynamics give rise to the delegitimation of central authority, accompanied by separatist tendencies and the emergence of alternative centers of governance, which may come into conflict both with one another and with the former metropolis.

According to Stephen Friesen, in the *Book of Revelation*, John the Divine employs eschatological imagery to link the imperial figures of the *Book of Daniel* with Judaic mythology, thereby equating the pinnacle of worldly progress with the grandeur of Rome (Friesen, 2004, p. 308). Rome thus becomes the basis for a mystical and theological reinterpretation of political reality within Christianity. A crucial testimony to this Christianisation of classical symbolism is found in the writings of Eusebius of Caesarea (Vashcheva, 2018; Kurdibailo, 2020; Corke-Webster, 2019). As noted by I. Yu. Vashcheva (2018), this 'recoding' of classical categories by early Christianity extended to the frontier figure of the 'New Rome' (*tertium status*): genealogical election was reinterpreted as supra-ethnic cultural belonging—initially located on the periphery of ancient norms, but gradually rising

to dominance. Eschatology thus becomes codified as a historiosophical framework for interpreting political processes.

Creationists will undoubtedly raise counterarguments, which is why the following thesis should perhaps be phrased as a question: to what extent did the cult of the “king of kings”—the imperial title associated with *Pax Augusta* and *Pax Romana*—contribute to the popularization of monotheism?

It is worth noting that the pagan traditions of Eastern civilizations (India, China) gave rise to stable world religions by defining the center and essence of the cosmos as located in the transcendent realm—beyond the material world—such as *prajñā* or *dao*. These traditions depersonalized transcendence, assigning it a substantial ontological status: power is not concentrated in a personal deity, but in impersonal cosmic law, adherence to which brings enlightenment. In contrast, the Abrahamic religions personify transcendental power in the figure of a Creator (the “King of Kings”) who establishes laws. This personalization of divine authority can be traced back to the theological tradition of Ancient Egypt, while the Indian and Chinese civilisations—likely due to geographic isolation—produced distinct religious worldviews.

The ideologeme *Tertius Romae* is a product of political discourse rooted in the Abrahamic tradition, wherein specific geographic sites are sacralized as capitals of the world—or the “Heavenly City.” Jerusalem, the Vatican, and Mecca thus acquire sacred status within their respective value systems. Among older precedents for such a “heavenly city on earth,” only the Old Testament Babylon competes for similar status. The idea of Babylon as the locus of imperial greatness—despite the Old Testament’s ethical condemnation of hubristic exaltation—nonetheless persists in the sacred geography of the Abrahamic traditions, framing the search for a terrestrial capital of divine authority.

Though Eusebius of Caesarea does not explicitly employ the term *Tertius Romae*, he develops a triadic logic in which Constantine’s Christian Empire is exalted above the earlier empires of pagan Rome and Alexander the Great. Eusebius’ trinitarian schema is open to critique on typological grounds, but its significance lies in initiating a Renaissance-era vision of the New Rome’s greatness. This idea was subsequently institutionalized in the pentarchy of the Universal Church, centered in the city of Saint Peter, and later in the political ideal of the Holy Roman Empire under the Carolingians (9th–10th centuries). However, internal tensions between the Constantinopolitan Patriarchate and the Roman Papacy eventually undermined the status of the Eternal City as the uncontested center. On one hand, the Bulgarian and Serbian kingdoms exemplify the principle of achieving national sovereignty through the nationalization of autocephaly. On the other hand, the fragmentation of ecclesiastical unity intensified the geopolitical ambitions of the Islamic world.

The emergence of new identity is a central theme in the Qur’ān (Fischbach, 2017; Reda, 2010). In its own ideological framework—Rome I as ancient, Rome II as Christian, Rome III as Islamic—the closest historical embodiment of *Tertius*

Romae is Sultan Mehmed II, who proclaimed himself Basileus of the Greeks and Romans after conquering Constantinople in 1453. The idea of the Caliphate was infused with the notion of restoring Roman greatness. No significant military or economic impediments prevented the Ottomans from advancing toward the city of Saint Peter; only internal political strife following Mehmed II's death halted the expansion of the Ottoman Empire. The strengthening of the Islamic world in the fifteenth century contributed to the formation of two competing emotional connotations associated with *Tertius Romae*: the Renaissance-style vision of imperial restoration (*translatio imperii*), akin to Eusebius' triadic New Rome centered in Saint Peter's city, and the Christian eschatological expectation of the Antichrist's worldly reign. In both cases, *Tertius Romae* is posited as a potential new center of power. This potentiality produces two antithetical affective inflections of the same ideologeme: one affirmative and restorative, the other negative and apocalyptic.

The transfer of the double-headed eagle to Spain in 1502, following the fall of Constantinople and the rise of Ferdinand II of Aragon, reinforces the notion of *Tertius Romae* as a migrating center of power—geographically mobile—which ultimately finds political expression in the grandeur of the Habsburg Empire. This case illustrates the strategic use of the affirmative connotation of the sociocultural frontier in papal provincial governance. As a result, European dynasties entered into symbolic competition for the highest spiritual and political status, creating a distinct arena of secular rivalry within the framework of the Holy Roman Empire.

An insightful observation is offered by T. T. Tadeeva (2021), who emphasizes the significance of establishing national sovereignty in Slavic states through the assertion of autocephaly for local churches and the acquisition of royal status by national monarchies (e.g., Bulgaria in the 7–11th centuries, Serbia in the 14th century). This connotation of *Tertius Romae*, limited to the idea of national sovereignty, fosters the rise of national self-awareness and is typically accompanied by a cultural breakthrough—a “golden age” of national culture. Accordingly, Tadeeva reconstructs the triadic Christian mystical interpretation of political transformations within the Universal Church: from the unity of the sacred capital of the Christian world (the First Rome—Saint Peter's city), to the East–West Schism, and further to the autonomy of local churches following the delegitimation of the central authority at the Council of Ferrara–Florence (1438–1445).

Drawing on her own observations and authoritative philological scholarship (A. I. Alekseev, A. V. Karavashkin, A. S. Usachyov, A. L. Yurganov), Tadeeva places the idea of “Moscow as the Third Rome,” formulated in the 16th century by Zosima and Philotheus, within the eschatological semantic sphere of Christian expectations. At the same time, the address of Philotheus' epistle to Vasily III suggests the influence of prior national sovereignty efforts, such as those of the Bulgarian prince Simeon I (r. 864–927), who was titled Tsar of Constantinople and of all Greeks and Romans in 919, and Serbian king Stefan Uroš IV (r. 1308–1355), who proclaimed himself Basileus of Serbia and Romania in 1346. The idea of “Holy Rus” thereby

becomes an idea of Russian national sovereignty centered in Moscow. According to academician Yu. S. Pivovarov, this principle was the outcome of the evolution of political culture in the Russian principalities (1993). Tadeeva confirms this with reference to textual studies by R. P. Dmitrieva, A. A. Zimin, A. L. Goldberg, N. V. Sinitsyna, and E. A. Bauer, noting that the influence of the ‘theory’ of “Moscow as the Third Rome” on political thought in Rus” was traceable in the 16th–17th centuries, waned in the second half of the 17th century, disappeared in the 18th century, and re-emerged only in the second half of the 19th century (2011, pp. 123–125).

It should be noted that recent scholarship has drawn attention to documents attesting to attempts to revive and instrumentalize the idea of “Moscow as the Third Rome” during the reign of Catherine the Great (Ivanov, 2021; Kirillina, 2012; Frid, 2020). Elena Alexandrovna’s use of the term “theory” in reference to the “Moscow as the Third Rome” idea also requires clarification.

In its classical sense, a theory refers to a system of knowledge. It is extremely difficult to apply the concept of medieval political theory to the use of the “Third Rome” idea in Muscovite political discourse. Rather, it should be understood as a theosophical concept within Orthodox pedagogical discourse, one that culminated in the coronation of Ivan the Terrible. Moreover, the metaphorical use of the term “theory” is not only inauthentic but also potentially misleading, since it was only in the second half of the 19th century (with thinkers such as V. S. Ikonnikov, N. Ya. Danilevsky, V. S. Solovyov) and in the 20th century (I. A. Ilyin, I. M. Snychev, A. P. Panarin) that *actual* historiosophical and political-philosophical theories began to form around the “Moscow as the Third Rome” concept.

The eschatological and revivalist emotional connotations of the *Tertius Romae* concept reflect two distinct states of provincial public consciousness, corresponding respectively to centrifugal and centripetal tendencies. While in the medieval period *Tertius Romae* was associated with the revival of the sacred unity of the world’s center, Catherine the Great’s geopolitical ambitions were no longer rooted in a missionary idea, but in the deliberate political instrumentalization of the *Tertius Romae* affect. This marks a form of secularization of the sacred concept of the world’s center—a reorientation of the idea toward shaping provincial sentiment in pursuit of strategic advantages in geopolitical confrontation. For the Moscow Patriarchate, “Moscow as the Third Rome” remained a sacred, missionary idea of unifying the Orthodox world; for Russia’s secular authorities (the “Northern Palmyra”), it became a geopolitical lever. These represent two fundamentally different semantic charges of *Tertius Romae*: the traditional (religious and sacred) and the modern (secular and profane). The evolution of the Moscow Tsardom demonstrates an inversion of eschatological pathos into a revivalist-positive trajectory. This inversion, in turn, reflects the strengthening of the center and the expansion of its spatial influence.

When the center weakens—as it happened with the fall of the Rurikid dynasty—the concept of *Tertius Romae* disappears entirely from political discourse. In traditional culture, ideology forms around a core concept over extended periods, integrating supra-biological social programmes across generations. Modern history, shaped by the anthropocentrism of the Enlightenment and the secularization of thought—culminating in humankind’s ambition to govern the world—marks an epoch in which sociohistorical processes are compressed to the scale of a single generation. This is the age of accelerated social time. It is the modern era that, in the classical sense, generates ‘theories’ and the strategic deployment of theory for the amplification of political power (*scientia potentia est*).

According to I. B. Budraitskis (2021), the foundation of contemporary political doctrines lies in the drive to overcome the apocalyptic idea of the end of history. This insight is valuable for identifying the secularization of political theology’s legacy within secular governance. Even the notion of God’s throne on Earth undergoes secular reinterpretation: the sacred imperative to overcome eschatological expectation through personal and collective transformation—as articulated by Metropolitan Philaret (V. M. Drozdov)—is displaced in modernity by political ambitions aimed at dominance in a contest between nation-states. While Christian eschatology understands time as beyond human control and history as an expression of divine will, secular politics seeks in history the legitimation of its own greatness, thus transforming the sacred idea of *Tertius Romae* into a doctrine of political supremacy.

The secularization of politics has diminished the authority of the Church over the state. Legitimacy is now sought not from God but from the masses—from those governed. As Budraitskis notes, three major political doctrines of modernity emerged to resolve the eschatological anxieties of the masses: conservatism, liberalism, and socialism. Despite their ideological divergence, all three are united in the orientation of the governing subject (whether the center or a contender for centrality) toward the governed object (the province or the masses). The desacralization of politics leads to the desacralization of the political center, which must then reassert its dominant position—often through ideological resacralization. The positively revivalist connotation of the socio-cultural frontier *Tertius Romae* remains relevant due to its capacity to activate centripetal tendencies and organize society around a unified center.

Despite the fierce historical struggle between monotheism and paganism, European medieval culture remained influenced by the cult of lineage (‘Rod’). Through missionary efforts, an alternative identity was offered to the province (the masses), while dynastic political ambition was reinforced by symbolic blood ties. The practice of “discovering” genealogical links to Alexander the Great (as in the case of the Byzantine *Porphyrogenitus* dynasty) illustrates this trend, later amplified by theological and historiographical efforts to rewrite the lineages of rulers. Hegel’s philosophy of the “wandering Spirit” concludes the transformation of

the cult of bloodline into the cult of Spirit, ultimately realizing Eusebius of Caesarea's triadic historiosophical model on a dialectical level.

According to the political-historiosophical analysis of Karl Popper (1992), the key difference between the political doctrines of modernity lies in their interpretation of historical time. This conceptual divergence underpins each revival of the *Tertius Romae* idea, necessitating rewriting history, recoding collective historical memory, and constructing new cultural identities grounded in mythological interconnections between past and future symbols of success (Bakumenko, 2015). In the process of activating centripetal forces, it is no longer the direct articulation of *Tertius Romae* as a 'magical formula' that predominates—although it also remains present in 19th- and 20th-century political discourse—but rather the renaming or reframing of the center of power while retaining its underlying semantic function. *Tertius Romae* designates the possibility of shaping a new identity around a new center that claims an exceptional role in the global reconfiguration of the world order. The semantic construct of the *Tertius Romae* socio-cultural frontier is recognizable through its functional association with *translatio imperii* and its capacity to invert eschatological pessimism into revivalist optimism.

In addition to its original appearance in Cicero's thought, the historical evolution of *Tertius Romae* can be divided into at least two major phases: the sacred (5th-16th centuries) and the secular (16th-20th centuries).

During the sacred phase, the idea of a center of power—of a capital, a metropolis—is cultivated. It develops two opposing emotive connotations, each reflecting divergent trajectories in the development of national self-consciousness. The revivalist-positive connotation is tied to the strengthening of the center and the desire of the periphery (or province) to unite under its leadership. The eschatological-negative connotation, by contrast, signals the delegitimization of the center and the tendency of the province toward separation. Political theology links the idea of a governing center with the embodiment of divine will in the figure of the ruler. However, it simultaneously limits the center's capacity to formulate and transmit principles capable of overcoming apocalyptic expectations—i.e., centrifugal tendencies. The oscillation between positive and negative expectations is not understood as a historical process but is interpreted as a manifestation of divine will inherent in the course of history. As a result, the very notion of autonomous governance is met with profound resistance in the collective psyche of the province.

The secularization of political life emerged as an inevitable consequence of the sacred center's inability to suppress centrifugal tendencies. The Reformation and the rise of Protestantism in 16th-century Europe precipitated a collapse in the legitimacy of the centralized religious-political authority. While the disintegrating European order gradually abandoned the *Tertius Romae* concept—at least until the intensification of colonial conflict—the Muscovite state appropriated the idea to proclaim its national sovereignty and assert a unique sacred mission: the spiritual destiny of the Russian people to establish *The Holy Rus*".

Virtualization of Governance

In the early decades of the 21st century, profound transformations have occurred within the structure of society. As the idea of decolonization (understood as liberation from political domination) gained widespread popularity throughout the 20th century, the logic of *translatio imperii* gradually migrated from political discourse into the domains of economics and organizational management. The era of economic imperialism was presciently anticipated by Karl Marx. The Soviet Union, while itself an empire, opposed global imperialism with varying degrees of success. With the collapse of the socialist bloc, political imperialism—regardless of ideological position or philosophical foundations—has become a sort of bogeyman, while economic empires have emerged as objects of critique, pride, envy, and even reverence.

In contemporary economic discourse, the governing function of *Tertius Romae* can be observed within constructs of the global economy (Mazzucato, 2020), especially in relation to forecasting major global risks and long-term economic trajectories.

For instance, an analysis of the concept of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) presented by Klaus Schwab (University of Michigan) (Schwab, 2017) by E. V. Balatsky, a researcher at the Central Institute of Economics and Mathematics (CEMI) of the Russian Academy of Sciences, reveals a coherent programme by which the leading European powers seek to escape the Malthusian trap (or “end of the world”) through a renewed form of colonial policy. Drawing upon Marxist theory of alienation, Balatsky models the labour matrix of industrial revolutions, distinguishing between “primary” phases (1IR, 3IR) and “massive” phases (2IR, 4IR) of labour displacement from the productive sector (Balatsky, 2019, pp. 9–11). The stage of labour alienation noted by Marx during the Second Industrial Revolution (1840–1860) was marked by the massive relocation of manual labour from the Old World to the New World. According to Balatsky, digital technologies and the convergence of digital, physical, and biological systems since 2010 (4IR) have intensified the displacement of both physical and cognitive labour. In the current global capitalist distribution of resources, no geographic periphery remains to accommodate the “surplus” population. Consequently, the risk of excluding the majority of the global population from economic participation is growing, condemning it to the margins of social life with no hope of access to fair and rational systems of labour, resources, or benefit distribution.

Digitalization marks a transformation in the modes of control over production and distribution mechanisms. It reinforces socioeconomic inequality and facilitates the replacement of value-creating economies with speculative technologies of value extraction (Mazzucato, 2020). Predictably, such deep transformations in the structure of social relations have been accompanied by shifts in their emotional climate. In particular, Balatsky highlights findings cited by Schwab’s study on empathy: between 1990 and 2010, American college students’ empathy levels declined by 40%,

rendering them significantly less responsive to the hardships and successes of others. “A biological insensitivity is forming among the population in response to manifestations of social inequality and injustice” (Balatsky, 2019, p. 16).

Balatsky also refers to the “theory of cerebral inequality,” which has been popularized in Russia by the biologist S. V. Savelyev (recipient of the satirical “Academician of Pseudoscience” award from the *Antropogenez.ru* portal and the Evolution Foundation in 2018). A lengthy quotation is warranted here:

“...cerebral differences imply something simple: not everyone possesses the biological prerequisites to create new technologies or to govern in the new reality. Accordingly, the rest will be pushed to the margins of life with no chance of success. During the 4IR, cerebral differences are superimposed on an increasingly complex technological environment, amplifying the social inequality that has already been rising for the past two or three decades. Most critically, this inequality can no longer be overcome through social means, but for deeper biological reasons: if specific brain regions are absent or lack sufficient neurons, there is no way to correct this” (2019, p. 17).

History has witnessed earlier “theoretical” doctrines of social Darwinism (e. g., T. Hobbes, J. Goebbels), whose primary objective was to provide ethical justification for colonialism, social discrimination, and genocide—all in the name of constructing a new *Tertius Romae*, i. e., legitimizing domination and gain through the humiliation and destruction of human beings under the guise of yet another ideology promising a “brighter future.”

One of the key tasks of the social sciences and humanities remains prevention of their own transformation into anti-human fields, devoid of foundational ethical principles. Evidently, such a drift toward dehumanization stems from the inertia of servicing the political and economic interests of a narrow elite incapable of governing by any means other than the annihilation of the governed. The paradox that exposes the pseudo-scientific nature of this trajectory lies in the possibility—by the same “cerebral” reasoning—of eliminating members of the ruling elite who justify their dominant position through biologically based claims of exclusivity.

It is hard to disagree with E. V. Balatsky’s prognostic insight that “the new technologies of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) will have contradictory effects: in some cases, they will amplify biological disparities; in others, they will mitigate them. There is no doubt that this is one of the most significant challenges of the near future” (Balatsky, 2019, p. 17). Yet with a minor amendment—it would be more accurate to say that all technologies across history (e. g., the potter’s wheel, flat-bottomed vessels, clothing, hammers, etc.) have always functioned ambivalently, both reinforcing and equalizing human biological differences. There is therefore no doubt that this is one of the most enduring challenges of both the future and the distant past. What matters most is the accumulated historical experience of humankind.

Digitalization primarily modifies the control system of society, simplifying and unifying mechanisms of governance. And yet, it is to be hoped that no “exceptional

monkey with a grenade” will accidentally find itself behind the levers of such machinery (no offence to primates).

As P. J. Blount argues, based on his analysis of the revolutionary breakthrough in telecommunications in the 21st century, digitalization reshapes society’s relationship to global order, as cyberspace reconfigures international borders (Blount, 2019). According to Blount, issues of information security increasingly conflict with the foundational democratic principles and inalienable human rights. The tension between the right to access information (e. g., the case of Julian Assange) and the societal demand to restrict access to certain categories of data becomes ever more pronounced. A pressing concern emerges: the monopolization of control over information flows, filters, and what Blount refers to as “informational weaponry”—a new form of weapon of mass destruction. On the one hand, control over information becomes a cornerstone of national sovereignty; on the other, it enables dominant powers to violate the sovereignty of states lacking informational protection, infringe upon basic human rights, and destabilize political systems with impunity.

Such concerns are echoed by Russian theorists (e.g., Panarin, 2003; Astafyeva, Nikonorova, & Shlykova, 2018). Cultural theorists in particular highlight the problem of establishing a “humanistic imperative for the development of the digital economy and civilization in Russia and globally” in light of the growing uncertainty surrounding core values (Astafyeva et al., 2018).

The acceleration of data processing in virtual environments, occurring independently of human decision-making, already indicates a significant shift of the center of power into cyberspace (Blount, 2019). At the same time, mass culture remains infected with the myth of the superiority of digital over analog forms: the myth of the machine as saviour—extending life, improving its quality, “freeing” humans from labour, and even promising immortality in the near future. These same mythological motifs also give rise to apocalyptic interpretations of current changes, technophobic anxieties, and resistance to innovation.

Within this idealization and mystification of the virtual domain—which increasingly absorbs the space of the social—one can discern both the positive-renewal and the negative-eschatological connotations of *Tertius Romae*. The current technological arms race among states and corporations strongly resembles the agonistic struggles of aristocratic dynasties during the Middle Ages. Today’s “Big Four” (Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, and Microsoft) effectively compete with leading nation-states for the redistribution of human capital. They succeed not only in the intellectual domain, but also in imposing their own corporate cultures and shaping a new supranational (global?) cultural identity.

If we understand the inversion of negative-eschatological into positive-renewal connotations as the core feature of the sociocultural frontier of *Tertius Romae*, then its virtualization becomes clearly apparent. Outside the framework of religious conceptions of being, the future can no longer be imagined without technologies of virtual and augmented reality. The new center of power—capable of resolving contradictions of the real—appears to be the ensemble of artificial intelli-

gence technologies, which serve simultaneously as a source of eschatological fear and of techno-optimism in the spirit of renewed interpretations of *Tertius Romae*.

In conclusion, the relocation of the sociocultural frontier of *Tertius Romae* into virtual space does not alter its extension or its oscillation between negative and positive connotations. Due to its ideal and illusory nature, the frontier's capacity to activate centripetal forces toward a new center of power diminishes, thereby weakening the cultural consumption of its symbolic meaning—alongside other socio-centric symbols of success—within the current trend of person-centric cultural consumption (Bakumenko, 2019, 2021).

If we are to trust the prognostic potential of the model of sociocultural success-symbolization—tracking fluctuations in cultural consumption between the poles of sociocentrism and personcentrism—then personcentrism remains dominant at present (Bakumenko, 2021, p. 160). This trend, likely to be persisted until approximately 2027, entails the predominance of the negative-eschatological connotation of the virtual *Tertius Romae*. However, a future paradigm shift in cultural consumption—assuming universal access to virtual and augmented reality technologies—may lead to the virtualization not only of particular sociocultural frontiers but of the entire process of success-symbolization as a spatial-environmental orientation mechanism within sociocultural systems (Bakumenko, 2015).

In the emerging digital reality, the sociocultural frontier of *Tertius Romae* assumes the form of shifting boundaries between underdeveloped peripheries and technologically advanced metropolises—those providing connectivity, regulating content, and ensuring informational security. If ancient Roman roads enabled the implementation of spatial labour division and market control across the empire, today's centripetal dynamics are defined by the speed of big data processing and the decision-making capacities of centralized hubs. The technological race, involving both superpowers and transnational corporations, thus allows us to name the new *Tertius Romae* of our time: Artificial Intelligence.

Conclusions

The shift of decision-making mechanisms into the automated (virtual) realm of big data processing grants the governing center(s) unprecedented historical capacities to reconstruct and manipulate public consciousness. The age of post-truth, post-literacy, neo-medievalism, the “dark times”, the digital, informational, or post-industrial society—these are just some of the metaphors employed by theorists to capture the profound transformation of sociality in the early decades of the twenty-first century. Against this backdrop, a new qualification of *Tertius Romae* becomes conceivable: its virtualization. Having passed through its sacred (5th–16th centuries) and secular (16th–20th centuries) phases, and having preserved under new names the semantic core of centralized power and its emotive perceptual valences, Cicero's concept now enters a new phase of development in the current millennium: the virtual. Formerly tied to territory and a specific form

of governance, *Tertius Romae* now signifies virtual potency. The frontier status of the periphery is determined today by connectivity quality, cybersecurity, the power and efficiency of terminal devices—that is, by the perfection and accessibility of advanced digital technologies.

Thus, in addition to the temporal origin of the *Tertius Romae* construct, three macro-historical phases of its evolution can be distinguished: the sacred, the secular, and the virtual.

The authors' proposed perspective on the sociocultural frontier—as a fluid construct reflecting the periphery's evaluative relation to the center—constitutes an original cognitive model, an abstraction of a socio-psychological process unfolding in historical time. It does not claim to be the sole valid interpretation of reality and, in fact, presupposes alternative theoretical framings. Providing definitive forecasts or normative judgments was never the aim. Rather, by delineating the outer bounds of the semantic construct *Tertius Romae*, the authors seek to provoke discussion on the multidimensionality and polysemic nature of historical reality.

A promising direction for further research lies in the comparative analysis of these three evolutionary phases. Preliminary observations suggest that the sacred and the virtual stages share the belief that the center of power lies beyond human capacities. Nevertheless, the virtual *Tertius Romae* is also infused with a modernist illusion of achieving hegemony through the concentration of power around simplified mechanisms for managing large-scale heterogeneous processes. While there are no historical precedents for the realization of this illusion—that is, *Tertius Romae* has remained a historical myth—its managerial function has been repeatedly activated: implicitly and unreflectively in the sacred phase; deliberately, yet insufficiently critically, in the secular. It would now be dangerously short-sighted to forgo the accumulated theoretical insights—from history, governance theory, economic thought, social philosophy, sociology and social psychology, anthropology and cultural studies—that could rationalize the aims of social development.

The approach adopted by O. V. Ustrizhitsky, which emphasizes the frontier-like flexibility of the very category of the sociocultural frontier, while also accounting for the dynamism of the phenomena it describes, enhances the heuristic potential of the frontier metaphor. It allows the conceptual frame to illuminate a field of underexplored and insufficiently articulated problems. Of course, both Ustrizhitsky's ideas and their application in this text require further critical elaboration.

Meanwhile, the boundary between social and virtual reality—when viewed through V. I. Shakhovsky's theory of emotivity—becomes sharply delineated. The very possibility of a communicative ascent from personal autocommunication through interpersonal dialogue to social autocommunication (i.e., meaningful exchange between center and periphery) dissolves under the conditions of a virtualized center of power. The feedback loop from the periphery to the center is

excluded from the cybernetic monologue of virtual reality—a monologue that can be turned on or off at the push of a button.

Today, much attention is given to information security, digital literacy, media hygiene, and related competencies—skills demanded by the mechanization of human life and society. Yet one fundamental question, once posed by Kazimir Malevich, remains largely ignored: what if, in the artificial reality created by human beings, there is no longer any place for the human being?

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