



DOI: 10.22363/2313-2272-2026-26-3-801-815

EDN: UYHYFM

In search of empire: Approaches to defining the concept in contemporary scientific discourse*

I.V. Trotsuk

RUDN University,
Miklukho-Maklaya St., 6, Moscow, 117198, Russia

Higher School of Economics,
Myasnetskaya St., 20, Moscow, 101000, Russia

(e-mail: irina.trotsuk@yandex.ru)

Abstract. The concept of empire seems quite transparent: from our school days, we learn to perceive the historical past through the chronological succession and life cycles of empires. In everyday interpretations, empire is something vast, powerful and wealthy in every sense of the word, which explains numerous metaphorical references to “empire” in marketing; dictionary definitions also lack precision [8; 33; 35; 75]. Given the growing popularity of extremely broad historical-political concepts (like interdisciplinary interest in “civilization” [2; 5; 30; 31; 37; 71]), it is necessary to clarify the main interpretations of “empire”, especially since it is not an alien concept to sociology [4; 74; 80]. While admitting the well-known challenges of defining empire [66], the author tries to structure this amorphous conceptual field by suggesting several possible ways: first, identifying “typological syndromes” in search results for “definition of empire” — four broad and overlapping interpretations (historical-philological, historical-(geo) political, critical-cultural, and philosophical-katechontic). Second, conducting quantitative content analysis of dictionary definitions of “empire” based on the search results from the Academic dictionary portal — five most frequent interpretations (figurative meaning; part of the names of historical states; substantive definitions with attributes of empire as a specific form of state organization; monarchical or imperial rule; and a common noun). Third, a study of expert discourse — qualitative content analysis of articles in the *Ab Imperio*, which specializes in the development of methodologies for studying empires, — conceptual foundations and key categories of contemporary “empire studies” (e.g., new imperial history, imperial experience, imperial rhetoric, imperial chronotope, imperial biography, imperial situation, post-empire). Thus, there is a conflict between two conditional approaches — universalist-objectifying and discursive-contextual, but the general research focus has shifted from attempts to construct grand theories or typologies to the analysis of imperial experience within a critical examination of any social order and its self-representations.

Key words: empire; everyday interpretations and scientific discourse; imperial experience; imperial past; imperial rhetoric; imperial policy; imperial perception; quantitative and qualitative content analysis; new imperial history

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The article was submitted on 10.06.2026. The article was accepted on 25.08.2026.

For citation: Trotsuk I.V. In search of empire: Approaches to defining the concept in contemporary scientific discourse. *RUDN Journal of Sociology*. 2026; 26 (3): 801–815. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-2272-2026-26-3-801-815> EDN: UYHYFM

Any attempt to compile a comprehensive body of interpretations of the term “empire” using online search engines seems futile; however, if the search query is narrowed to the “definition of empire”, one can see some “typological syndromes” in the search results if focuses on analytical materials (of varying content and quality). First, there is the *historical-philological* interpretation: the word “empire” is of Roman origin and bears the “distinct imprint of Roman history”. In the Russian context, the word evokes two types of associations: a “prison of nations” characterized by the relentless oppression of the ruling elite that stifles any expression of independent thought; and “Russian eagles soaring over Alpine peaks and beyond the Balkans at the walls of Constantinople, palaces of Rastrelli and Rossi, poetry of Pushkin, and music of Glinka” [42]. According to the historical-philological research, originally *imperium* was not an opposition to *respublica* as a form of political organization; rather, the term “empire” had multiple meanings (state, great power, authority, specific executive powers). Subsequently, in major European languages, derivatives of *imperium* made a distinction between “empire” as authority in a broader sense and “emperor” as the title of the ruler of any state claiming to be Rome’s imperial successor; “empire” as denoting any country acknowledging no higher sovereign (autocracy) or colonial power; the concept of “national empire” developed much later.

Second, there is the *historical-(geo) political interpretation* often linked to the question of whether today’s Russia can be considered an empire: affirmative answer defines empire as a “long-lasting state” and a “strategic unity of (national) diversity” — both “do not require a selection of historical analogues” for legitimation [38]. Such publications often cite Carl Schmitt’s definition of empire as a “technical term” denoting traditional (pre-modern) form of statehood without unification and unitarism and sometimes even an emperor. This interpretation resonates with Russian statist who contrast the artificial Western European “empire of enslavement” with the Russian “project”-based empire of natural-historical evolution (great power, multi-ethnic and multi-confessional state with strong central authority and cultural diversity) [45].

This interpretation highlights the specificity of various imperial projects — the contemporary Western European one (European Union as an empire of a new

type [56]), the Russian Empire and the USSR as a distinct type of state with the features that in some respects mirror those of other empires while remaining unique in others. The attributes of this distinct type of state are as follows: “maximization of territorial expansion for the sake of economic and political interests” (peaceful or military homogenization of population and/or territory); “construction of an economic and social life that is self-sufficient and closed to the outside world”; “national consciousness’s idea about country’s special mission”; “necessity of a sacral figure — an emperor-leader with absolute power, whose worldview determines how state institutions (instruments for executing his will) are developed and restructured”; “impossibility of population’s civil consciousness as it lacks economic, political, legal and cultural foundations... law serves as an instrument of the autocrat’s will and the state bureaucracy”; “individual is considered a small part of the large mechanism, with personal traits and interests being ignored” [48]. The list of the “fundamental features of the Russian imperial policy” can be framed more positively: “Russian authorities officially placed all peoples on an equal legal footing before the law — Russia was an empire without an imperial nation”; “there was no rigid division of subjects along religious lines”; “during incorporation of new territories, the authorities sought to assimilate not only peoples but also their elites”; “traditionally there was no nationalism... and discrimination against peoples... in Russia, it is impossible to identify a metropole that exploited its periphery” [32].

The historical-(geo) political interpretation focuses on the following “indicators” of empire: “superpower with strong centralized, mostly monarchical power, pronounced expansionist ambitions and multi-ethnic population at varying stages and levels of development, with a quite distinct set of imperial ideological concepts and imperial consciousness shared primarily by the ruling elite”. At least by the mid-19th century, the Russian Empire fully met these definitions [32] as a “mixed type of empire” [56]; its construction had begun “under Peter the Great... yet the form of government and the nature of power did not change in the slightest: power remained absolute, concentrated in the hands of the monarch, although it acquired a theoretical justification and clear expression in law... under the influence of the European state-legal philosophy of the time” [29]. “In the 20th century, all empires ceased to exist, including not only the Soviet empire but even the Russian empire that succeeded it” [36; 72].

However, far from everyone shares the view that there are no more empires. Critics of this position consider it overly politicized (In politics and

historiography empire is either “ours” or “evil”): “the idea that empire as a form of political organization has undergone some sort of decline... is false. Empire has changed but has not disappeared; we still live with empires, and it seems that will continue to do so... Empire is the dominant form of political organization of the modern era. Claims that the nation-state is an adequate form of political organization are false as a construct of historiographies engaged in nation-building... There are many definitions of empire and no consensus: empires live long and change over time” [46; 56].

Third, there is the *critical-cultural interpretation* of empire as a sociocultural phenomenon rather than merely political-economic or political-strategic. There are significant differences between approaches of Russian and foreign authors. The former “proceed from the notion of a certain value-based, pan-imperial norm that appears as if ‘pre-given’, possessing a specific ontological foundation”; the latter “focus on the subjective-psychological aspects of imperial construction — issues of perception, motivation and dynamics of interethnic contact”; both approaches are based on “their own imperial experience (or memory of it), and this experience varies among different peoples” [41]. For Western countries, this experience is predominantly colonial, which determines the task of studying the correlation between the people’s cultural tradition and its imperial program, and the clash of two or more cultures, i.e., the colonial situation [58; 59].

The Russian tradition views empire not as “a product of specific interaction between forces and institutions of the metropole and the periphery” but as a “complexly organized universal system... the central functions of which are integration... liberation of a vast conglomerate of diverse ethnic and confessional units from burdensome local limitations and particularism, from mutual and internecine strife... through shared, universalizing normative principles and value orientations” [41]. At the same time, Western and Russian approaches are complementary: the former focuses on missionary and commercial imperialism, while the latter emphasizes culturally determined expansion (greater ontological dimension, fewer economic justifications and more religious ones); thus, the USSR in many ways resembled modernizing empires [69].

The critical-culturological interpretation implies possibilities for the empirical analysis of “imperial consciousness” through public opinion polls: “today the word ‘empire’ possesses complex semantics, since in various contexts... and for different social groups it has not only different meanings but

also divergent value connotations. The conflict between positive and negative perceptions of one's country as an empire represents the current stage in the internal conflict of the Russian political culture and culture in general... Regardless of its nature or rigidity of the external bonds holding it together, the imperial body remains heterogeneous, with zones of unexpected cultural combinations and possibilities" [39].

Fourth, there is the *philosophical-katechontic contrast between "evil empire" and "spiritual empire"*, based on the idea that the primary "characteristic of empire is not the form of its internal state structure, possession of colonies or military might but something else" [7] (beyond maturity and power [67]). This "something else" marks the fundamental distinction between empire and great power: "the right of the strong", oppression of the weak, managed anarchy and the desire to "live like everyone else" versus "the supreme truth of mankind", victory over evil, social order, lasting peace, desire to "live in truth" and to "serve the truth" [70]. This interpretation does not deny the following objective principles of the "great power's and its state authority's efficiency": operational capacity and mission; ability to rapidly mobilize vast economic, technological and informational resources for military purposes and major civil projects; appeal of cultural values, recognized educational and cultural superiority; ability to maintain internal viability and unity (including with own resources and without significant social sacrifice); competitive economy; willingness of "satellites" to acknowledge the metropole's superiority and desire of their elites to identify with the imperial establishment; flexible nature of strong central authority and its control over the acquired territory, etc. However, "all this must be cemented and justified by the sense of 'special mission'... rooted in the imperial 'civilizing idea' and the national political elite's aspiration for greatness defined broadly as 'expansion (or consolidation) of the empire's influence' in the spirit of the notion that 'empire is the Katechon holding the world back from evil'" [44].

Given the multitude of connotations associated with the word "empire" (especially in the foreign policy discourse with many such concepts as "imperial ambitions", "imperial syndrome", "imperial claims", etc.), it is hardly possible to systematize various interpretations of empire in academic and analytical-journalistic discourses (not to mention derivative concepts). However, one can take two simple paths: the *first* is to search the Academic portal of *dictionaries* for definitions of empire. We get 13 pages with 128 results from explanatory

dictionaries, dictionaries of foreign words and synonyms, philosophical, political and legal encyclopedias, and so on [34]. Basic *content analysis* allows to identify the following most frequent mentions of empire:

- examples of the word used in a figurative sense — 41 mentions (names of sports clubs, hotels, retail chains, awards, films, books and computer games, including featuring “empires”;
- names of historical states — 38;
- a (large/vast) state composed of economically and politically dependent territories (countries or peoples) often incorporated through conquest and governed from a single center; a unitary union of diverse parts with an imperial core (metropole) that establishes and governs empire and its constituent parts; a powerful multinational state that incorporates territories of other countries and governs them from a single center — 30;
- a (predominantly large) state with a monarchical form of government — 23;
- a (large/vast) state headed by an emperor or empress (absolute ruler of the highest rank) — 26;
- common nouns/phrases (“empire of evil” and “empire of good”, “the Empire strikes back”, “empire of dreams”, “entertainment empire”, etc.) — 18.

If we set aside the marketing use of the word “empire” and historical self-designations in scientific discourse, the empire’s “denotatum” seems to be a large state with a monarchical form of government (typically imperial) and rigid centralization of power along a “center-periphery” axis, regardless of the specific territorial, national, ethnic or other composition.

The *second*, more complex yet methodologically similar path is to *examine an “extreme case”* (In terms of expertise) — the journal *Ab Imperio* that specializes in the “new imperial history” and the study of nationalism within the post-Soviet space, playing a pivotal role in developing the methodology of empire studies and ongoing search (In both Russia and the West in recent decades) for the most accurate definition of empire within the new approach to empire studies — “analysis of imperial histories and imperial situation” (practices and discourses rather than structures) [28; 41]. “According to the project of the new imperial history, empirical studies allowing for generalizations create methodological foundations for analyzing complex, composite and unevenly organized (heterogeneous) societies (or spaces), i.e., empires” [41]. The analysis of the editorials for nearly every issue (or its key section) and all articles in the

sections Methodology and Theory and ABC: Studies of Empire and Nationalism allowed to reconstruct the following theoretical-methodological ideas and categories of contemporary “empire studies”.

“On the one hand, the history of empire emerges as a projection determined by the disintegration of multi-ethnic states, significantly revising the quasi-national perspective of earlier historiography which reduced imperial history to the history of the nation-state (dominant nation). On the other hand, the imperial historical experience is rejected, discredited, fragmented or appropriated by strengthening national historical narratives. Thus, empire serves as a *reference point in the ‘political history’* of new nation-states (In both evaluative and negative terms), an ideal type contrasted with the nation and the nation-state” [9].

The focus of the *new imperial history* is not “the integrity of social groups or chronological periods (nation, territory, confession, gender, Middle Ages) but rather the current *unstable equilibrium of composite society and asynchronous historical development*” [10]. By “examining societies of the past — often archaic and reactionary”, the new imperial history offers a unique opportunity to observe and analyze the work of non-national or para-national social mechanisms. Their critical analysis can be a unique resource... for forms of post-national imagination as a prerequisite for a more inclusive and just society” [10. P. 10; 11; 40; 50; 64].

“Any attempt to define empire in ‘*objective terms*’— as a system of stratification, a policy based on force or a system of exploitation — proves unsuccessful as it fails to capture the most important component of the imperial situation: *perception*... Empires and states differ from one another not by exploitation or use of violence but by the perception of policies and practices as ‘one’s own’ or ‘alien’” [40. P. 16; 12; 13]. One should focus “not on ontological fundamentality and structuralist symmetry of the ‘friend or foe’ opposition but on who/what defines the concepts of ‘friends’ and ‘foes’ and how they function within an imperial situation (‘friend’ may turn out to be ‘enemy’ or these categories may lose their specific content and evaluative dimension)... Instead of illusory structural statics, we are interested in the historical dynamics of the imperial social-political, cultural and economic experience which is manifested in discursive (and other) convergences and divergences of some groups, communities and states” [13. P. 10]. “Researchers have shifted from factual and structural analysis to examining the mechanisms of imperial stability based not only on *physical coercion* but also on *pro-imperial public*

opinion” [64. P. 26], collective memory (In Maurice Halbwachs’s interpretation) [14; 47. P. 85–88] and “rejection of determinism and teleology of the orthodox modernization theory” in favor of “adequate understanding of spatial component of the *imperial chronotope* with its multidimensionality and non-linearity” [15. P. 8–9; 63]. The *comparative history of empires* [77] examines how the balance of sources of power changed and which sources came to the fore during different historical periods and in various regions of a single empire. However, “the ‘imperial comparative’ cannot be viewed as a universal method for constructing an analytical model of empire: only the features common to all social-political organizations of the era can be compared directly, while the unique inner world of empire remains a thing-in-itself as it was never rationally articulated” [16].

“One should not indulge in the illusion of the possibility of a ‘*universal*’ *explanatory model* of empire for the age of modernization and nationalism... it is more relevant to combine various approaches when studying the interaction between imperial authorities and local communities” [61. P. 377], since empire is a *heterogeneous space and mechanism for producing differences of various orders* [6; 17; 18; 51; 53; 60].

Empire is “a distinctive space for *biographical and psychological reconstructions*”: “the question ‘what is empire’ is replaced by the question of how it expresses itself at political, social and other levels (if empire possesses a specific ‘language’ of self-description) and how it is experienced and conceptualized by contemporaries (what life in empire means for individuals or groups)... It is natural for the historian to attempt to identify an *agent* capable of binding together the fabric of imperial society, which rapidly disintegrates into mutually untranslatable languages... Empire’s heterogeneity and multifaceted nature of individual experience within it create conditions for the purposeful construction of *identity*. In this sense, empire is an environment that fosters the formation of a modern type of personality characterized by self-reflection and social constructivism. Certainly, empire also places limits on this constructivism... This is the fundamental tension of the ‘*imperial biography*’” [19. P. 12–13; 20; 21; 22].

“*Imperial situation*” is characterized by: diverse historical subjects whose interactions do not lead to homogenization of political, social and cultural space; overlapping historical subjects whose languages of self-description contain markers of both archaic and modern identities (the archaic undergoes modernization, while linguistic community and national territory become

historicized); absence of a dominant, consistent self-description of empire as rooted in the epistemology of the cognitive self-description framework [23; 49]. Empire functions as a system of silences that allows imperial situation to be reconciled with the *normative language of modernity*: imperial center makes an epistemological claim to provide a universal system of categories that imbue imperial space with meaning through the assertion or dissolution of distinctions [79. P. 57]. It is also crucial to understand how the imperial situation is perceived “*from within*” (by citizens, politicians and social scientists) [24; 27; 52].

The key aspects of empire’s existence in the contemporary world are as follows: “*imperial reputation*” – modern cultural codes and media through which imperial experience is transmitted and disseminated in mass culture and society; *imperial rhetoric* and value-based traditional perception of empires that is reproduced within this rhetoric; finally, *empire as a category that reveals context*. The last interpretation transforms the issue of imperial exceptionalism into a subject of inquiry, viewing ‘exceptionalism’ as a language of imperial self-description subject to scientific deconstruction... For any researcher, discourse of ‘exceptionalism’, like practices of exclusion and inclusion in the imperial society, is a language for identifying empire and rationalizing imperial situation” [24. P. 12–13].

One can compile the following “imperial glossary”: imperial construction, imperial order, imperial ideology, imperial consciousness, imperial discourse, imperial legacy, imperial experience; modernizing and traditionalist empires, or pre-modern (ancient/archaic) (formalized political structure based on conquest and lacking powerful rivals — sovereign states and nationalism) and modern (based on informal colonial domination, commercial ties and modern technology) empires, compatible and even interconnected with the idea of sovereign nation-states) [26. P. 24]; geopolitical projection — overseas (colonial) empires (technological and cultural superiority over periphery as determined by political revolution and bourgeois society) and continental (territorially expansive) empires (more permeable borders, less distinct boundaries between center and periphery, multi-ethnic composition and differentiated citizenship, non-democratic forms of government and national movements); imperial/dominant/unified metropole and imperial projects; imperial studies, (new) imperial history, imperial historiography, imperial paradigm; imperial rhetoric, imperial imagination (a stimulus for political creativity) [78]; empire-building (formation and development) and revolution [43; 73; 76].

“Case studies” as the main method of imperial history allows to “consider the Soviet Union not as the ‘last empire’ but as one of the earliest manifestations of *a new form of empire*... that denies its own imperial essence and employs foundations of the modern nation-state system — principles of state sovereignty and national self-determination — as instruments of non-consensual control over a multi-ethnic population... There is no such thing as ‘last empires’... Imperial politics remains a key arena of struggle within the contemporary state system — struggle over whether to transform or preserve empires... Most states labeled as empires today are in fact ‘*post-empires*’... they emerged after the collapse of empires, do not define themselves as empires and lay no claim to the legacy of their imperial predecessors (although there are often forces with such aspirations)... This shift — from a purely structuralist, ‘trans-historical’ view to a *new understanding* of empire as essentially an identity, claims to imperial status and accusations of imperialism — aligns with new trends in the study of nations and nationalism... Empire is not merely a political label... but also a result... a social fact rather than simply a category of political practice” [3. P. 73–75]. However, one should bear in mind the difficulty of distinguishing between the imperial and the post-imperial (or “neo-imperial”), since “what one defines as ‘empire’ and what one considers as its transcendence depends only partially on historical facts and circumstances” [54. P. 17–18]. “There is a whole range of *post-imperial states* that emerged from former imperial centers (Austria, Germany, Sweden, Portugal, Belgium or Japan) but are rarely classified as empires today... A specific case of the post-imperial state is post-Soviet Russia (with the “stigma of empire” in internal and foreign policy, accusations of imperial ambitions, positive discourse on empire as an expression of longing for order within the “simple” imperial world order, and pro-imperial nationalist discourse)” [3. P. 75, 82].

Thus, the definition of empire requires grounding in principles of the linguistic and cognitive turns and multidisciplinary critical analysis under the “current demand for a universal definition of empire from both social sciences with their generalizing approach and globalized public opinion” [26; 62; 68]. This demand gives rise to interpretations of empire as “a universal and semantically redundant meta-category” denoting a state form for controlling vast spaces and managing difference or a historical precursor to contemporary structures of hegemony, inequality and conflict, which implies focus on structuralist (historical structure of political, social and cultural differences), essentialist (“imperial realism” and the idiom of imperial archaism) and functionalist (negative and positive

assessments of “imperial curse” or “imperial destiny”) interpretations. However, a more productive research approach is the rejection of such interpretations and of the very concept of empire as an ideal type opposed to the nation-state in favor of understanding empire as a critical (In the logic of discourse studies), analytical and “context-generating” category for explaining the past and present.

Thus, the research focus has shifted from “empire theory” or typology of empires to a “dynamic model for constructing and marking imperial experience”. Analytical work with the concept of empire requires distancing from grand narratives of national histories and monologic versions of the past and adopting an estrangement perspective (rejecting self-referential and binary-oppositional descriptions) to develop contextually complex models and hybrid, multiple subjectivities (discourses, social practices, groups, etc.). Such work does not “derive a historical moral; its task is to draw attention to multidimensionality of the historical process”; yet its results “imply a critical perception of any social order and its self-representation... showing how order emerges ‘from chaos’ (In terms of Ilya Prigogine)... from imperfect social structures and incomplete knowledge rather than due to teleological development, higher design or secret conspiracy” [28; 57].

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DOI: 10.22363/2313-2272-2026-26-3-801-815

EDN: UYHYFM

В поисках империи: подходы к определению понятия в современном научном дискурсе*

И.В. Троцук

Российский университет дружбы народов,
ул. Миклухо-Маклая, 6, Москва, 117198, Россия

Национальный исследовательский университет «Высшая школа экономики»,
ул. Мясницкая, 20, Москва, 101000, Россия

(e-mail: irina.trotsuk@yandex.ru)

Аннотация. На первый взгляд понятие империи кажется предельно прозрачным: со школьной скамьи мы учимся воспринимать историческое прошлое через хронологическую смену и жизненные циклы империй. Как правило, обыденные трактовки связывают понятие империи с чем-то огромным, могущественным и богатым во всех смыслах словах — отсюда множество метафорических отсылок к «империи» в маркетинговых целях (в названиях питейных и торговых заведений), однако не отличаются детализированными дефинициями и словарные трактовки [8; 33; 35; 75]. Учитывая возрастающую популярность предельно

широких историко-политических понятий (например, возрождение междисциплинарного интереса к «цивилизации» [2; 5; 30; 31; 37; 71]), следует прояснить основные интерпретации понятия «империя», тем более что для социологии это не инородный концепт [4; 74; 80]. Признавая обозначенные в литературе проблемы определения империи (масса фактического материала, который сложно обобщить, множество нюансов значений, споры представителей соперничающих теорий, путаница между дефиницией и типологией, лингвистическая двусмысленность и др. [66]), попробуем все же структурировать это вязкое понятийное поле. Для этого предложено несколько возможных решений: во-первых, поиск «типологических синдромов» в выдаче поисковых систем по запросу «определение империи» — просматриваются четыре расширенные и пересекающиеся трактовки (историко-филологическая, историко-(гео) политическая, критически-культурологическая и философско-катехонная). Во-вторых, количественный контент-анализ словарных толкований империи по результатам поисковой выдачи на словарном портале «Академик» — просматриваются пять наиболее частотных трактовок (в переносном значении; часть названия государств прошлого; содержательные определения через перечисление атрибутов империи как особой формы государственного устройства; монархическая или императорская власть; имя нарицательное). В-третьих, обращение к экспертному дискурсу: был проведен качественный контент-анализ публикаций в журнале «Ab Imperio», специализирующемся на развитии методологии изучения империи, — выделены основные концептуальные положения и категории современного «импероведения» (новая имперская история, имперский опыт, имперская риторика, имперский хронотоп, имперская биография, имперская ситуация, постимперия и др.). Сделан вывод о противоборстве двух условных подходов — универсалистски-объективирующего и дискурсивно-контекстуального, но в целом исследовательский фокус смещается с попыток построения гранд-теорий или типологий к анализу имперского опыта в контексте критического восприятия любого социального порядка и его самопрезентаций.

Ключевые слова: империя; обыденные трактовки и научный дискурс; имперский опыт; имперское прошлое; имперская риторика; имперская политика; имперское восприятие; количественный и качественный контент-анализ; новая имперская история

Для цитирования: Троцук И.В. В поисках империи: подходы к определению понятия в современном научном дискурсе // Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Социология. 2026. Т. 26. № 3. С. 801–815. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-2272-2026-26-3-801-815> EDN: UYHYFM