Introduction

It takes three and a half months to ride from Moscow to Karakorum. The Eurasian continent is vast, but historically, it has been easily traversed. It has also been strikingly homogeneous by dint not only of its grasslands but also its social and political organisation. Far from being an isolated phenomenon, steppe politics proved productive far beyond the boundaries of the steppe itself. From 4000 BCE (Before the Common Era) until only a few centuries ago, steppe politics have had an absolutely central effect on sedentary politics, from what we now call Europe in the west, via Persia in the south, to China in the east. When a fourteenth-century Russian ruler had to set out for the Mongol capital of Karakorum to receive his patent of rule, perhaps 'beginning his journey in the Dobrudja at the mouth of the Danube [he] could travel eastwards through the Pontic steppe across the Volga and beneath the southern flank of the Urals, continuing on through Kazakhstan to the Altai mountains and eventually to Mongolia' (Cunliffe 2008: 42), the landscape would stay the same, and the riders would simply re-track back to the steppe habitat from which they themselves had emerged only a long millennium before.

This book sets out to demonstrate that there was such a thing as a political steppe tradition and that this tradition hybridised with sedentary politics again and again down the millennia. Our aim is not only to fill in some missing knowledge about a specific region or to come up with some residual points about the emergence of the states system but also to demonstrate that a central part of the run-of-the-mill histories of the emergence of Eurasian states is systematically being elided. With the exception of a highly specific interest in Greek fifth-century BCE philosophising, most students of politics and international relations simply have not extended their historical interest far enough back in time to grasp the central role that what we call the 'political steppe tradition' has played, and arguably still plays, for their subject matter. More specifically, we see four major reasons why students of

politics should own up to this challenge. First, and most generally, any science worthy of the name should look at a maximum number of pertinent cases. Given that the study of international systems is at the core of the discipline of International Relations (Buzan & Little 2000; Butcher & Griffiths 2017) and that the steppe tradition constitutes the history of a system, we need a study of it for generalising purposes. As long as the steppe is left unexplored, the universe of cases upon which we build our generalisations remains suboptimal. Second, in-migration from the steppe was important for early sedentary polity formation, from early polities in Anatolia during the second millennium BCE to medieval polities from Russia in the west via Persia to China in the east. A study of the steppe is therefore central to the overall study of early polity formation. Third, the steppe tradition survived as what we may call a substrate of political practice into the modern era. The political tradition of states such as Turkey and Russia must be understood in terms of hybridisation of the steppe tradition, on the one hand, and the increasingly dominant European tradition (which itself once originated in the steppe), on the other. Thus, this book is also a study of one key precondition for the emergence of Turkish and Russian foreign policy. The fourth reason flows from the third: in the degree that Turkish and Russian foreign policies, and indeed politics in general, are different from those of European polities, the existence of a steppe substrate that is stronger in Turkey and Russia than in European states is one possible determinant of this difference.

We try to rise to these challenges by presenting a broad, chronologically ordered narrative. This narrative begins with the emergence of political organisation in the Eurasian steppe. When we say 'the steppe', the territorial reference is to the area south of the Arctic forest zone stretching from just north of the Black Sea to the northern frontier of China. The invention of the wheel and its fitting to wagons some 6,000 years ago made it possible for nomadic pastoralists to spend extended period in the Eurasian steppe. The first inhabitants of the steppe, the Proto-Indo-Europeans, gradually homogenised political organisation throughout the steppe by spreading ethnically non-specific practices such as sacrifice, formalised friendship (horizontal relations) and protection (vertical relations). These practices persisted when, in the first millennium BC, elite kinship lines shifted from being primarily Indo-European speaking to being primarily Turko-Mongol speaking.

We may talk of a political steppe tradition that centres on the rise and fall of steppe empires. The basic pattern is very clear. Social organisation in the steppe concentrated on the pastoral household. Nomadic pastoralist households vary first and foremost according to the size of their flocks. Certain households come to vouch for others during bad times and establish themselves as hereditary superior patrilinear kinship lines. Polities congeal around these lines. There is a continuous fight between polities over the best grasslands. With regular intervals, a new dominant polity will push a previous one towards the edge of the steppe and even out of it, into the surrounding sedentary population, and galvanise parts of (or in the case of the Mongols, even the entire) steppe into one empire. We detail the succession of such polities, from the Cimmerians, Scythians and Xiongnu in the first millennium BCE, to the Khazars, Kipchak and Mongols in the second millennium CE (Common Era).

Since any reading of a little-known historical sequence is implicitly comparative in the sense that what is read is taken in by categories already formed by knowledge of other historical sequences, we may as well stress some key differences between the steppe tradition and the European tradition, particularly as it evolves from the high Middle Ages. The steppe tradition is not an ethnic tradition. Methodological nationalism, which equates ethnic stock and language with kinship, tends to get in the way of most discussion of the area we are examining. It seems likely that the bulk of the steppe peoples are descended from Indo-Europeans, particularly people of Iranic stock (Anthony 2007), since Iranic peoples made up a key part of the nomads before Turko-Mongol elite kinship lines conquered the steppe.[1] In terms of politics, however, this is neither here nor there, for the conquering of polities led by Iranic kinship lines by polities led by Turko-Mongol kinship lines did not seem to bring on significant changes in social and political organisation. From the very beginning, steppe polities were multiethnic. Ethnicity was in evidence – there are various originary myths tied to kinship – but it pertained to social organisation on the levels of household and clan and not to the complex polities that were formed out of different households and clans.

[1] We follow common usage and use 'Persian' and 'Iranian' about stuff pertaining to polities named Persia and Iran but 'Iranic' to denote the wider cultural catchment area; similarly, 'Turkish' pertains to Turkey and 'Turkic' to the wider Turk world.

By the same token, it would make little sense to highlight language beyond kinship lines. The Xiongnu Empire, which arose in the third century BCE out of households and polities, already had at least half a millennium long presence in the Eastern steppe and was to spawn the Huns who were instrumental in bringing down the Roman Empire during the fourth century was in all probability not primarily Indo-European speaking. As a matter of fact, we do not quite know what they spoke (Golden 1992: 57); one possibility is an Altaic language, but the etymologies of the names of Hun leaders suggest a Turkic language (Kim 2013: 30). The fact of the matter is that the question of language spoken, so important to the forging of nations in Europe, was not that important on the steppe. Polities were defined by their rulers, not by language. All steppe empires were polyglot. Rulers would use one language for court conversation – from the 500s to the 600s CE onwards, typically a Turkic or Mongol one – but the language of administration and also of contact with sedentaries would typically be an Iranic one. Even the language of the Ottoman Empire, Ottoman Turkish (*osmanlıca*), consisted of a Turkic grammatical structure with a host of loanwords and other elements from Persian, Arabic and Greek. Rulers and statesmen were polyglot. When Ottoman Sultan Selim I communicated with the Safavid ruler in Iran, the former would write in Persian, while the latter would write his answers in Turkic. The relationship between the Turkic and the Iranic peoples, of whom the Persians are one, was so intertwined that the eleventh-century author Mahmud al-Kashgari noted that a 'Turk is never without a Persian (just as) a cap is never without a head' (1982: 273).

It was rulers, and not ethnicity or language, that defined empires. Down the centuries, some young man would succeed brilliantly in recruiting followers, routing neighbours and yoking them into his expanding polity, raiding caravans and sedentaries and even exacting tribute from them. The resulting consolidated confederations, what we may call 'steppe empires', were defined by the rulers who had brought them into existence. Until the fifteenth century, rulers-in-waiting roamed the steppe, looking for followers and taking their claim to rule from the institution of kinship. Mongols spoke of the 'golden kin' and meant Chinggisid lineages – lines running from Ghenghis [Chinggis] Khan, the founder of the empire – and in this, as in so much else, they were firmly placed in a millennia-long steppe tradition.

Kinship is a many-splendoured thing, however, and it would be a gross mistake to assume that it played the same role in the forging of steppe polities as it did in the forging of European polities. In Europe, with the exception of republics, politics took the form of different aristocratic families fighting for kingship. In the steppe, the number of aristocratic kinship lines involved was never very high, and at the time of the Mongols, one set of noble kinship lines, and one set only, was supposed to furnish rulers. We are moving on the level of ideal representations here. In practice, every dynasty has to have a beginning, and usurpers will try their hand at inventing genealogies that will prop up their claims. After all, Chinggis (a.k.a. Genghis) Khan himself was a usurper. This did not, however, change the social fact that rulership was reserved for those belonging to a noble kinship line, so succession was supposed to be a family affair. A supreme ruler – a khagan – was to be succeeded by people from his own line.

If the relative unimportance of language and ethnicity, as well as the specific linkage of kinship and politics, made for different political categories in the steppe and in Europe, respectively, so did the legitimising principle of the ruler, which was that the khagan had God's grace as long as things went well (*qut*). The principle is well known – from China (whence it probably found its way to the steppe), from Iran (another possible inspiration for the steppe) and from Medieval Latin Europe (where princes and kings ruled 'by the grace of God'). With *qut*, as with everything else concerned, we only need go back far enough to find how the steppe and the sown are caught up in a game of hybridising that only petered out in the eighteenth century.

While the first part of our narrative traces the emergence of the steppe tradition, the second part fastens on the interface between the steppe tradition, on the one hand, and sedentaries on the south-western periphery of the steppe, on the other. The international or, more correctly, inter-polity relations between steppe polities and sedentary polities turn on two key factors. First, in order for a steppe polity to become a fully fledged steppe empire by dint of swallowing other steppe polities, it had to succeed in raiding and extracting tribute from sedentary populations. As seen from the steppe, sedentary polities held key resources that could be put to work in intra-steppe relations. Second, as already noted, losing steppe polities were often pushed off the steppe and into sedentary polities, where they often became allied to sedentaries who needed protection against the very same steppe polities that

had pushed their new incoming allies off the steppe. Steppe polities presented themselves to sedentaries in two different guises, as victorious raiders, tribute-takers and conquerors and as possible allies. As a rule, yesterday's raider became today's ally. Nomadic allies were also often recruited by sedentary leaders and contenders engaging in intra-sedentary power struggles. This state of affairs invited no end of hybridisation. Empirically, we discuss these dynamics by tracing two polities, one sedentary polity that was decisively hybridised by the continuing relations with steppe polities and eventually emerged as Russia and one that came in from the steppe as a conqueror to become first the Ottoman Empire and eventually Turkey.

Russia's steppe contacts begin with the khazars in the eighth century onwards,[2] continue with Pechenegs and Kipchaks and come to a head with the Mongol invasion of the 1240s. The Turkic dynasties that conquered Iran, Anatolia and the Balkans from the eleventh to the fifteenth century were peopled by steppe nomads who conquered by virtue of their superior military organisation and techniques. Steppe practices were an integral part of Ottoman politics throughout its history and served as an important symbolic order when the sultan went to war. The court settled down in times of peace and had a nomadic counterpart in times of war at least until the second siege of Vienna in 1683 (Aksan 2007). The capital was then considered to be wherever the Ottoman sultan went and not in the palace he had left behind. The Ottomans themselves took over a large part of their conceptual and institutional apparatus from the steppe, and although its importance was clearly not constant throughout its history, this lasted until the end of the empire (Golden 1992; Findley 2005; Dale 2010). Russia was also intimately tied to the steppe tradition. The steppe-nomadic Avars and later Khazars raided the early Slavs, who appear to have become hybridised to the point of calling their own leader *khagan* (Curta 2011: 16–17). Indeed, although it is hardly ever mentioned in the literature, the early Rus' and early Seljuq polities are at one in having emerged from under Khazar suzerainty (with the Seljuqs

[2] Early Slavs emerged on the Danube in the sixth century, often from under Avar rule. We do not know why some Slavs trekked north to where Rus' was eventually founded, but one key hypothesis is that they tried to avoid the Avars. Be that as it may, early Slavs, who were agriculturalists, are certain to have been in perpetual contact with steppe peoples from their very emergence (Neumann 2016).

emerging from out of the Oghuz confederacy, which was under Khazar suzerainty). Varangian state-builders who came down from the north from the eighth century onwards copied Khazar models, and steppe polities posed a continuous challenge until 1239, when the lands were overrun by the Mongol Empire (Fennell 1983; Halperin 1987; Morgan 1986; Allsen 1987; Franklin & Shepard 1996; Ostrowski 1998; Jackson 2005; Jönsson & Hall 2005). The Muscovy polity that emerged towards the end of the fifteenth century was, as we shall see in Chapter 5, modelled on the steppe tradition not only by dint of specific military, diplomatic and administrative practices but also where thinking about hierarchy and legitimacy was concerned (Kappeler 2001; Poe 2000). Furthermore, early incarnations of Russia and Turkey – Rus' and the Ottoman Empire – both emerged as polities subordinate to imperial steppe-related systems.

Steppe Empires and the States System

In extant literature on the states system, the basic idea is that the system emerged in Europe and then came to envelop the rest of the world, beginning with the Ottoman Empire and Russia. There is some debate over how this homogenisation came about, but the consensus is that the states system is now homogeneous and consists of like units (Waltz 1979). We are dissatisfied with this story because it looks at the world exclusively from the point of view of an expanding European tradition and also overstates the homogeneity of contemporary political life across the globe. Phillips and Sharman point us in a more fruitful direction when they describe the littoral Indian Ocean system as 'durably diverse', consisting of different types of units engaging in symbiotic relations:

> Europeans and local political actors pursued different but compatible goals. The continental empires unsurprisingly sought wealth, power and glory on land, and were often indifferent to maritime affairs. Even the smaller littoral polities of the region, from the Swahili Coast to the Spice Islands, did not share the militarized monopoly trading aims of the Europeans. For their part, the Europeans largely eschewed territorial conquests, instead building and fighting over maritime networks and strategic fortified ports and trading posts. A critical similarity, however, between Africans, Asians and Europeans was the culturally distinct but congruent beliefs regarding the legitimacy of shared and overlapping authority, especially between the

Mughals, the company sovereigns and the smaller Indian Ocean galactic polities. The division of territory and sovereign prerogatives was not zero-sum, and the sort of competitive dynamics and relative gains logic that International Relations scholars generally assume is an inevitable feature of international polities were muted, if not entirely absent. Finally, rather than relying on static institutional parallels, all these actors adopted and adapted disparate practices of localization. (Phillips & Sharman 2015b: 206)

We find this to be a more useful approach to what kind of 'international system' existed in Eurasia until the nineteenth century. In order to analyse the fallout from what was a series of cultural meetings, we do not need a Eurocentric approach but a relational one (Jackson & Nexon 1999).[3] Since it is impossible to deliver a fully relational story of a 6,000-year-long sequence, our aim in this regard is limited to highlighting what should have been a rather obvious point, namely that European agency did not rule the roost alone but meshed with steppe agency. We will draw on the concept of hybridisation, particularly as it has been used in semiotic studies of cultural meetings (Lotman 2000). We offer an alternative and more relational story, where polities emerging out of the steppe tradition meet sedentary polities whose genealogy, lest it be forgotten, was in each and every case itself shaped by previous hybridisation between incoming steppe polities and sedentaries. European polities from Troy via

[3] For similar critiques informed by studies of China, Africa and Latin America, see Hobson (2004), Dunn & Shaw (2001), Trouillot (1991). See also Brown (2006). Kim (2013: 4) pinpoints an important Eurocentric reason why the steppe has not been studied more when he writes that '[w]ith the exception of the significant, but in fact comparatively brief, interlude of Arab Muslim and Tang Chinese dominance between the seventh and ninth centuries CE (roughly 200 years), the millennium that we identify as the Dark Ages-cum-Middle Ages was without doubt the era of Turco-Mongol supremacy. In this world order, Inner Asia formed the core and Europe, China and the Middle East were merely the periphery. Such a reality was difficult to accept for most historians in both the West and also the East. No Sinocentric or Eurocentric writer could ever admit that their world was of secondary importance in the grand scheme of things and that the "nomadic", steppe barbarians, whom they despised, were at one stage even in the distant past their superiors and overlords. The solution had been to basically ignore this period of history altogether (as the relative dearth of scholarly interest in the so-called Middle Ages in comparison with the previous "Classical Period" of Greco-Roman pre-eminence and the later Pre-Modern European era shows) or relegate the Turks and the Mongols to oblivion by attributing to them unbelievably primitive and bestial levels of cultural development and a comprehensive lack of any redeeming civilized features.'

Charlemagne's Empire to present-day states have been at one in trying to forget their own steppe origins. We think that it is time to have a look at what has consistently and continuously been treated as the *pudenda origo*, or 'dirty origin', of European state formation.

Temporality is of the essence here. It makes a key difference *when* polities are being constituted by migration from the steppe (fourth century, as in Spain, or tenth century, as in Hungary?) and how long contacts are maintained (tapering off from the ninth century, as in continental Europe, or only in the sixteenth century, as in Russia?). We highlight how polities such as Russia and the Ottoman Empire brought with them fresh steppe baggage to meetings with European states. The pre-existing practices of these states, by which we simply mean the inter-subjectively accepted ways of doing things – the legitimation of rule, the division of labour between army and bureaucracy, the various practices of succession and so on – shaped how the transition to membership in international society happened. Steppe practices did not simply disappear but were hybridised with newly acquired practices. What is hybridised is then what we will refer to as 'repertoires of practice' (Tilly 2010; Swidler 1986). Just as social movements draw upon a spatially and historically delimited set of tactics that they deploy to pursue their claims, so too do international actors typically select from within a repertoire that simultaneously 'provide[s] an array of possible tactics' but also limits them as they 'generally turn to familiar routines and innovate within them, even when in principle some unfamiliar form of action would serve their interests much better' (Tilly 1986: 4). Repertoires act as a 'locus around which varied performances' of power politics 'are created' (Rolfe 2005: 66). These repertoires are not fully formed wholes but can be thought of as ever-restocked tool boxes, with concepts and practices being the tools available to a particular individual or community. New ways of doing things are *added* to state elites' repertoires, complementing what is already there. These new practices and concepts do not travel unchanged but are translated and adapted to fit with the pre-existing state tradition (see Wigen 2018). Hence, even when states such as Russia and Turkey try to abide by the rules of international society, they are easily stigmatised as outsiders because the extent and way of using these practices diverge slightly from those of the rest of the collective (Zarakol 2011). Moreover, the old ways of doing things do not simply go away. This can be thought of in terms of a rephrasing of Robert Redfield's (1955; 1960) distinction

between a 'great' and a 'little' tradition. The little tradition does not simply influence how the great tradition is practiced at the time of its adoption, but it continues (at least for a while) to represent an alternative set of available practices or governance tools that not just subalterns (with whom Redfield associates the 'little tradition') but also elites can do things with, should those of the great tradition fail to achieve what they set out to do. As with any tradition, the 'little tradition' is also vibrant and can be transformed during times of marginalisation. To be more specific, while Turkish statesmen have adopted and translated European political practices as part of their repertoires of governance, there still remain old ways of doing things, of ruling, and of legitimising rule. When practices taken from the European repertoire fail to produce the intended results (e.g. EU membership), there is an alternative set of practices available on which rulers may fall back. The tabloid formulation of this is 'Turkey is turning east.' A much better way of analysing this, we aver, is as an emergent hybridising process between European and steppe repertoires.

Hybridisation of practice repertoires is a standard feature of all communities, and hence all state elites have different sets of practices available to them (though they themselves may not necessarily conceive of them in such terms). There are two ways to account for why some of these states still behave differently from European states and for why there are marked similarities between states like Russia and Turkey, similarities that are specific to states that had fresh contacts with the steppe tradition at the time when the states system began to evolve. The first such similarity is, of course, a greater propensity to use *other parts* of their repertoires of statecraft practices when the 'new' ways of doing things, associated with international society, fail to produce the intended results. A second similarity is that when these states seek to be norm-following peers within European-emergent international society, the way the practices were translated into Turkish and Russian, for example, make for certain idiosyncracies that are specific to each language. To put the point in terms borrowed from a theory of linguistics (see e.g. Cravens 1994), we may say that these states share a *substrate* logic, with a substrate language being a language that is no longer spoken as such but which marks the grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation of a certain group, one example being former speakers of Greek on the Black Sea coast, whose written and spoken use of Turkish clearly demonstrates the influence of the seemingly forgotten