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IDEOLOGICAL DETERMINANTS OF MILITARY AGGRESSION IN THE POLITICS OF TODAY'S RUSSIA



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Zusammenfassung:

IDEOLOGISCHE FAKTOREN DER MILITÄRISCHEN AGGRESSION IN DER POLITIK DES HEUTIGEN RUSSLAND

Der Russland-Ukraine-Krieg ist ein Konflikt, der von russischer Seite eng mit Geschichtsbildern verknüpft wird. Diese Bezüge werden aber nicht nur zu Propagandazwecken herangezogen – auch die politische Ideologie, politische Entscheidungen oder das russische Verständnis von Sicherheit müssen aus diesen Bezügen heraus betrachtet und erklärt werden. Das zugrunde liegende Geschichtsbild in Kombination mit ideologisch gefärbten Einschätzungen zur globalen Situation und Rolle Russlands sind wesentliche Ursachen und Triebkräfte des andauernden Konflikts. Dieser Beitrag zeichnet diese Zugänge nach und analysiert ihre Ursprünge, Entwicklung und Auswirkungen in Russland und darüber hinaus.

In today's Russia, the concept of "security" is not only influenced, but completely shaped by ideological structures. Many of these structures have their deep-rooted origins in history. As a consequence of this conditioning, the meaning of "security" is significantly misinterpreted by Russian politicians that it significantly differs from a generally accepted understanding of a concept of security. The subjects of this analysis are the ideological aspects that act as the fundamental basis of propaganda mechanisms in today's Russian political discourse and the construction of appropriate strategies to define, formulate and ensure the implementation of the concept of Russian security policy.

ROOTS AND CAUSES

Understanding the roots and causes of Russian aggression in Ukraine needs historical and social research designed to uncover these roots in different periods

of Russian history. By analyzing and understanding current Russian expansionism in the context of political science, the role of these ideological views as a factor in the deployment of expansionist policy, as a manifestation of the practice of confrontation and imposition of meanings and systems of beliefs in the political space becomes clear. In this case, in our opinion, the policy of expansionism is not a result of the desire for new territorial conquests that require justification and legitimization of such conquests, but the result of already formed imperial ideologemes that have become determinative factors for the current Kremlin leadership in implementing its foreign policy. "An idea in action", according to Carl Friedrich, that undergoes another transformation or "reincarnation". However, the latter is also confirmed by the historical experience of previous decades, which demonstrated the premature testifying by Daniel Bell¹ and Francis Fukuyama² of both the "end of ideology" and the "end of history", respectively.

Imperial traditions, deeply rooted in Russian history, have a strong influence on Russian identity to this day. These are also based on a strong foundation of imperial narratives with a harsh aggressive orientation. In today's Russia, to identify as a Russian means to fully legitimize the Putin regime and its policies, including absolute support for the brutal aggressive war unleashed by Russia against Ukraine. The reason for such aggression is presumably the non-recognition of modern global transformations by Russian authorities and emerging foreign policy realities where Russia does not find its place and also demonstrates inability or even unwillingness to adapt. Russia's foreign policy is rigidly determined by imperial ideologemes, which have become, in fact, the basis and foundation for the existence of current Russian statehood. Ideological determinants have become the main background and driving forces of both foreign and domestic policies.³ At the same time, it is very difficult not only to name and identify political ideology in contemporary Russia, but moreover to categorize this ideology. At least, in comparison with Soviet ideology, which was based on the works of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and Vladimir Lenin as its foundation, or with Nazi ideology, which was represented by the ideas of Alfred Rosenberg, Joseph

Goebbels and Adolf Hitler, current political ideology in Russia has neither doctrinal consistency nor a logical sequence of basic statements. In fact, it can be seen as a conglomerate of loosely connected and often illogical ideological clichés, the latter being a strange from both Soviet and pre-Soviet times, sometimes even contradictory.⁴

IDEOLOGEMES

The ideologemes used are confusing and highly inconsistent. Among the political ideologemes with a fundamental or, as they say in Russia, "scraping" significance, narratives associated with World War II are especially important and interesting. In the Russian narrative, this war is overlapped by the Great Patriotic War.⁵ The idea of the greatest exploit and the decisive role not of the Soviet Union but of the Russian people in achieving victory in that bygone war is cultivated in everyday life – a war the overwhelming majority of Russians does not remember and know anything or very little about.⁶ At the same time, ideological clichés become sacralized and become postulates that cannot be questioned or reconsidered critically, while other topics related to World War II are tabooed, distorted, or just not communicated.⁷



Fig. 1: Victory Day Parade on 9.5.2022 in Moscow.

The political ideology that has taken shape in Russia over more than the past two decades has not yet received a terminological description and justification in the academic world. Journalists and bloggers use different names for the current Russian political regime and its ideology. They refer to concepts such as Nazism/Neo-Nazism or Fascism/Neo-Fascism respectively, thus using terminology established in political and historical context. In social networks, the journalistic community of Ukraine and in Ukrainian publicity in general, the term “Rashism” has become widespread, a combination of the English words “Russia” and “fascism”, comparing it with a regime and its atrocities British Prime Minister Winston Churchill called to “exceed any human crime”⁸ on May 13, 1940. It will be seen what name and reflection the current Russian regime and its ideology will receive in the academic community in the future.

Based on Carl Friedrich’s definition, ideologies are systems of ideas associated with action, and, in addition, political ideology is consolidated by certain social groups, classes and communities around its main principles and is realized in a complex of political programs and strategies designed to implement a holistic system of ideas for political means to maintain or transform the political order.⁹ For us, the positioning of Russia represents an interest by the consideration of documentation of strategic importance, which provides much information for further analysis.¹⁰ While under President Boris Yeltsin the National Security Concept of 1997 referred to Russia as an influential European-Asian state¹¹, the Foreign Policy Concept of 2000 under Vladimir Putin begins to change many accents and is positioning Russia as a major Eurasian power.¹² During Putin’s third term, accessible strategic documents show attempts by the Russian establishment to rethink Russia as a separate civilization. In particular, the Strategy of State National Policy for 2025 speaks of a unified cultural (civilizational) code for the modern Russian state.¹³ And the National Security Concept states that national interests require strengthening the position of Russia as a great power and one of the influential centers of a multipolar world.



Fig. 2: Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin in 2000.

In the Foreign Policy Concept of 2000, this position as a “great power” was supplemented by the theses about the national superpower of the Russian Federation and its real potential to ensure its worthy rightful place in the world.¹⁴ In 2009, Russia’s self-positioning took on new forms in the National Security Strategy. It did not refer to ensuring a decent place in the world, but about transforming Russia into “one

of the leading states in terms of technological progress, quality of life, and influence on global processes”.¹⁵ In 2015, the National Security Strategy enshrined the self-designation of Russia as a world power and defined its status as one of the world’s leading powers being one of its long-term national

interests.¹⁶ Looking at this, it becomes clear that from the 1990s until today, Russia has gone from recognizing itself as the largest Eurasian country over developing to a world power up to transforming into one of the leading world superpowers in the foreseeable future, influencing world processes.

It is not the topic of this text to explore if these global intentions correlate with the real potential and resource capabilities of the economy and the political system in Russia. Nevertheless, under the influence of such self-positioning, Russia was building a foreign policy course since the years of Yeltsin’s presidency, taking also the neighboring countries of Russia into account. Since the 1990s, in relation to post-Soviet countries as former republics of the USSR, various strategic doctrines and concepts are dominated by formulations about the “Near abroad”, “common military-strategic space” or “common economic and legal space”.¹⁷

From the beginning of the 1990s, in the first years of the new Russian statehood, there were repeated attempts to implement such statements concerning foreign policy in the strategic documentation. In 1992-1993, the supreme representative assembly of Russia adopted a number of resolutions concerning the Crimea and Sevastopol, questioning the territorial integrity of Ukraine. Such territorial claims should be interpreted only by pro-imperial ambitions, the ascertainment that the former USSR is “the sphere

of vital interests of Russia". This position is fueled by the military doctrine of the Russian Federation and "the weakness of the neighboring state, which seemed unable to give proper fighting".¹⁸ An example are the events of 2003 around the island of Kosa Tuzla, which became a kind of rehearsal for the dramatic events of the occupation of Crimea in February 2014.

Among the basic ideologemes of contemporary Russia, a special place belongs to the position of Vladimir Putin and one of the indicative speeches he gave on February 10th 2007 in Munich. In this speech, he outlined his vision of world politics as a multipolar world, under the guise of concern over the newly emerging unipolar world. The speech deplored the loss and disappearance of the previously dominant bipolar model in international relations. The destruction of one of the poles, namely the Soviet pole, is certainly regarded by Putin as a tragic event, about which he has repeatedly lamented: "I believe that the unipolar model is not only unacceptable for the modern world, but also impossible. And not only because with unipolar leadership in today's – exactly in today's – world there will be neither enough military and political nor economic resources. But more importantly, the model itself does not work, since it does not and cannot have a moral basis for the modern civilization".¹⁹ Further, Putin declared **declamatory** the need for the existence of universal norms of international law and the need to ensure that international law has a universal character.

Let us leave aside his "concern" about the fate of modern civilization, although in today's realities this concern looks very cynical, just as the word about condemning the crimes of "some countries" in the course of military operations, which can hardly be called legitimate, and in which hundreds and thousands of civilians are killed: "At the same time, everything that is happening in the world today – and we have just begun to discuss this – is a consequence of attempts to introduce this very concept in world affairs – the concept of a unipolar world."²⁰ And further: "Today, on the contrary, we observe a situation when countries, where the use of the death penalty is prohibited even against murderers and other criminals – dangerous criminals, despite this; such countries easily take part in military operations, which can hardly be called legitimate. And yet in these conflicts people die – hundreds, thousands of peaceful people!"²¹ After the terrible crimes of the

Russian army in Ukraine, such phrases reveal the whole essence of Putin's false hybrid propaganda. When black is called white and white is called black, the aggressor is called the victim and the victim is called the aggressor, war is called a "special operation", and so on. Even George Orwell and his characters could have envied such a sophisticated use of double-thinking.

The following theses demonstrate not only the cynicism but also the sophisticated hybrid nature of Putin's propaganda, in which everything – truth and lies, aggressors and victims, justice and injustice – is mixed up, turned upside down, and rendered meaningless. Such "ultra-Goebbels" propaganda leads to the situation when it is impossible to recognize, distinguish and make sense of anything. Everything gets lost and devalued in the hybrid stream of absurdity and endless lies. This is yet another illustration of Putin's hybrid propaganda in action: "According to the founding documents in the humanitarian sphere, the OSCE is called upon to assist member countries, at their request, in complying with international human rights standards. This is an important task. We support it. But this does not mean interfering in the internal affairs of other countries, let alone imposing on these states how they should live and develop." Obviously, such interference does not contribute to the maturation of truly democratic states.²² On the contrary, it makes them dependent and, as a consequence, politically and economically unstable. There is no doubt that in such lofty phrases, Putin declares the need to assert the principle of the force of law (in this case, international law). However, in fact, behind the camouflage of Putin's hybrid propaganda, the goal is to assert in world politics not the force of law, but the law of force.

Subsequently, Putin's foreign policy found its continuation in the doctrine of so-called limited sovereignty. The basic statement, main ideas and elements of this doctrine are summarized and formulated in the public speeches of the Russian president, in particular in his address to both chambers of the Federal Assembly in connection with the proposal of the State Council of the Republic of Crimea to accept the Republic into the Russian Federation, speeches at the Valdai Forum on 24th October 2014 and in his address to the Russian Federal Assembly on 4th December 2014. In addition, on 26th December 2014, Putin approved a new military doctrine of the Russian Federation, which, compared to the previ-

ous one from 2010 on threats to Russia's security, includes regime change in neighboring countries that "undermine" political stability in Russia.²³ This justifies Russia's aggression into neighboring countries and openly legitimizes interventions of Russian expansionism.

THE USE OF HISTORICAL IMAGES OF THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE

In recent years, another concept-idea about a so-called historical Russia has begun to appear in Putin's speeches. This concept is quite heterogeneous and vaguely articulated by the Kremlin leader himself, implying the idea of restoring the project of a somewhat "primordial" Russia, which would include either the territories of the former Soviet Union or those of the former Russian Empire. Such nostalgia is caused primarily by revanchist sentiments and regrets about the disappearance of the former empire. We should not forget that Putin called the collapse of the Soviet Union the "greatest geopolitical tragedy of the twentieth century".²⁴ Among the persons who are called ideologues of the Russian imperial doctrine and probably had a significant influence on Putin's worldview, in the authors opinion, it is worth highlighting Aleksandr Dugin with his book *The Foundations of Geopolitics*. Here, Dugin substantiated and outlined the foundations of Russian foreign policy implemented in the era of Putinism. Among the most urgent threats to Russian security and the most likely scenarios for the unleashing of wars in which Russia will be involved, Dugin focuses on a so-called civil war, inspired, according to his conviction, from the outside by Western countries. However, by this term, he in fact means Russia waging a military conflict against neighboring countries. Let us limit ourselves to one, but extended and very revealing quote, illustrating Dugin's vision of foreign policy: "A variant of civil war is defined by the formula: RF [Russian Federation] vs one (or several) of the republics of the Near abroad. Such a situation could easily arise because of the extreme instability of the new state formations on the territory of the former USSR. The overwhelming majority of these states, which do not have a more or less stable state and national tradition, are created within completely arbitrary random borders that do not coincide with either the ethnic, socio-economic or religious territories of or-

ganic societies, will inevitably be plunged into deep internal and external crisis. They will fundamentally be unable to acquire any genuine sovereignty, since their strategic capabilities do not allow them to defend their independence without resorting to external assistance. The collapse of their political, social and economic systems is inevitable, and naturally, this cannot but affect their attitude both to the Russian (or pro-Russian-oriented) population and to Russia itself. In this case, most likely, it is from their side that Russia will be challenged, to which Russia will be forced to respond with a degree of aggressiveness [...] The main enemy in such a war for the Russians will be their immediate neighbors."²⁵

Dugin's disrespect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the new states that emerged on the territory of the former Soviet Union after 1991 and his disregard for the norms of international law deserve separate consideration. For this analysis, it is worth paying attention to the fact that among the most likely threats to security and, as a result, war scenarios, Dugin highlights wars with neighboring states, which he does not even consider as states, due to his imperial ambitions. What he meant with the term of "immediate neighbors" was shown by the events of 2008 during the occupation of South Ossetia in Georgia and 2014 in Ukraine after the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in Donbass. The choice of the enemy was not accidental: according to Hannah Arendt, an ideology that wants to convince and mobilize people cannot choose a victim arbitrarily.²⁶ Thus, enemies are not chosen arbitrarily either.

While there are enough reasons to classify Dugin as part of relevant political consultants and advisors, there are also many individuals who should be classified as "scientists". Unfortunately, political ideologemes have become prevalent in Russia not only in the political, but also in the scientific landscape. Russian historian Vladimir Serebryannikov in his work *Russia's Wars: A Social and Political Analysis* postulates the following thesis as a well-known fact: "Russia may conduct lawful, fair, liberating and aggressive unjust wars in the future."²⁷ The author does not indicate any criteria to distinguish between "just, lawful" and "unjust" wars. Apparently, this judgement should be done by those who will be entrusted with the mission, who possess not only a monopoly on power and violence, but also a monopoly on truth. That is the



Fig. 3: Map showing the regional crisis between Russia and Georgia in 2008.

competence to give the power the right to impose and establish the truth, or rather what is considered as such truth. And further, Serebryannikov explains the reasons for militarism in Russia by the fact “that the country is forced to prepare for such wars in order to preserve itself, to survive in the modern very wild world, to go forward and have a perspective.” This understanding of threats to Russia’s security and the resulting justification for its own aggression is corresponding with Putin’s current rhetoric that Russia was forced to launch its war of aggression against Ukraine, justifying this aggression with considerations of its own survival, external threats from the West and NATO etc. In Putin’s narrative, the aggressive war against Ukraine is exaggerated into a global confrontation with NATO and the entire Western world.

Serebryannikov also offers his scenario of the course of events in the near future: “Russia will have to build armed forces capable of simultaneously conducting a large-scale war and one or two local conflicts, to conduct peacekeeping on the territory of the CIS [Commonwealth of Independent States] on the basis of agreements with relevant countries and also jointly with other countries in Europe and Asia”.²⁸ The way Russia has carried out and is carrying out such “peacekeeping missions” already has repeatedly tested principles: first, agents of special services inspire and instigate conflicts, and

then, according to habitually developed schemes, these processes are covered in mass media, press releases and statements of officials categorizing these conflicts as “civil war” or “internal conflict”, requiring urgent and immediate intervention of “peacekeepers”, the role of which, naturally, must be played by the armed forces of the Russian Federation. It is noteworthy, however, that on some pages Serebryannikov predicted a scenario for Russia that is close to the path that is being observed today in Russia: “If aggressive and criminal by their nature classes, groups, and parties that sow social discord and enmity and aim to use any means and methods to enrich themselves in power become entrenched in Russia’s authority, the country itself may turn into a source of military danger.”²⁹

Russia’s hybrid warfare for realizing its imperial ambitions methods imply, in addition to military measures, a whole range of other instruments, from information and propaganda activities to financial, economic and energy pressure and coercion. From the point of view of Russian officialdom, these are means of “peace enforcement”. Especially energy supply was used by the Russian leadership in the 2000s in such a way, giving rise to neologisms as “energy empire” and “energy superpower” in the public political environment, leading to the idea of Russia acting as a newly emerged “global energy empire (superpower)” in scientific and popular-sci-

entific literature. Such adherents who globalize the scale of warfare include Konstantin Simonov, who announces in his book *Global Energy War* a fundamentally different stage and recommends that “Russia must enter to the new stage of energy wars as prepared and soberly assessing the political risks”.³⁰ His conclusions: “The world has divided into two new blocs – not the socialist and capitalist systems, but those who possess serious reserves of oil and gas and those who are their key consumers. The world is moving from consumer dictate to seller dictate. Alternative energy sources will remain more for public relations purposes; they will not become a real substitute for oil and gas. Not sellers, but consumers will use political tools, elbowing other buyers of hydrocarbons. Russia, with its enormous oil and gas reserves, above all can use them to expand its own weight on the world stage.”³¹

The author’s position is especially revealed by another statement: “The hydrocarbon famine is what is pushing the world toward global conflict today. If conflicts, including military ones, are around the corner, it is better to be prepared for them than to continue sitting in rose-colored glasses, reading books about the happiness of all mankind.”³² The events of recent years show quite different political and economic developments taking place in the world and put the vast majority of the assumptions of this author in question. The irreplaceability of oil and gas as absolute non-alternative energy sources in the world energy market for example, or the absolute dominance of the producer, dictating his terms to the consumer in the future.³³ And the hypothesis about the hydrocarbon famine as an impetus to a global conflict should be perceived not as a probable forecast, but rather as a desirable scenario that the Russian leadership itself was interested in putting many efforts into the implementation, as the events of 2021 and 2022 have shown. Examples are the measures of the Kremlin leadership connected with the suspension of the Yamal-Europe pipeline and cessation of natural gas transit through Ukrainian territory. Also the destruction of the finished, but not yet used Nord Stream II gas pipeline would fit in this picture, as an “apotheosis” of all this militaristic aggressive policy of today’s Russia.³⁴ The list of imperial-oriented and pro-Kremlin “experts” is not limited to these persons, but there is not enough space here to present an extended list of such ideologues in all the diversity of their opinions and arguments.

RUSSIA’S REALITY AS A FACTOR

Today’s Russia, with its archaic development strategy, with its problems of internal separatism, crisis in the economy, destabilization and polarization in the social and societal structure, and potential ethnic conflicts, exacerbated by foreign policy failures and defeats, is a country that demonstrates movement not into the future but into the past. This “colossus on clay feet”, as Denis Diderot called Russia in the 18th century, appears as the embodiment not of progress, but of regression, not development, but backwardness in a modern world. This backwardness is represented in many manifestations, from the archaic barbaric cruelty in the treatment of prisoners of war and civilians in the occupied territories to the basic ideological postulates that have become ideological templates for today’s Russia. And it is literally cemented in the minds of millions of people, which determine the course of foreign (and to a large extent also domestic) policy. In recent decades, one of the main slogans of Russian imperial politics on the ideological field, along with the narrative of “re-gathering the land”, has been the appeal “We can do it again!” This statement, often connected to the war in Ukraine, represents the almost irrational desire of Russians to reproduce and, as it were, “re-live” the Soviet victory in World War II, reproducing thereby the geopolitical balance of power on the international stage. And it seems that Russia can and does repeat all those obsolete ways of managing and conducting war with a seemingly talentless leadership, repeats its methods and practices of ruthless treatment of its own soldiers and civilians in the occupied territories, showing parallels to the 1920s and 1940s.³⁵ In other words, Russia is waging a war along the lines of World War II, and the main thing that it can repeat and is already repeating is the huge number of casualties among both military and civilians as a result of this insane attempt to return to the past, a return to some mythical former greatness, which has again been constructed in propaganda pictures and which the Kremlin offers to recreate anew. But the result of this attempt to transfer the past into the present is in fact a replacement of the past for the present and the future for Russia itself and its citizens. In other words, the Kremlin leadership acts as if trying to replace the future of its country and its citizens with a surrogate of the past.

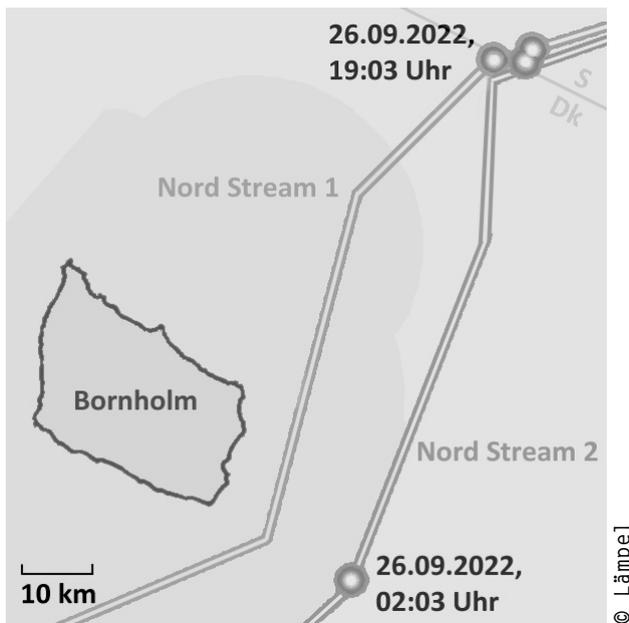


Fig. 4: Locations and time stamps for the Nord Stream bombings.

The current war is becoming an existential war, a war of identities, rather than a confrontation over resources or territory. The brutal aggression organized by the Kremlin entails a rigid dichotomy, based on which Putinism leaves the possibility of further existence to either Ukraine or Russia, but not both of them.³⁶ Such an idea of a dichotomy does not only determine the results and victory in the war, but also has to do with the very prospect of further existence of the two states in principle rather than coexistence.³⁷ Unfortunately, it seems that the problem is not reduced to the question of coexistence of the two states, because, in case the “Ukrainian question” is solved like the Moscow scenario determines it, the imperial ideology and the resulting imperial policy will direct Russian aggression toward other neighboring states. The political ideology of contemporary Russia is not characterized by a structured sequence of statements, provisions and logical rigor of reasoning, but by a set of basic ideas that can be found in most documents on geo-policy, strategy and public statements of the political leadership of the country. These ideas are:

- “Great power”, built by imperial ambitions about the super-importance of the idea of a powerful hyper-centralized autocratic state, with one of the main pillars being constant “self-aggrandizement” i. e. expansion of its own territory.
- “Messianism”, based on the belief and awareness of the Russians in their exclusivity and

“choseness”, the recognition that they are entrusted with the implementation of some great goal, the need to fulfill grandiose super-tasks, which in different periods took the form of such mega-projects as “Moscow – the Third Rome”, “Great Russia” or “building communism as a bright future for all mankind”.

- “Militarism”, fueled by aggressive invasive plans, camouflaged in a hybrid package of “liberation” campaigns, with increasing scale and significance, as the aforementioned messianic and great-power ideas are extolled, while the imperial idea of magnifying greatness, mixed with messianic feelings, requires constant “feeding” in the form of more and more conquests.
- “Xenophobia” becomes part of ideologemes designed to justify a sense of intransigence and hatred towards “wrong” or “dangerous” people, their existence seen as a threat to its own security by the Russian regime, with the consequence of a spiral of hatred towards dehumanization and the formation of a negative and odious attitude towards such peoples both inside and outside of Russia.
- “Search for enemies”, providing for the special importance and necessity of fighting against non-believers, class enemies, “Fascists”, “Nazis”, “Banderaites”, and other enemies, and Russia sees itself to be called upon to save not only itself, but also all of humanity from them.
- “Cult of personality” – the sacralization of the figure of Putin, combined with the cultivation of uncritical acceptance of everything he has said and done, bordering on a newly formed belief in the infallibility and invincibility of the Kremlin leader, an ideology that acts as a core and connecting element designed to bring together and implement all the above ideologemes.

Over time, these ideas, as well as other propaganda stamps and clichés that were designed to mobilize the Russian public as a target audience, could put the Russian political establishment in serious dependence on such ideological stamps.³⁸ They probably also had toxic propaganda and manipulative effects on the organizers and initiators of this propaganda machine themselves. In a certain sense, the Russian political class itself became a

slave to its own PR, to the self-constructed image that conditioned and rigidly regulated the subsequent ways of implementing Russian policy. The image of the great leader at the head of the state, the greatness of which he helped to restore, and the ideologemes of “raising Russia from its knees”, “reunification with the brotherly people” received a powerful impulse to exist not only in the form of propaganda rhetoric in the printed or electronic mass media, but also began to exist as a form of attitudes and patterns that conditioned the behavior of the Kremlin leadership vice-versa. Subsequently, these ideologemes had such a serious impact on the worldview³⁹ and the behavior of the Russian political leadership that they apparently acquired the form of dogmas and stereotypes, turning into a kind of substitute political reality.

THE ROLE OF THE POLITICAL LEADER

The behavior of the “great helmsman” of Russia looks more and more irrational, given his rhetorical determination to realize his imperial chauvinistic ambitions at any cost, focusing on restoring the territory of the former USSR or the Russian Empire and returning to the geopolitical positions won by the USSR in Eastern Europe, followed by redistributing zones of influence in the world, in the Middle East, Latin America and South East Asia in particular, where the USSR **had with** the USA for decades. However, it is quite obvious that trying to solve geopolitical and global problems in the current modern world while ignoring the internal economic problems and the real economic potential, incomparable even with the Soviet Union, is an absolute utopia. All this gave rise to various versions concerning the true intentions of the Russian leader in the range depending on his mental inadequacy, up to the idea that he is in fact a recruited agent of the American secret services, a kind of “Trojan horse”, which has the task of the final destruction of Russia.⁴⁰

The loss of adequacy even leads to the refusal of information that do not fit into Putin’s picture of the world. Such a fate could have befallen operative reports and intelligence information coming to the Kremlin from various sources, including from sources in Ukraine. The Kremlin leadership could not have been unaware of the situation in Ukraine regarding the number of Russian sympa-

thizers, the number of supporters and opponents of the so-called Russian world, and the amount of electoral support for pro-Russian parties and other socio-political forces. In this regard, the events of 2014 and the following years, and especially the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russian troops in February 2022, **raises** the following questions: If the Kremlin had more or less accurate and adequate data about attitudes towards Russia in Ukrainian society, about diverse and often contradictory foreign policy preferences and positions of Ukrainians, then how can the reasons and meanings of such adventures be explained to avoid the impression of irrational actions as unleashing military aggression against a country with a population of 40 million people? How can statements about the capture of Kiev in three days or about the conquest of Ukraine in a couple of weeks be explained rationally? Was it ignorance of the data collected about Ukraine by the representatives of an extensive network of agents and the result of skepticism and distrust from the head of state towards his own “colleagues in the office”, or was this position a consequence of a profound change in his perception of the world, in which statistical data and reports gave way to a firm commitment to his own ideas and perceptions of what is happening in the world and in Ukraine? The latter seems to be more likely. However, a substantiated in-depth analysis by experts in political psychology and psychopathology would be needed to confirm this hypothesis. There is a third possible option, suggesting that over time the information coming to the Kremlin was not ignored, but formatted in a certain way in accordance with those frames of perception and ideas on the global situation and the one in Ukraine of the leading person. Combined with an entourage (and possibly agent agencies working in other countries) knowing about his views and filtering out all information they expected to be not suitable. It is possible to assume that at a certain moment a psychological phenomenon called fundamental self-attribution error occurred: When a lack of information or rejection of facts is compensated by the first person’s own judgments and beliefs. This leads to a set picture of the world, in this case, strongly influenced by USSR times.

It seems that over more than 20 years, the Kremlin leader’s (and probably his entourage’s) worldview has undergone such significant changes that it has significantly transformed their behavior.



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Fig. 5: Civilians arming themselves to defend Kiev against Russian forces on 26.2.2022.

Radical changes became more and more evident after the beginning of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, which began in 2014, as the Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, pointed out at that time.⁴¹ And although the Russian aggression at that time, along with the occupation of Crimea, was localized outside of the Donbass and hybrid (or disguised) in nature, many people besides the head of the German government began to doubt the adequacy and raised questions about the progressive inadequacy of the first person in Russia. In fact, evaluating the behavior and statements of the head of the Russian government in recent years and especially in the last ten months, the hypothesis on Putin's inadequacy no longer raises categorical objections and refutations. His ultimata with threats of nuclear apocalypse, statements about sending all his supporters to paradise etc. are partially seen by psychologists and psychopathologists as proof for this theory.

The main question is not if the Russian leader is mentally ill. It cannot be a diagnosis, as mentioned before. The more vital question is how serious the threats posed by the views and actions by this person (and his entourage) are, given that such threats are becoming global in scope. It should be borne in mind that, over the past two decades or more,

power in Russia has been methodically monopolized. It became a rigid authoritarian model, with concentrating the power in the hand of the leader, or in the hands of a very limited group of people. Today, the system in Russia allows no criticism or an alternative point of view. In this situation and this atmosphere in society, it seems probable and even quite natural that the Russian leadership assessed the situation based on its own constructed schemes before the war with Ukraine, with the conclusion that there was no other option than the victorious march of Russian troops through Ukraine (or, at least, its significant parts, including southern, eastern and central Ukraine). In this case, several main defining moments seem quite obvious, which can be characterized as the reasons for initiating the military aggression. These moments may also explain the reasons of these catastrophic miscalculations and the failure of the military-political leadership of Russia:

- The obsession of the Kremlin clique with its imperial ideology of great-power Russian chauvinism, based on the messianic idea of restoring an imaginary former greatness, combined with a constant cultivation of a concept of the enemy. Ukrainian media has named this ideology "Rashism".

- The creation of a new cult of personality, based on an irrational belief in the infallibility, invincibility and power of the first person. Such glorification has had a profound effect not only on the many millions of Russian people, but has apparently also affected the worldview of this first person.
- The Russian leadership's assessment of their own army's fighting ability, potential and actual capabilities was highly inadequate. This overestimation of its own armed forces, seeing itself as the country with the "second greatest army", despite the fact that Russia did not have the necessary economic, technological, and military-conventional capacities – with Russia having just a little more than one and a half percent of world GDP, for example.
- The assessment of Ukraine and its army potential, its fighting qualities, the motivation of its personnel, its ability to resist, and the resilience and determination of civil society (described as Ukrainian patriotism and fighting spirit) can also be considered as a serious underestimation. This can have its roots in a disdainful attitude toward Ukraine, its ethnicity, its subjectivity, and also in ignoring

and not recognizing a number of social transformations that have occurred in Ukraine in recent decades, especially since 2014.⁴²

- Russia's inadequate assessment of Western leaders, the society and citizens of Western countries as well as their likely reaction to Russian aggression. There was a serious misconception and underestimation of the willingness to provide support to Ukraine.

The alleged changes in Putin's personality and psyche require separate consideration by psychologists and specialists in psychoanalysis and thus cannot be part of this article. For the questions here, the extent to which such changes could have influenced the structure and integrity of the personality of him is relevant to a certain point. For example, regarding the process of making political decisions, influenced by pathologies in the psyche or the ideological closed-mindedness. They could have played a role in the unfolding of the strategically failed scenario for Russia, the processes of internal disintegration. There is the risk that after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it threatens not only Eastern Europe or the Eurasian continent, but also provokes a crisis in the security system of the world in general.



Fig. 6: The Maidan square in Kiev on 13.4.2014: "Stop propaganda! There's no fascism here!"

CONCLUSIONS

Thus, it is necessary to recognize the fact that political decision-making processes in the Russian leadership are highly dependent on propaganda clichés cultivated and replicated by this leadership. The latter, in turn, are formed under the influence of the indoctrination of ideological messages that are essentially imperial or pro-imperial in nature. Although the imperial ideology in today's Russia is characterized by inconsistencies and contradictions in its postulates, it nevertheless has a significant impact on the implementation of Russia's foreign policy through the formed behavioral attitudes of the Kremlin leadership. For the Kremlin, these ideologemes have served as justification for its

territorial claims and aggressive policy toward neighboring states, which has created a serious crisis in the global security system.

Such ideological determinants make it difficult, if not impossible, to find common positions for further peaceful coexistence. It concerns not only the possibility of coexistence between Russia and Ukraine, but also the prospects for Russia's coexistence with the entire civilized democratic world. In the end, the way to consolidate around Ukraine and provide it with comprehensive military, economic and humanitarian support in this confrontation with the enemy, which is no longer a local, not regional, but a global threat, remains, in our opinion, the only alternative. And such a threat to peace naturally requires consolidation of the efforts of the entire world.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology* (Glenon 1964), 20-23.
- ² Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History?*, in: *The National Interest* (Summer 1989), 3-18.
- ³ However, it is worth noting that today's Russian domestic politics has become absorbed by foreign policy, displaced from the political agenda and the media space. In other words: in Russia today, foreign policy has become, as it were, domestic policy.
- ⁴ For example, the Ukrainians are positioned by Russia either as a brotherly nation, or as a part of one nation with the Russians or are transformed into one of the most hostile nations along with the Americans. In the end, the question about the purpose of the so-called special military operation remains open, which at the grassroots level is couched in the following wording: what are hundreds of thousands of Russian men going to fight and die for and in the name of?
- ⁵ It is thought that linguistic analysis and content analysis with a high degree of probability will confirm the assumption that the majority of films and TV series are devoted to the war, mainly World War II, or rather its surrogate, which received in Soviet and Russian propaganda the name Great Patriotic War.
- ⁶ As early as during his second prime ministerial term, Putin declared in an interactive dialogue with the Russians on 16.12.2010, that "the victory of the Soviet Union over Nazi Germany was achieved at the expense of 'the human and industrial resources of the Russian Federation'." See: *Russia, Putin and the Victory in the Great Patriotic War*, in: *Voice of America*, 17.12.2010. <https://www.golosameriki.com/a/putin-victory-in-world-war2-2010-12-17-112084454/191443.html>. Similar sentiments about the role of the Russian people as a decisive force that ensured the victory of the USSR in the war against Nazism, were expressed by Stalin. Iosif V. Stalin, *Speeches at a reception in the Kremlin in honor of the commanders of the Red Army on May 24, 1945*. https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/stalin/t15/t15_64.htm.
- ⁷ In particular, one of these taboo topics are the events surrounding the unleashing of World War II after the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact by Stalin's USSR and Hitler's Germany in August 1939.
- ⁸ Prime Minister Winston Churchill's speech to the House of Commons, 13.5.1940. *Documents of the 20th Century*. <http://doc20vek.ru/node/2804>.
- ⁹ Carl J. Friedrich, Zbiginiev K. Brzezinski, *Totalitarian dictatorship and autocracy* (Cambridge 1956), 5.
- ¹⁰ An attempt of such an analysis was made by experts from the Institute of World History of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine. Andrii G. Bulvinskii (ed.), *Bachennya postodyanskogo prostranstva v rossiiskikh strategichnykh dokumentakh/ Tsivilizatsii zasadii transformatsii prostranstva na postodyanskii prostranstva* (Kiev 2018).
- ¹¹ *Concept of National Security of the Russian Federation* (approved by Presidential Decree No. 1300 of December 17, 1997). <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/11782>.
- ¹² *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation* (approved by the President of the Russian Federation on June 28, 2000). <http://kremlin.ru/acts/news/785>.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ *National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation until 2020* (approved by Presidential Decree No. 537 of May 12, 2009). <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/47046>.
- ¹⁶ *National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation* (approved by Presidential Decree No. 683 of December 31, 2015). http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_191669/.
- ¹⁷ Bulvinskii (ed.), *Bachennya*, 67.
- ¹⁸ Alexej Zverev, Bruno Coppieters, Dmitri Trenin (eds.), *Ethnic and Regional Conflicts in Eurasia*, in: *3 Kernels: Kernel 2 Russia, Ukraine, Belorussia* (Moscow 1997), 185f.
- ¹⁹ *Speech and discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy*, 10.2.2007. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*

- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Thor E. Lossovskiy, Russia's aggression against Ukraine as a realization of the doctrine of "limited sovereignty" (Putin doctrine), in: Andrej I. Kudryachenok (ed.), The Yalta Conference of the "Great Three" of 1945. Evolution of International Relations in the XX-XXI centuries (Kiev 2016), 119.
- ²⁴ Here it is appropriate to draw readers' attention to the fact that, from Putin's point of view, the main tragedies were neither the two world wars, nor the Holocaust, nor the famine, nor the repression of the Hitler and Stalinist regimes, which claimed millions of lives, but the collapse of the political system that President Ronald Reagan called the "empire of evil".
- ²⁵ Aleksandr G. Dugin, Fundamentals of Geopolitics (Moscow 2000), 253.
- ²⁶ Hannah Arendt, The origins of totalitarianism (San Diego, CA 1999).
- ²⁷ Vladimir V. Serebryannikov, Russia's Wars: Social and Political Analysis (Moscow 1999), 231.
- ²⁸ Ibid., 231.
- ²⁹ Ibid., 230.
- ³⁰ Konstantin V. Simonov, Global Energy War (Moscow 2007), 15.
- ³¹ Ibid., 267.
- ³² Ibid., 269.
- ³³ David Sheppard, Vladimir Putin is losing the energy war after weaponising gas supplies, the Russian president is now on the back foot as prices fall, in: Financial Times, 20.1.2023. <https://www.ft.com/content/daf62a50-bf3d-4513-bbef-9e56cca1dcc5>.
- ³⁴ Back in 1992, in a conversation between the first Ambassador of Ukraine in Moscow Viktor Kryzhanivsky and Russian State Duma deputy Sergey Baburin when the ambassador was asked "what Russia sees the prospects of our relations", the deputy said "reunification or war", and when the ambassador asked again "do you think that we can cooperate as good neighbors?", Baburin replied: "I explained you clearly: *reunification or war*" (emphasis A.Y.). Quoted from Ihor Y. Todorov, NATO and War on the Ukrainian Homeland (2014-2017), in: Serhii V. Tolstov (ed.), Strategies of Foreign and Security Policies of the Leading International Actors (Kiev 2017), 103.
- ³⁵ Russia also repeats its own miscalculations and failures in combat operations, in which a huge number of soldiers of its own army die, first as cannon fodder on the battlefield, and later in military hospitals.
- ³⁶ Moreover, because of such a brutal and intransigent nature of the war that Russia is waging against Ukraine, it is now difficult to say what, what event, what state of affairs can be considered the end of the war. An unlikely scenario would be a victory where the last soldier of the occupying Russian forces would be expelled from Ukrainian territory. We have to admit that there are reasons to talk about the end of the war only if Putinism is eliminated, that is, if the current Russian political regime is completely dismantled. At the same time, such dismantling necessarily implies raising questions about the denationalization, denuclearization, demilitarization and deputinization of Russia itself.
- ³⁷ Here we are no longer talking about an interstate conflict, but about a confrontation between different value systems. Without any pathos, this war can be called a war that is acquiring the character of a world war, a war taking place not between different civilizations, about which Samuel Huntington wrote in his time, but between civilization and barbarism. It seems that after Bucha, Izyum, Mariupol and other atrocities committed by the Russian army, it becomes more and more difficult to recognize as civilized the Russian state and its army, which is certainly one of the main institutions that represent this state.
- ³⁸ In this propaganda machine, the Russian mass media, primarily television, have become a kind of analogue of the Nazi daily *Völkischer Beobachter*.
- ³⁹ This influence of ideologies on the picture of the world is quite understandable, if we use Karl Mannheims interpretation of ideology as a certain worldview. Karl Mannheim, Ideology and Utopia. An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge (London 1997).
- ⁴⁰ Andrii G. Bulvinskii (ed.), Post-Soviet countries in the conditions of the formation of the large-polar world: historical lessons and prospects (Kiev 2016), 10.
- ⁴¹ On 2.3.2014, The *New York Times* published an editorial claiming that after a telephone conversation with Putin German Chancellor Merkel contacted US President Barack Obama and stated that "she is not sure if Mr. Putin has kept in touch with reality" and that the Russian leader is "in another world". Ukraine-Krisentelefonat mit Obama. Merkel schimpft: Putin lebt in einer anderen Welt, in: Bild Zeitung, 3.3.2014. <https://www.bild.de/politik/ausland/krim/merkel-schimpft-im-obama-telefonat-ueber-putin-34911584.bild.html>.
- ⁴² As examples of such transformations in Ukraine over the past 30 years, suffice it to point to the events of the 2004 Orange Revolution and the 2013-2014 Euromaidan, to which the Kremlin's reaction was that such protest actions and peaceful protests of Ukrainian citizens were seen by Moscow as special operations inspired by the U.S. State Department or the special services of Western countries.

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